

# Military Sealift Command Celebrates '75 Years of Maritime Excellence'



MSC 75th Anniversary Seal  
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NORFOLK, Va. – This year, Military Sealift Command will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Since 1949, MSC, originally Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS), has been at the forefront of maritime logistics supporting the nation's joint warfighters around the world. Over the decades, the command has evolved into an agile fleet of more than 135 civilian-crewed ships that replenish U.S. Navy ships at sea, conduct specialized missions, preposition combat cargo at sea around the world, perform a variety of support services, and move military equipment and supplies to deployed U.S. forces.

Today, MSC's workforce includes more than 7,000 civil service and contract mariners, shore staff and active duty and reservist service members; deployed in regions all over the world. Throughout 2024, the command will be remembering its history, honoring its legacy and celebrating the contributions of its Civil Service Mariners, civilians and military members – past and present – through various community outreach, observances and other special events to reflect on “75 Years of Maritime Excellence.”

“The prosecution of war requires the use of a tremendous number of noncombatant vessels. In all our history, we have never had a sufficient number of ships to meet the voracious appetite of war. Even with its service Force vessels, the Navy does not have enough ships to serve the mobile logistic support needs of the combatant fleets. In any war, therefore, the Armed Forces need the help and the close cooperation of the merchant marine. The groundwork for wartime cooperation with the merchant marine must be laid in times of peace. It would be dangerous to delay such cooperation until the outbreak of war for the complexities of ocean transportation cannot be learned overnight.”

– Vice Adm. William Callahan, Commander, Military Sea Transportation Service, 1952.

The idea of creating an all-encompassing component responsible for water transportation of the military, in both peace and wartime was suggested as early as 1847 by the Quartermaster General of the Army, Brig. Gen. Thomas S. Jesup who had competed with the Navy for the chartering of American merchant ships. However, it would be another century before the idea would began to become reality. The division would continue through the early 1900s and the Spanish-American War and both World Wars.

During World War II, four different government agencies competed to utilize the commercial merchant marine – the Naval

Transportation Service, the Army Transport Service, the U. S. Maritime Commission's War Shipping Administration, and the Fleet Support Services. To oversee these organizations, the Joint Chiefs of Staff established the Joint Military Transportation Command.

On Dec. 15, 1948, the Secretary of Defense James Forrestal issued a statement, "all military sea transport including Army transports would be placed under Navy command." With the decision made, discussions began on the details of the actual transfer and scope of the new command.

While the Army and Air Force agreed in the transfer of sealift functions to the Navy, the services could not agree on how to distribute the costs. The services thought was the Navy should pay for the operations of the vessels, while the Navy believed that the services wanting to ship items should provide the necessary funds. This issue was not resolved until the new Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, issued a memorandum July 12, 1949 that spelled out the financing, purpose and responsibilities of the MSTS. The new command opened for business October 1, 1949 – the birth of Military Sealift Command.

The initial MSTS fleet consisted of six troop transports, three attack transports, 12 attack cargo ships, and 16 tankers, commissioned vessels in the U.S. Navy and manned by military crews. During the Vietnam War, MSTS was renamed Military Sealift Command.

"MSC has been conspicuous because its people and ships generally have been where the action has been."

– Rear Adm. Bruce Keener III, Commander, Military Sealift Command, 1981.

Since its inception MSTS/MSC has been present during every major conflict since World War II, providing vital logistic

and operational support to the warfighters on the front line. MSTS responded to the challenge of the Korean War within nine months deploying the 24th Infantry Division from Japan followed by the 25th Infantry Division and 1st Cavalry Division. In three years, MSTS transported more than 54 million tons of cargo, nearly 5 million troops and passengers and more than 22 million long tons of petroleum.

Between 1965 and 1969, MSC transported nearly 54 million tons of combat equipment and supplies and nearly 8 million tons of fuel to Vietnam. MSC ships also transported troops to Vietnam which marked the last use of MSC troop ships. Now, U.S. troops are primarily transported to theater by air.

During the first Persian Gulf Wars, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, MSC distinguished itself as the largest source of defense transportation delivering more than 12 million tons of wheeled and tracked vehicles, helicopters, ammunition, dry cargo, fuel and other supplies and equipment. At the height of the war, MSC managed more than 230 government-owned and chartered ships.

