USS Porter, USNS William Mclean Perform Vertical Launch System Re-Arm Demonstration

NORFOLK, Va. (August 3, 2023)–Sailors assigned to the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Porter (DDG 78) and Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group's Expeditionary Reload Team stow simulated ordnance in the ship's MK 71 Vertical Launch System (VLS) during a VLS re-arm demonstration held pier-side on Naval Station Norfolk, Aug. 3. The VLS demonstration was part of U.S. Fleet Forces Command's Large Scale Exercise 2023 which provides a venue to test and refine current and new technologies and platforms to reinforce our current position as a supreme maritime force and provide feedback used to inform future innovation. (U.S. Navy photo by Bill Mesta)

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NORFOLK, Va. – The crews of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Porter (DDG 78) and Military Sealift Command’s (MSC) dry cargo ammunition ship USNS William McLean (T-AKE 12) performed a MK 41 Vertical Launch System (VLS) re-arm, pier-side, at Naval Station Norfolk, Aug. 3.

The Navy conducted the demonstration to provide proof of concept that a dry cargo ammunition ship can reload the weapons system pier-side and while the ship is at sea, with a goal of expanding the capability of VLS reloading in expeditionary environments.

“The Navy has been considering alternative vessels to move ordnance into a theater without an on-shore infrastructure to support,” according to Jerit Vanauker, of MSC’s Taluga Group. “One of the situations considered was the ability to re-arm VLS for Navy combatant ships in a contested environment, and so we considered the idea to use an MSC dry cargo ammunition ship.”

In addition to the crews of Porter and William McLean, U.S. 2nd Fleet, Navy Expeditionary Combat Command’s (NECC) Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group (NAVELSG), the Carderock Division of the Naval Surface Warfare Center (NSWC) and NSWC Picatinny supported the VLS re-arming. NECC’s expeditionary reload team from NAVELSG are expertly trained in ordnance transfer and handling and can operate in remote, complex, and austere environments to ensure naval forces remain forward and mobile.

“MSC’s role in developing and executing VLS is vital,” Vanauker stated. “We will bring the ordnance, and platform to deliver ordnance, in support of VLS re-arming of our combatant ships, so they can get back in the fight without traveling long distances to be resupplied.”

During the demonstration, Porter pulled into the naval station

and moored ‘skin-to-skin’ along-side William McLean, which was moored to the pier. The ships’ crews installed marine bumpers between the vessels to prevent damage to the ships during the VLS re-arm.

Once the ships were safely moored, the VLS team aboard William McLean prepared two simulated ordnance packages for delivery.

“The VLS handling team prepared and reviewed the necessary procedures, ordnance handling equipment (OHE) and tools to conduct the VLS re-arm,” said Vanauker. “All procedures were reviewed, OHE and tools were inspected and a safety brief was conducted.”

“Once inspection was complete, the canister was loaded into the tilt-fixture and vertical strong-back, secured and then attached to the crane hook,” he continued. “The tilt-fixture and vertical strong-back allows the canister to be tilted into a vertical position with assistance from the ship’s crane.”

Using the Mclean’s crane, two simulated missiles were lifted from the ship’s flight deck and swung over to Porter’s forward weapons cells. Porter’s VLS team received the simulated ordnance and stowed the missiles aboard in the ship’s MK 41 Vertical Launch System.

“The crane operator, with assistance from the Signalman, swung the simulated ordnance over to Porter, placing it over the open module cell hatch, and lowered into alignment with the available cell,” Vanauker continued. “In all, performing a VLS re-arm is a very simple evolution which requires patience and focus.”

The crane for the VLS re-arm demonstration was operated by Boatswain’s Mate Justin Bradley, one of William McLean’s Civil Service Mariners (CIVMARs).

“This was the first VLS re-arm to take place aboard William McLean,” according to Capt. John Stulz, USNS William McLean’s Master. “Our CIVMARs secured the USS Porter alongside, operated the crane and provided support on deck for this evolution. Cargo and ordnance operations are a part of daily life for MSC ships.”

“The crew of the William McLean performed with precision and professionalism during this movement, just like our counterparts do every day around the globe,” Stulz added.

The VLS re-arm demonstration was conducted as part of U.S. Fleet Forces’ Large Scale Exercise 2023 (LSE).

“Expeditionary logistics allow the Navy to quickly return to maintaining maritime dominance,” said Rear Adm. Brad Andros, Commander, Navy Expeditionary Combat Command. “Operating in support of Military Sealift Command during Large Scale Exercise 2023 provides our expeditionary reload teams the opportunity to train to different platforms so that they can continue to sustain capacity and increase the persistent combat power of naval forces.”

LSE 2023 provided a venue to test and refine current and new technologies and platforms to reinforce our current position as a supreme maritime force and provide feedback used to inform future innovation. LSE 2023 includes six Navy and Marine Corps component commands and seven U.S. numbered Fleets, including U.S. Fleet Cyber Command/U.S. 10th Fleet, operating seamlessly across 22 time zones.