

Austal USA Celebrates Keel Laying for the Future USNS Solomon Atkinson



Ship sponsor JoAnn Atkinson, wife of namesake Solomon Atkinson, authenticates the T-ATS 12 keel welding her initials into the keel plate with the help of Austal USA A-class welder Rufus Lord. (Austal USA)

From Austal USA, April 16, 2025

MOBILE, Ala. – Austal USA celebrated the official start of construction on the future USNS Solomon Atkinson (T-ATS 12), the Navy's seventh Towing, Salvage and Rescue Ship, with a keel laying ceremony today at the company's Mobile, Ala. ship manufacturing facility. Ship sponsors JoAnn Atkinson, Solomon Atkinson's widow, and daughters Michele Gunyah and Maria Hayward, authenticated the keel by welding their initials into a keel plate that will be welded to the hull of the ship.

They were assisted by Rufus Lord, a fifteen-year Austal USA veteran A-class welder.

Keel laying is the formal recognition of the start of a ship's construction. The keel laying symbolically recognizes the ceremonial beginning of the construction of a ship. This ship milestone is being recognized just over two weeks after Austal USA celebrated the christening of the future USNS Billy Frank Jr. (T-ATS 11).

"I am proud of the Austal USA T-ATS program team for providing us with the opportunity to celebrate two T-ATS milestones so close together," said Dave Growden, vice president of new construction. "This ceremony is evidence of the hard work and dedication put forth by Austal USA and our Navy and supplier partners to keep the T-ATS program steadily moving forward."

Local community leaders, Austal USA employees, Navy personnel, and family and friends of ship namesake Solomon Atkinson attended the ceremony today.

Solomon Atkinson, born in 1930 in Metlakatla, Alaska, worked as a commercial fisherman before enlisting in the U.S. Navy in 1952. A year later, Atkinson volunteered for the underwater demolition teams and became a frogman, the precursor to present day SEALs. In 1962, Atkinson became one of the first Navy SEALs and was a plank owner for SEAL Team 1. As a SEAL, he deployed to Korea and completed three combat tours in Vietnam. His Vietnam service-related awards include a Bronze Star, a Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V," and a Purple Heart. Atkinson also had the distinction of training numerous astronauts, including Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, in underwater weightless simulations at the Underwater Swimmers School in Key West, Florida. Atkinson retired from active naval service in 1973 as a Chief Warrant Officer 4 and returned to Metlakatla, where he continued to serve his people and state on the Indian Community Council and Board of Education, as founder and president of the first veterans'

organization on Annette Island, and as mayor of Metlakatla.

T-ATS 12 will provide ocean-going towing, salvage and rescue capabilities to support fleet operations. T-ATS will be a multi-mission common hull platform capable of towing U.S. Navy ships and will have 6,000 square feet of deck space for embarked systems. The large, unobstructed deck allows for the embarkation of a variety of stand-alone and interchangeable systems. The T-ATS platform will combine the capabilities of the retiring Rescue and Salvage Ship (T-ARS 50) and Fleet Ocean Tug (T-ATF 166) platforms. T-ATS will be able to support current missions including towing, salvage, rescue, oil spill response, humanitarian assistance, and wide-area search and surveillance. The platform also enables future rapid capability initiatives such as supporting modular payloads with hotel services and appropriate interfaces.

Destruction of Houthi Controlled Ras Isa Fuel Port

From U.S. Central Command, April 17, 2025

The Houthis have continued to benefit economically and militarily from countries and companies that provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization. The Iran-backed Houthis use fuel to sustain their military operations, as a weapon of control, and to benefit economically from embezzling the profits from the import. This fuel should be legitimately supplied to the people of Yemen. Despite the Foreign Terrorist Designation that went into effect on 05 April, ships have continued to supply fuel via the port of Ras Isa. Profits from these illegal sales are

directly funding and sustaining Houthi terrorist efforts.

