

Navy's 7th Fleet Bolstered with New Ships



The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson (DDG 114) arrives at Commander, Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) as one of the newest additions to Commander, Task Force (CTF) 71/Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 15. *U.S. NAVY / Tetsuya Morita*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Recent ship transfers have added capability to the Forward-Deployed Naval Force of the U.S. 7th Fleet in the Western Pacific in recent months.

Ships are occasionally transferred to or swapped out with the Japan-based fleet to modernize its capabilities or to replace ships that are rotated to receive maintenance at U.S. shipyards.

The most recent addition to the 7th Fleet is the Lewis B. Puller-class expeditionary staging base ship USS Miguel Keith (ESB 5), which was commissioned on March 8 as the third ship of its class. Its sister ships, USS Lewis B. Puller (ESB 3) and USS Hershel “Woody” Williams (ESB 4), are assigned to the U.S. 5th Fleet and U.S. 6th Fleet, respectively.

The Miguel Keith, nominally based in Saipan, has two mixed crews of Sailors and Civilian Mariners designed to rotate, keeping the ship deployed for longer periods. The ship is designed with a large flight deck and extensive command-and-control facilities to support expeditionary operations and can host helicopters, small boats, special operations forces, unmanned vehicles, mine countermeasures forces. It can support humanitarian and disaster-relief operations as well.

The new Flight IIA Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, USS Ralph Johnson (DDG 114), arrived at Yokosuka, Japan, on Oct. 4, commander, Task Force 71/Destroyer Squadron

15 Public Affairs said in a release.

“Ralph Johnson comes over as one of the newest and most capable destroyers in the U.S. Navy,” said Capt. Chase Sargeant, commander, Task Force 71/Destroyer Squadron 15. “The addition of Ralph Johnson demonstrates our unwavering commitment to maintain maritime security in the Indo-Pacific alongside our alliances and partnerships.”

The Flight IIA Arleigh Burke-class DDG USS Dewey (DDG 105) arrived in Yokosuka on Sept. 8, to join the FDNF.

“Dewey is an excellent addition to our forward-deployed team,” Sargeant said in a release. “Dewey brings capability and lethality that enables U.S. 7th Fleet to defend U.S. and like-minded nation’s interests and supports a rules-based international order and free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Earlier, on Aug. 16, the Arleigh Burke-class DDGs USS Higgins (DDG 76) and USS Howard (DDG 83) arrived in Yokosuka. These ships are Flight II and Flight IIA DDGs, respectively, with ballistic-missile defense capability.

“These destroyers are some of the most capable ships our Navy has to offer,” added Sargeant. “Adding them to our forward deployed forces is a clear signal of our continuing commitment to our partners and allies, and our mutual commitment to maintaining stable regional maritime security.”

One of the Navy’s oldest destroyers, the Flight I Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS John McCain, departed Yokosuka on Sept. 17, the ship’s public affairs officer said in a release, for assignment to the 3rd Fleet and a new homeport of Naval Station Everett, Washington. The John McCain had been a unit of the FDNF for 24 years, arriving in 1997. In addition to its operations for the 7th Fleet, the John McCain “also participated in several surge deployments to U.S. 5th Fleet in support of the USS Independence battle group in 1998

and USS Kitty Hawk strike group in 2002 and again in 2003 supporting Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom," the release said.

"It is definitely a changing of the guard with USS John S. McCain and her crew departing the 7th Fleet after over 24 years in Japan," Sargeant said. "The contributions of the current and all previous crews in defending peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific cannot be overstated, and the entire forward-deployed fleet wishes John S. McCain fair winds as she transfers to her new homeport of Everett, Washington."

Earlier, on Aug. 18, the Flight I Arleigh Burke DDG USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG 54) departed Yokosuka after 25 years with the FDNF, the ship's public affairs officer said in a release. The destroyer is now homeported with the 3rd Fleet in San Diego.

In addition to its 7th Fleet operations, the Curtis Wilbur deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operation conducting maritime interception operations in the Arabian Sea in support of U.N. resolutions in the region, and later supported Operation Enduring Freedom with the Kitty Hawk Battle Group.

"As the first Aegis destroyer forward-deployed to Japan, Curtis Wilbur leaves behind a legacy of warfighting excellence and operational performance that set the standard for every destroyer that followed," Sargeant said. "For the last 25 years, the 'Steel Hammer of the Fleet' boldly sailed the Indo-Pacific as part of the long grey line of warships of Destroyer Squadron Fifteen that maintained the freedom of the seas and protection of our national interests."

USS Mustin (DDG 89), a Flight IIA DDG, departed Yokosuka on June 22 after 15 years with the FDNF. The destroyer now is a unit of the 3rd Fleet and is homeported in San Diego.

Also ending its FDNF tour was the Whidbey Island-class amphibious dock landing ship USS Germantown (LSD 42), which departed its homeport of Sasebo, Japan on Sept. 15 after more

than a decade with the FDNF, said Amphibious Squadron 11 Public Affairs in a release.

“Germantown and the Sailors who have sailed with her have made an incredible impact across the entire 7th Fleet theater,” said Rear Adm. Chris Engdahl, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group 7. “Whether strengthening alliances and partnerships during a myriad of amphibious operations or conducting humanitarian assistance when people of the Indo-Pacific region needed it most, Germantown has always set the standard in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. A great ship and crew comes to replace them, but they will be missed.”

Germantown will be replaced at Sasebo later this year by sister ship USS Rushmore (LSD 47).