Following the attacks of 9/11, MSC ships delivered more than 25 billion gallons of fuel and moved 126 million square feet of combat equipment and supplies to U.S. and coalition forces engaged in operations supporting Iraq and Afghanistan.

In March of 2003, on the heaviest day of delivering combat gear to Kuwait for Operation Iraqi Freedom, MSC operated 167 ships that stretched from the U.S. East and Gulf Coasts to Kuwait, the equivalent to one ship every 50 miles, a constant stream of combat material, supplies, vehicles and helicopters delivered to U.S. forces in the Middle East.

Throughout its existence, the MSC combat logistics force has continued to provide fuel, ordnance, food, parts, and supplies via underway replenishment to carrier strike groups and

amphibious ready groups, independent deployers and ships from allied and partner nations.

“In peacetime, during conflict, responding to natural disasters and now during this global pandemic, our mariners and their teammates ashore remain steadfast and committed to provide agile logistics to our Navy, support joint warfighters forward and help defend our nation.”

– Rear Admiral Michael Wettlaufer, Commander, Military Sealift Command, 2023.

The key for MSC’s longevity has always been its Civil Service Mariners (CIVMARs). Merchant mariners have courageously supported the nation’s warfighters, and they have a tradition of going in harm’s way to deliver equipment and personnel, wherever and whenever called upon.

There is no better display of the spirit and versatility of the merchant mariner than the “Taluga Tigers.” In 1972, a group MSC civil service mariners did something many naval leaders didn’t think was possible when they took a decommissioned Navy oiler and converted it into MSC’s first fleet service oiler.

The experimental project, Charger Log II, tested MSC’s ability to man a fleet oiler with a minimum crew of mariners. The goal was to test the viability of operating an aging Navy ship with a civilian crew.

The recently decommissioned Cimarron-class oiler, USS Taluga (T-AO 62), was turned over to MSC, and after an overhaul, USNS Taluga (T-AO 62) became the first MSC fleet support oiler. Manned with a crew of 105 CIVMARs and a 16-member military detachment to handle communications, Taluga would conduct 875 underway replenishments with the Seventh Fleet over three and a half years.

The Tigers proved that mariners could conduct underway replenishments repurposing a Navy oiler and their efforts set a new course for the Navy. It was a cost-saving alternative that preserved the operational lifetime of numerous naval vessels.

With the success of Taluga, the Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force grew from one ship to 22 T-AOs, eight T-AEs and three supply ships purchased from the British Ministry of Defense recommissioned as Sirius-class T-AFS ships. Then, in 1987, the USNS Henry J. Kaiser (T-AO-187) was introduced to the fleet in 1987 becoming the first of a 15-ship class of replenishment vessels designed from the beginning to be operated by civilian mariners.

“Through innovation, adaptability and a commitment to success, we will continue Military Sealift Command’s legacy of Maritime Excellence for another 75 years.”

– Rear Adm. Philip Sobeck, Commander, Military Sealift Command, 2024.

As the Henry J. Kaiser-class fleet oiler era ends, the John Lewis-class era begins, and MSC continues to adapt to an ever-evolving maritime environment. The Navy accepted delivery of USNS John Lewis (T-AO 205) in July 2022. It is the first of 20 in the class – USNS Harvey Milk (T-AO 206) was delivered in May 2023.

The new oilers have the capacity to carry 156,000 barrels of oil, including biofuels. They are fitted with a helideck with the capacity to conduct refueling for helicopters, and they can hold more dry cargo than their predecessors. The vessels can also be armed with a close-in weapon system anti-ship missile defence system for detecting and destroying anti-ship cruise missiles.

Twelve new classes of vessels are scheduled to come online

over the next decade, and 20 new ships will be delivered to the fleet in the next five years, all with modernized systems. MSC is also focusing on emerging capabilities such as new connectors, unmanned aerial resupply and expeditionary munitions reload to better support distributed maritime logistics.

For 75 years, MSC has provided agile logistics, strategic sealift and specialized missions to the Department of Defense and has kept warfighters equipped and ready. Now, they are looking forward to another 75!