Today, US forces took action to eliminate this source of fuel for the Iran-backed Houthi terrorists and deprive them of illegal revenue that has funded Houthi efforts to terrorize the entire region for over 10 years. The objective of these strikes was to degrade the economic source of power of the Houthis, who continue to exploit and bring great pain upon their fellow countrymen. This strike was not intended to harm the people of Yemen, who rightly want to throw off the yoke of Houthi subjugation and live peacefully.

The Houthis, their Iranian masters, and those who knowingly aid and abet their terrorist actions should be put on notice that the world will not accept illicit smuggling of fuel and war material to a terrorist organization.

PWD Souda Bay Delivers \$5.2M Warehouse, Enhancing NAVSUP Mediterranean Mission



By Anthony Cage, April 15, 2025

NAVAL SUPPORT ACTIVITY SOUDA BAY, Greece – Public Works Department Souda Bay, Greece joined with Naval Supply Systems Command (NAVSUP) Fleet Logistics Center Sigonella (FLCSI), Site Souda Bay and Naval Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay leadership for a ribbon cutting ceremony, inaugurating the new Marathi Logistics Support Center at the NATO Marathi Pier Complex, April 3, 2025.

The NATO Marathi Pier Complex is the only military deep-water pier facility in the Mediterranean with the capability to accommodate a U.S. Navy nuclear-powered aircraft carrier pier-side.

“This project represents a significant investment in our ability to support the fleet and our allies here in Souda Bay,” said Capt. Stephen Steacy, commanding officer, NSA Souda Bay. “This facility, delivered through the outstanding collaboration of PWD Souda Bay, NAVSUP, and our partners,

enhances our logistical capabilities, strengthens our operational readiness, and underscores our commitment to maintaining a robust presence in this strategically important region.”

The \$5.2 million, 14,000-square-foot, pre-engineered steel warehouse improves the installation’s logistical support capabilities, including critical storage, visiting ship cargo handling and office space.

“This isn’t just about today’s mission. This new facility ensures NAVSUP can effectively support the fleet here in Souda Bay well into the future,” said Lt. Cmdr. Barry Ventura. “With added freezer and chill storage, along with expanded postal capacity, we can provide even more robust and reliable support well into the future. The upgraded water system is also crucial for maintaining uninterrupted service to our ships and allies.”

The four-year project, funded by Commander, Navy Installations Command, also provides NAVSUP with essential hazardous material storage and an upgraded water supply system, including an above-ground tank and pump house.

“This new facility at NSA Souda Bay, one of two opened by NAVFAC EURAFCENT this week, demonstrates our commitment to delivering critical infrastructure through effective partnerships,” said Lt. Katy Pekala, director, Facilities Engineering & Acquisition Division. “PWD Souda Bay’s expert oversight of construction management, engineering, and contracting, along with seamless communication with all stakeholders, was crucial to delivering this project on time and within budget.”

The vital new facility at NSA Souda Bay is the latest example of NAVFAC EURAFCENT’s commitment to delivering impactful shore infrastructure projects across Europe, Africa, and Central

Command.

“PWD Souda Bay’s dedication and expertise were essential to the successful completion of this vital project,” said Lt. Cmdr. Ted Packowski, public works officer, NSA Souda Bay. “Working closely with stakeholders, including the end-users, to ensure the new warehouse met all requirements and exceeded expectations, in the end resulted in delivering a first-class facility that will significantly enhance the installation’s operational capabilities.”

NAVSUP Fleet Logistics Center Sigonella supported by Navy Region NAVSUP FLC Sigonella mission is to plan, coordinate, integrate, synchronize, and provide logistic support to U.S. Naval, Joint, and allied forces operating in peace, crisis, and wartime within the EUCOM and AFRICOM areas of responsibility.

NSA Souda Bay is an operational ashore installation which enables and supports U.S., Allied, Coalition, and partner nation forces to preserve security and stability in the European, African, and Central Command areas of responsibility.

Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command is the naval shore facilities, base operating support, and expeditionary engineering systems command delivering life-cycle technical and acquisition solutions aligned to fleet and Marine Corps priorities. NAVFAC EURAFCENT supports fleet commanders by providing engineering assessments and agile acquisition strategy, constructing and maintaining shore infrastructure, and maximizing force readiness to enhance warfighter capability. NAVFAC EURAFCENT serves as the engineering link between the shore and the Fleet in the European, African, and Central Command areas of responsibility.

