

USS Fort McHenry Decommissioning Ceremony Marks 33 Years of Service



Sailors aboard the Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship USS Fort McHenry (LSD 43) main the rails during the decommissioning ceremony at Naval Station Mayport, March 27, 2021. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Aaron Lau*

NORFOLK, Va. – The Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship USS Fort McHenry (LSD 43) held a small, COVID-conscious decommissioning ceremony at Naval Station Mayport, Florida, on March 27 before its inactivation, which will occur in April, the U.S. Fleet Forces Command said in a release.

Rear Adm. Robert Katz, commander, Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) 2 presided over the ceremony, which included the remaining ship's crew and several of its previous commanding officer, including the ship's commissioning commanding officer, Capt. George "Dusty" Rhodes, who retired in 1999 and

featured prominently in the ceremony.

"I am humbled to be with you on this bittersweet day as we gather here at Naval Station Mayport to commemorate this ship's 33 years of commissioned service," said Katz. "The history of Fort McHenry lies within each of the ship's Sailors, and it is my hope this pride in their namesake guided all who crossed its quarterdeck and reported for duty."

Fort McHenry was commissioned on Aug. 8, 1987, at Lockheed Shipyard in Seattle.

"During my 17 years of sea duty and four commands at sea, I have no doubt that the Fort McHenry crew was the best with whom I ever served," said Rhodes. "They were always more than willing to do whatever it took to fulfill the mission. It is remarkable how closely they have stuck together over the past 34 years. I am proud to be among them."

After arriving in San Diego on Sept. 30, 1987 the ship remained homeported there until 1995 when it replaced the USS San Bernardino (LST 1189) as a forward-deployed ship based in Sasebo, Japan.

Fort McHenry's first deployment to the Western Pacific took place between June 16 and Dec. 16, 1988, as part of an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) along with embarked Marines from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. The other ships of the ARG were USS New Orleans (LPH 11), USS Mobile (LKA 115), USS Ogden (LPD 5) and USS Fresno (LST 1182). During the deployment Fort McHenry participated in exercises Cobra Gold-88, Valiant Usher 88-6 and Valiant Blitz 89-1 and the Sailors and Marines got some well-earned liberty during port visits to Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, South Korea and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Over the next few decades, Fort McHenry would shift homeport, and deploy several more times, supporting Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Vigilant Warrior and Enduring Freedom.

Its crews would assist with humanitarian assistance efforts domestically, such as oil spill cleanup in the Prince William Sound and internationally, supporting disaster relief efforts in East Timor in 2001, the Philippines and Indonesia in 2004,

In November 1994, the ship received the first women to be permanently assigned to the crew – two lieutenants who reported aboard as the Supply Officer and Electrical Officer.

The ship's final deployment was as part of the USS Kearsarge (LHD 3) Amphibious Ready Group and concluded in July 2019. While deployed to the Europe, Africa and the Middle East area of operations, Fort McHenry, along with embarked Marines from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, conducted maritime security operations and provided a forward naval presence in these critical regions.

During the deployment, Fort McHenry Sailors conducted a burial at sea for the remains of 34 veterans and two military spouses, a passing exercise with Egyptian navy ships in the Northern Arabian Sea and conducted more than 15 strait transits and port visits to Romania, the United Arab Emirates, Germany and Latvia. The ship capped off their deployment by participating in exercise Baltic Operations 2019.

"The last crew of Fort McHenry has performed with toughness and resiliency," said Fabrizio, the ship's final commanding officer. "Like their predecessors onboard, their efforts during the last phase of the ship's active service and the inactivation process have been nothing short of amazing."

The ship will be inactivated on April 16, 2021, and will be designated as Out of Commission in Reserve. That same day, it is scheduled to be towed by a seagoing tug to the Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility in Philadelphia.