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 (FDNF) 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.