USS Stockdale Deploys to U.S. Northern Command Area of Responsibility

From U.S. Fleet Forces Command, April 11, 2025

NORFOLK, Va. – The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Stockdale (DDG 106) departed Naval Base San Diego to support U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) southern border operations in the USNORTHCOM area of responsibility, April 11.

Stockdale takes over duties previously carried out by USS Spruance (DDG 111), which conducted similar operations in support of USNORTHCOM's border security objectives.

Stockdale's departure reinforces the Navy's role in the Department of Defense's coordinated effort in response to the Presidential Executive Order. Stockdale's sea-going capacity contributes to USNORTHCOM's ability to protect the United States' territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security, through a coordinated, multi-domain strategy.

Stockdale will continue operations with an embarked U.S. Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment (LEDET). These Coast Guard teams bring specialized expertise in maritime interdiction, enabling the ship to address a range of challenges, from countering illegal activities to supporting humanitarian efforts and homeland security operations.

In February of 2025, Stockdale returned to San Diego after a seven-month independent deployment to the U.S. 3rd, 5th and

7th Fleet areas of operation. Stockdale joined the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group (ABECSG) and remained in 5th Fleet following the departure of the ABECSG.

While in 5th Fleet, Stockdale successfully repelled multiple Iranian-backed Houthi attacks during transits of the Bab el-Mandeb strait and escort operations of U.S.-flagged vessels in the Gulf of Aden. During these engagements, Stockdale engaged and defeated one-way attack uncrewed aerial-ship cruise missiles. Stockdale received no damage and no personnel were hurt.

Now, while operating in the USNORTHCOM area of responsibility, Stockdale will respond to national priorities and a Presidential declaration emphasizing the military's role in securing U.S. borders. As the DoD's lead for implementing border-related executive orders, USNORTHCOM continues to support critical Department of Homeland Security capabilities gaps, with Stockdale marking a vital contribution to these efforts.

USFFC is responsible for manning, training, equipping and employing more than 125 ships, 1,000 aircraft, and 103,000 active-duty service members and government employees, and providing combat-ready forces forward to numbered fleets and combatant commanders around the globe in support of U.S. national interests.

USFFC also serves as the Navy's Service Component Commander to both U.S. Northern Command and U.S. Strategic Command, and providing naval forces in support of joint missions as Commander, Naval Forces Northern Command (NAVNORTH) and Commander, Naval Forces Strategic Command (NAVSTRAT). USFFC is the Strategic Command Joint Force Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC STRAT) and executes Task Force Atlantic in coordination with U.S. N

UNITAS 2025 Mid Planning Conference Concludes



NAVAL STATION MAYPORT, Florida – (Apr. 7, 2025) – Led by Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, Commander U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet, more than 100 Sailors, Marines, and civilians gathered onboard Naval Station Mayport in support of the UNITAS 2025 Mid-Planning Conference. (U.S. Navy illustration by MCC John Fischer)

By USNAVSOUTH/4th Fleet Public Affairs, April 11, 2025

NAVAL STATION MAYPORT, Fla. – U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet completed the UNITAS 2025 mid planning conference on board Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville, Apr. 7-11. Held virtually and in-person, the conference brought together commands from the U.S. and partner nations to plan for UNITAS 2025, the 66th iteration of the world's longest-running multinational maritime exercise.

UNITAS 2025 will feature a range of maritime operations, including a live-fire sinking exercise (SINKEX) and amphibious landings. The exercise will take place Sept. 15-Oct. 6 off the East Coast of the United States, with shore-based events at Naval Station Mayport, Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia.

“The level of participation and plans being developed are paramount to a successful exercise and are all oriented to expanding and strengthening our maritime partnerships,” said Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet. “Already steeped in a long history of success, UNITAS 2025 will continue to solidify a legacy of maritime partnerships.

More than 250 representatives from 23 countries and all branches of the U.S. military participated in person and virtually, including Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Singapore, Spain, and the United States.

