U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star completes Operation Deep Freeze 2023 mission, departs Antarctica



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The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star (WAGB 10) and crew departed the Antarctic region March 2, after 67 days below the Antarctic Circle in support of Operation Deep Freeze 2023.

The Polar Star and crew broke a 17-mile channel through fast ice and conducted over 1,600 hours of ice breaking operations to create a navigable route for cargo vessels to reach McMurdo

Station. The Polar Star and crew executed more than 60 hours of ice escorts for cargo vessels through difficult pack ice conditions.

“Though sea ice around the Antarctic continent overall has been determined to be at one of the lowest in recent history, the sea ice in McMurdo Sound was observed to be at the highest concentration on record dating back to at least 2012,” said Lt. Cmdr. Don Rudnickas, the onboard ice analyst. “The pack ice conditions this year were difficult and made icebreaker support critical not only for establishing the fast ice channel, but for the close escort through pack ice of three of the four cargo vessels resupplying McMurdo Station.”

While operating in Antarctica, the Polar Star and crew made two logistical stops at McMurdo Station. After the first stop in McMurdo, the cutter and crew assisted in moving a 30,000-ton aging and degraded ice pier from Winter Quarters Bay to make way for a modular causeway system that was installed for the season. The cutter also provided an ice escort to motor vessel Ocean Giant and crew, who delivered the 65-ton MCS that was offloaded, assembled, and used as a pier to replace the traditional ice pier used for cargo operations.

“The Antarctic region is a harsh and challenging environment to operate in,” said Lt. Cmdr. Benjamin Litts, operations officer. “Despite the inhospitable conditions, our crew adapted and tirelessly performed at the highest level to ensure mission success.”

Before departing the Antarctic Region, the cutter also visited Palmer Station, the United States’ research facility located on the Antarctic Peninsula. Polar Star personnel went ashore to meet with the station manager and staff, tour the facility, and shared camaraderie in one of the most remote regions on the planet. This was the first visit from a U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker to Palmer Station since 1987.

“Ice breaking in Antarctica is a unique and dynamic mission requiring months of preparation and coordination among all our partners,” said Capt. Keith Ropella, commanding officer. “Mission success was a result of our crew working with fellow service members from the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Navy as a Joint Task Force to continue our proud support of the United States Antarctic Program.”

Operation Deep Freeze is the annual logistical support mission provided by the Department of Defense to the National Science Foundation (NSF) managed by the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP). This includes coordination of strategic inter-theater airlift, tactical intra-theater airlift and airdrop, aeromedical evacuation support, search and rescue response, sealift, seaport access, bulk fuel supply, port cargo handling, and transportation requirements supporting the NSF. This is a unique mission demonstrating U.S. commitment to the Antarctic Treaty and to research programs conducted for the betterment of all humanity. The Polar Star and crew contribute to this yearly effort through icebreaking to clear the channel for supply vessels.

The Polar Star is the United States’ only asset capable of providing access to both Polar Regions. It is a 399-foot heavy polar icebreaker commissioned in 1976, weighing 13,500 tons and is 84-feet wide with a 34-foot draft. The six diesel and three gas turbine engines produce up to 75,000 horsepower.