

USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee Commissions in Conch Republic Honoring Navy Nurses



Photo By [Petty Officer 2nd Class Nicholas Huynh](#) | 230513-N-IW125-1382 KEY WEST, Fla. KEY WEST (May 13, 2023) – The crew of the Navy’s newest Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee (DDG 123) brings the ship to life during its commissioning ceremony in Key West, Florida. DDG 123 is the second U.S. Navy warship to honor Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee. Higbee was the first living woman to receive the Navy Cross for her leadership of the Navy Nurse Corps during World War I. Naval Air Station Key West is the state-of-the-art facility for combat fighter aircraft of all military services, provides world-class pierside support to U.S. and foreign naval vessels, and is the premier training center for surface and subsurface military operations. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Nicholas V. Huynh/Released) [see less](#) | [View Image Page](#)

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KEY WEST, FL – The U.S. Navy commissioned its newest Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee (DDG 123), May 13 in Key West, Florida.

Guest speaker Rear Adm. Cynthia Kuehner, Commander, Naval Medical Forces Support Command and Director of the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps wished the Corps happy 115th birthday and reflected on its being one of the “greatest enhancements to the fighting strength of our Navy over the past 247 years of its rich history” and celebrating the legacy of Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee.

“I and the nearly 4,000 active and reserve professionals represent will forever feel connected to this moment in history and words cannot fully express our gratitude for our presence and representation,” said Kuehner. “In honoring her selfless service we ensure that the permanence of her spirit is breathed into every space and crevice of this magnificent vessel as she comes to life.”

“The story of Lenah Higbee is the story of past, present and future Navy nurses and the undeniable, inseparable role of the Navy nurse in defense of our nation,” she continued.

“Our Navy, and in particular, our surface fleet, sends a strong signal that we remain committed to our values. Values that we share with our allies and partners around the world,” said Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro. “We will continue to put forth every effort to ensure freedom, stability, security, of sea lanes around the world. Today with the commissioning of the USS Higbee we add one more highly visible extremely capable warship to our Fleet.”

"It is fitting we commission this ship this week, which is National Nurses week, and particularly this day, the 13th of May. On this day our Navy Nurse Corps was established creating the institution that is the lifeblood of Navy Medicine," said Admiral Mike Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations. "Somebody once said, save a life and you're a hero. Save a hundred lives, you're a nurse."

Guest speakers for the event also included the Honorable Donald Norcross, U.S. Representative, New Jersey's 1st District and member of the House Armed Services Committee; the Honorable Teri Johnston, mayor of Key West; and Ms. Kari Wilkinson, president of Huntington Ingalls Industries-Ingalls Shipbuilding division.

The ship's sponsors are Ms. Louisa O. Dixon, former Commissioner of Public Safety for the State of Mississippi under former Governor Ray Mabus; Ms. Virginia Thompson Munford, former Chair of Mississippi Bar Committees; and Ms. Rolanda Pickett Wilson, former Special Advisor for Education and Intergovernmental Relations under former Governor Ray Mabus.

During the ceremony, USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee's commanding officer Cmdr. Douglas Brayton, reported the ship ready to Capt. Courtney M. Minetree, commodore, Destroyer Squadron 21, and all three sponsors gave the traditional order to "Man our ship and bring her to life!"

"If there's anything I want us all to take away from the commissioning of this ship is that we all have the ability to make a difference and make an impact. Whether you are the first group of 20 female nurses in the Navy, a new Sailor to the service, or someone just wanting to see what a ship commissioning is," said Brayton. "We all have the ability and choice to make a difference."

The future USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee, honors Navy Nurse Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee. Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee was the first woman to receive the Navy Cross while still living. Higbee joined the Navy in October 1908 as part of "The Sacred Twenty," the first group of women forming the Navy Nurse Corps. She became the second superintendent of the Navy Nurse Corps in January 1911, holding the position for 11 years. Higbee served in the Navy for 14 years, leading the Nurse Corps through World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee's example is part of the Navy's heritage – 247 years of standing the watch to protect the homeland, preserve freedom of the seas, and defend our way of life.

A Canadian by birth, Higbee completed her formal nursing training at the New York Postgraduate Hospital in 1899 and that same year married retired U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel John Henley Higbee. Higbee worked in private practice following her marriage. Higbee's husband passed in April 1908 and she advanced her nursing career by completing a postgraduate course at Fordham Hospital in New York City.

On May 13, 1908, Congress passed legislation allowing for the establishment of Navy Nurse Corps – the equivalent of the Army Nurse Corps established in 1901. The Navy required members of its Nurse Corps to be unmarried and between the age of 22 and 44. The 36-year-old and widowed Higbee joined 19 other females to make up this first group of female Navy Nurses known as the "Sacred Twenty."

Higbee became Chief Nurse at Norfolk Naval Hospital in 1909 and the second Superintendent of the Corps in 1911. Higbee led the Nurse Corps through not only World War I, but the Spanish Influenza epidemic. Higbee was one of four Navy Nurses to be awarded the Navy Cross in 1920, however, the other three were victims of the flu and honored posthumously. Higbee retired

from the Navy in 1922.

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are the backbone of the U.S. Navy's surface fleet. These highly capable, multi-mission ships conduct a variety of operations, from peacetime presence to national security providing a wide range of warfighting capabilities in multi-threat air, surface and subsurface.