Participants refined the exercise scenario and objectives, the list of participating units and personnel, and logistics and communications plans. UNITAS is designed to strengthen relationships and foster interoperability among participating nations.

UNITAS 2025 will showcase maritime technology, including unmanned and hybrid fleet systems, building on last years integration of unmanned undersea vehicles. The exercise will culminate in high-end warfighting events.

“The combined efforts of all planners have shaped UNITAS 2025 to be the largest and most robust iteration of the exercise to

date,” said Patrick Cooper, UNITAS 2025 lead planner. “The level of expertise and enthusiasm of every participant at the MPC has been truly astounding.”

UNITAS 2025 will also help set the stage for events celebrating the U.S. Navy’s 250th anniversary, a monumental event. Planning efforts will continue until the Final Planning Conference (FPC) scheduled to be held in June.

U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet is the maritime partner for Caribbean, Central and South American maritime forces, working to improve unity, security and stability.

U.S. Navy Adds Persistent Systems to Family of Systems USV Contract

RESILIENT DATA LINK FOR UNMANNED SURFACE VESSELS (USVs)

U.S. NAVY

ADDS

PERSISTENT SYSTEMS

ON **\$982.1M IDIQ CONTRACT**

Company's mobile ad hoc network (MANET) technology to support Navy's vision of integrating manned and unmanned formations

From Persistent Systems

NEW YORK, New York. – April 15, 2025 – Persistent Systems, LLC (“Persistent”), a leader in mobile ad hoc networking (MANET), announced today the U.S. Navy has selected the company as one of 88 participants for a \$982.1 million, indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract to support current and future data links for unmanned surface vessels (USVs).

The USV Family of Systems (FoS) contract, first awarded in 2020, now includes 88 contractors supporting the Navy's effort to integrate USVs into its fleet. Building on its experience working with the Unmanned Systems divisions of Naval Surface Warfare Centers and Naval Information Warfare Centers, Persistent Systems will supply its MANET solutions to Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) to enable secure, resilient data links for RDT&E efforts in support of the Navy's USV program.

“As a leading provider of MANET solutions for this contract,

we will serve as the critical data link for maritime unmanned reconnaissance vehicles, supporting numerous mission sets, including maritime domain awareness, sea control/sea denial, and swarming operations,” said Ed Leopold, Director of Business Development at Persistent Systems. “This is essential for maintaining real-time situational awareness for expeditionary forces and supporting collaborative autonomy of unmanned systems.”

The company’s MPU5 networking devices leverage their highly scalable Wave Relay® MANET to seamlessly connect users in a true peer-to-peer fashion, allowing for the high-throughput transfer of voice, video, text, sensor data, and GPS information without needing external infrastructure.

“As the U.S. Navy emphasizes the need for manned and unmanned formations, we are seeing the shift from pilot programs and proof of concepts towards the implementation of validated USV upgrades as part of their Unmanned Maritime Autonomy Architecture (UMAA),” says Leopold.

This IDIQ contract builds on Persistent’s ongoing work with the Navy. Over the past few months, the company has supported several naval efforts:

- In July, the U.S. Naval Information Warfare Center Pacific awarded Persistent a contract to network USVs, individual operators, ships, and ground control stations;
- Persistent Systems supported networking efforts during Valiant Shield, a joint exercise conducted every two years across the INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility and;
- During the Paris Olympics, the French navy used Persistent’s MANET technology on vessels and shore infrastructure to secure a sailing competition.

“We look forward to building on these relationships, and this selection reinforces our position as a trusted supplier for

the U.S. Navy,” Leopold concluded.

Naval Foundry and Propeller Center Delivers Final Propulsor Component for First Columbia-class Submarine



Members of the Naval Foundry and Propeller Center (NFPC) celebrate the delivery of the final propulsor component for the Columbia-class lead ship, the future USS District of Columbia (SSBN 826). (U.S. Navy photo)

By Naval Foundry Propeller Center Public Affairs, April 11, 2025

PHILADELPHIA – The U.S. Navy’s Naval Foundry and Propeller Center (NFPC) delivered the final major propulsor component for the first Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), the future USS District of Columbia (SSBN 826), to General Dynamics-Electric Boat (GDEB) Apr. 8. GDEB accepted the component in Philadelphia, and transported it to the shipyard in Groton, CT, where it arrived April 10.

The delivery marks a historic milestone for NFPC, and the culmination of a years-long project. Well before the ship’s keel was laid in 2022, NFPC was working on patterns, molds and castings for the propulsor – with the first sub-component pour in 2019 and the final large component being cast in 2021.

NFPC’s journey to produce the propulsor for the District of Columbia has pushed engineering innovation to new heights, resulting in multiple record-breaking pours for nonferrous castings in the U.S. The largest casting was over 260,000 pounds and is already at GDEB for installation. Collectively, NFPC poured nearly 1 million pounds of bronze and removed well over 200,000 pounds of machine chips on the lead ship project.

Once completed, the District of Columbia will be the first ship of its kind, set to replace the Navy’s current Ohio-class SSBNs. The Columbia-class is the Nation’s future Sea Based Strategic Deterrent, the Navy’s number one acquisition priority, and will provide the most survivable leg of the Nation’s strategic triad. The class will ensure continuous sea-based strategic deterrence into the 2080s and will be the largest, most capable and most advanced submarine produced by our Nation.

NFPC has produced four components for District of Columbia. Once completed at the foundry, the components are transported by truck or barge to GDEB shipyard, which is responsible for final assembly of all Columbia-class submarines.

In addition to producing propulsors for the next three ships in the Columbia-class, NFPC continues work for the Navy's Virginia-class fast attack submarines.

NFPC has been manufacturing propellers and propulsors for the U.S. Navy for more than 100 years in Philadelphia. The current workforce benefits from a wide range of individual experience, with team members ranging from trade school graduates to seasoned engineers and mechanics with over 40 years of service. NFPC offers unique capabilities and capacity, achieving its mission to design, manufacture and deliver precision machined propulsor castings for undersea superiority.

USS Minnesota Returns Home to Naval Base Guam



Cmdr. Jeffrey Cornielle, commanding officer of USS Minnesota (SSN 783), left, mans the conning tower as the boat transits Apra Harbor to Naval Base Guam. (Lt. James Caliva)
From Petty Officer 1st Class Nikita Custer, April 15, 2025

NAVAL BASE GUAM (April 14, 2025) – The Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Minnesota (SSN 783) returned to its homeport of Naval Base Guam following its first operational tasking while forward-deployed in the Indo-Pacific region, April 14, 2025.

“This first operational tasking following Minnesota’s recent homeport shift demonstrated the submarine’s operational readiness and the capabilities the Virginia-class brings to the Indo-Pacific region,” said Capt. Neil Steinhagen, commander, Submarine Squadron 15. “Their performance is a clear reflection of the high standards and strategic impact expected of our forward-deployed assets. Minnesota has proven itself ready to meet the sustained operational tempo of our Pacific Submarine Force—truly living up to its motto, From the North, Power!”

Minnesota’s operations included a port visit to Western Australia, marking the first of two planned U.S. Virginia-class fast-attack submarine visits to HMAS Stirling in 2025. While in the region, the crew took part in at-sea operations as part of the Submarine Command Course and participated in Exercise Lungfish, a tactical development exercise between the U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Navy. The submarine also visited Darwin in Australia’s Northern Territory, supporting bilateral engagements and hosting tours for local officials.

“These port visits were an outstanding opportunity to strengthen international partnerships and reinforce the Navy’s forward presence with our allies,” said Cmdr. Jeffrey Cornielle, commanding officer, USS Minnesota. “Working side-by-side with our Australian counterparts helped sharpen our undersea warfighting skills. That kind of tactical development

is vital—not just for increasing our own readiness, but for enhancing interoperability with allied warfighters deployed shoulder-to-shoulder in support of a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific.”

Beyond operations at sea, the crew engaged in community outreach throughout Australia, delivering STEM presentations at local schools and volunteering with programs for at-risk youth.

“The Sailors of Minnesota truly embodied what it means to serve, whether they were inspiring students with stories of life aboard a submarine or giving their time to support the local community,” said Master Chief Missile Technician Kevin Lewis, USS Minnesota, Chief of the Boat. “What they did went beyond the uniform. Every connection they made helped build trust, show our values in action, and strengthen the relationships that support our presence in the region.”

Commissioned on Sept. 7, 2013, in Norfolk, Virginia, Minnesota is the 10th Virginia-class submarine to enter service. On Nov. 26, 2024, Minnesota became the first Virginia-class submarine to join the U.S. Navy’s only forward-deployed submarine squadron, along with four Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarines based in Guam. Assigned to Commander, Submarine Squadron 15 at Polaris Point, Naval Base Guam, Minnesota operates at the tip of the spear, reaffirming the submarine force’s forward-deployed presence and supporting the vision of peace through strength and a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Navy Secretary Embarks Gerald R. Ford for First Carrier Visit



Capt. Rick Burgess, commanding officer of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), welcomes Secretary of the Navy John C. Phelan in the captain's in-port cabin. (MC2 Jacob Mattingly)
15 April 2025

ATLANTIC OCEAN – Secretary of the Navy John Phelan embarked USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), the flagship of Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 12, to observe the strike group's Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX), Apr. 10-11. The visit was the Secretary's first visit to an operational carrier strike group since becoming the 79th Secretary of the Navy on March 25, 2025.

"There is nothing that compares to the strategic influence that the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group delivers to the Commander-in-Chief," said Phelan. "All Americans should be

proud of these men and women, whose grit and determination keeps our seas open and our nation safe.”

The Secretary joined the strike group during Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX). The training environment delivers opportunities for carrier strike group commanders to integrate highly-capable, multi-mission teams through live, virtual, and constructive presentations of threats. CSG-12 coordinates and directs the actions of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81), Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 8 with its nine accompanying squadrons, and Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 2 and its four guided-missile destroyers.

“I can’t think of a better time, place, or team to introduce Secretary Phelan to strike group operations at sea,” said Rear Adm. Paul Lanzilotta. “It’s an honor and a privilege to lead this team, and I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the team’s hard work, tactical acumen, and warfighting spirit to the Secretary.”

COMPTUEX is the Joint Force’s most complex training event which underscores the Navy’s commitment to deliver naval task forces for sustained high-end Joint and combined combat. The visit was also an opportunity for the crew of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) to present the ship to senior leadership.

“It is a great honor to host Secretary Phelan during his first trip to a ready aircraft carrier,” said Capt. Rick Burgess, commanding officer of Gerald R. Ford. “The crew demonstrated Ford’s ability to project power on demand anywhere across the globe.”

Following its return from its maiden deployment in January 2024, Ford completed a maintenance and training cycle.

“As the first aircraft carrier to deter aggression during the Israel-Hamas conflict, you stood tall in support of Israel’s

right to defend itself, and you made America proud. But you didn't just deter. You made a difference. and you showed the world what American naval power and strength looks like." said Phelan.

The Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group delivers the Joint force and Commander-in-Chief the combat capability to deter, and if necessary, defeat America's adversaries in support of national security and economic prosperity. The strike group is comprised of its flagship, the world's largest and most capable aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81), Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 8 with nine accompanying squadrons, and Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 2 and its four guided-missile destroyers.

For more information about the USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), visit its official webpage at <https://www.airlant.usff.navy.mil/cvn78/>, or its Defense Visual Information Distribution site at www.dvids.net/ CVN78. Follow the ship's operations and upcoming deployment on Facebook at @USSGeraldRFord or on Instagram at @cvn78_grford.

USS Hershel "Woody" Williams Returns to Norfolk from Forward Deployment



The Lewis B. Puller-class expeditionary mobile base USS Hershel "Woody" Williams (ESB 4) returns to Naval Station Norfolk, April 10, 2025. Photo credit: *U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Derek Cole*

NAVAL STATION NORFOLK, Va. – The U.S Navy expeditionary sea base USS Hershel "Woody" Williams (ESB 4) returns to Naval Station Norfolk, April 10, 2025, after operating forward deployed for almost five years, supporting U.S. Navy and allied efforts in the U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa / U.S. Sixth Fleet area of operations.

Hershel "Woody" Williams returns to Norfolk's waters with a hybrid-manned crew of 44 Military Sealift Command (MSC) civil service mariners who operated, navigated, and maintained the vessel and 85 U.S Navy Sailors, Blue and Gold crews, who alternated manning the vessel and allowing for continuous strategic deterrence patrols.

"This is a unique opportunity to welcome home a hard-working ship from its historic tenure forward-deployed, and to welcome home its crew – its heart, soul and lifeblood – in classic Navy fashion," said Rear Adm. Dave Walt, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group 2, who was on hand to welcome

home the Hershel "Woody" Williams crew.

"This crew has punched above its weight and impressed leadership with its hard work, resourcefulness, and dedication."

The evolution marks the completion of 59 months as a Forward Deployed Naval Force (FDF) vessel homeported in Souda Bay, Crete, Greece, a journey that began in 2020. Hershel "Woody" Williams will spend a week at Naval Station Norfolk, offloading fuel before shifting to the East Coast Repair and Fabrication Shipyard in Newport News, Va., where the ship will be in lay berth awaiting its next tasking.

Built as a highly flexible mobile platform, capable of operating across a broad range of military sea-based operations, Hershel "Woody" Williams had several noteworthy highlights throughout this deployment.

In 2020, Hershel "Woody" Williams became the first U.S. Navy warship assigned to AFRICOM due to the ship's ability to support maritime security and humanitarian operations.

In 2021, during AFRICOM's largest, premier, joint, annual exercise, known as African Lion, Hershel "Woody" Williams participated in a key leader engagement with Morocco Armed Forces, hosted by Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal.

"These engagements are critical as they allow Navy leaders to interact with partner nations to foster trust and build long-term partnerships," said MSC's ESB Project Officer William Revak.

In 2022, Williams joined forces with partners and allies for Obangame Express 22, the largest multinational maritime exercise in Western Africa, to improve communication and information sharing and to increase partner nation capability

to further advance maritime security and stability, said MSC's Program Manager, Prepositioning Ships, Lora Caldwell. Additionally, the ESB-4 platform was used to conduct visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) drills with French soldiers.

"VBSS training with partner nations contributes greatly to a more stable and secure global maritime environment," Caldwell said.

In 2023, Hershel "Woody" Williams conducted humanitarian and disaster relief operations, delivering 113 pallets of disaster relief supplies, totaling nearly 40,000 pounds, to The Ministry of Interior Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency in Mersin, Türkiye for those citizens impacted by the Feb. 6, earthquakes.

In 2024, the Gold-military crew and MSC's civilian mariners conducted community relation events in Tema, Ghana to continue building their mutual commitment to security and stability in the region which helps to enhance the Navy's operational readiness. The Hershel "Woody" Williams crew also conducted a theater security cooperation mission during the ship's visit to Luanda, Angola. Likewise, they managed regional cooperation operations (logistical and personnel support) while in Port Victoria, Seychelles. While there, the ship hosted U.S. Ambassador Henry Jardine and Brig. Gen. Michael Rosette, chief of the Seychelles Defense Forces.

"We will continue to share information with the United States of America in the fight against illegal activities within the Indian Ocean," Rosette stated in Seychelles Nation, dated Sept. 4, 2024.

Throughout Williams 59-month deployment, MSC's CVIMARS and the Navy's Blue and Gold crews were instrumental in further enhancing Navy readiness, strengthening partnerships, and

improving the combined capabilities of the U.S. Navy and partner nations' responses to public crisis, Caldwell said.

ESBs primarily support aviation mine countermeasures and expeditionary forces missions. Additional ship features include a large flight deck and hanger with four aviation operating spots capable of handling MH-535E equivalent helicopters and MV-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft, berthing and messing accommodations, workspaces and ordnance storage for embarked forces.

ESB 4 is named in honor of Chief Warrant Officer Hershel "Woody" Williams, a decorated U.S. Marine who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II.