Wisconsin-made combat ship in Chinese sights

Nathan Phelps, Gannett Wisconsin Media 2:04 p.m. CDT July 10, 2015



(Photo: U.S. Navy)

Story Highlights

- USS Forth Worth is in the middle of a 16-month deployment to the Far East
- The ship was built at Marinette Marine Corp. in Marinette
- The U.S. Navy said it is seeking more heavily armed version of the ship in the future
- Future USS Little Rock will be christened and launched Saturday in Marinette.

Waves wash over the forward deck and 57mm gun, temporarily blinding the video camera mounted on the bridge of the USS Fort Worth as it makes its way across a stormy East China Sea.

The scene is part of an online video showing the Wisconsin-built ship en route to military exercises near Korea last winter, illustrating the critical role the sleek vessel is playing in shallow coastal regions where Chinese ambitions are inflaming tensions with neighbors and locking the U.S. Navy in a game of cat-and-mouse around disputed waters. "The Chinese, U.S, and lots of navies are sailing the South China Sea and all the waters around there," said Cmdr. Matt Kawas, who served as the commanding officer of Fort Worth during a February to May deployment. "We had many interactions with many navies, including the Chinese Navy as we operated in Northeast and Southeast Asia."

As Marinette Marine Corp. prepares to launch the future USS Little Rock during a Saturday, July 18 ceremony at its production facility along the Menominee River in Marinette, the sailors who will be crewing the Littoral Combat Ship might find themselves in a similar situation in a strategic and volatile region.



Cmdr. Matt Kawas was the commanding officer of the USS Forth Worth earlier this year as part of the ship's 16-month deployment to the Far East. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

The sometimes politically contentious Littoral Combat Ship program has followed a circuitous route to development and deployment during the past decade. The Navy opted to buy two different versions of the ship: the more traditional-looking Lockheed Martin variant built in Marinette, and a much different design built by Austal USA in Alabama. Under the initial purchases, each company will build 10 ships.

Six ships are under construction in Marinette. Two, the USS Freedom and USS Fort Worth, are operational in the fleet. The Navy has said it would like to buy more than 50 of the ships, some of which it said will be renamed to "frigate" under a revised design. The average cost for the first 10 ships built by Lockheed Martin is \$360 million per ship.

Work at Marinette, which has 2,500 employees and contractors, is wrapping up on the future USS Milwaukee — undergoing pre-delivery tests — and construction is expected to get underway on more ships this year. Parts and material suppliers for the Lockheed Martin version are located in more than 43 states, including Wisconsin-based companies such as Fairbanks Morse Engine, a marine power plant supplier.



Sailors refuel an MH-60R Seahawk helicopter on the flight deck of the USS Fort Worth in April. Fort Worth is on a 16-month rotational deployment in the Far East. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

Regional tensions

USS Fort Worth's deployment comes amid political sparring in the region. The Obama administration shifted its focus from the Middle East to Asia as part of a policy pivot, partially in response to the growing military muscle — and threat —posed by China. At the same time China is dramatically increasing defense spending and deploying weapons designed to threaten U.S. aircraft carriers, it is aggressively laying claim to small island chains also claimed by its neighbors. In late May, U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter called for China to halt rapid island-building in the South China Sea, warning that the reclamation projects on rocky shoals and reefs were causing instability in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. argues that China can't use artificially constructed islands to expand its sovereignty in the region. U.S. officials have said they were considering stepping up patrols to ensure free navigation in the contested region and have defied Beijing's warning for Washington to stay out of Asian disputes. A Chinese military official rejected the idea China might threaten freedom of navigation in the heavily traveled sea lanes.

Ships such as Forth Worth are using a relatively new set of procedures during encounters with foreign warships to prevent an unintended escalation of tensions while at sea.

"That was our mission out there, to support the 7th Fleet commander's efforts to maintain maritime security, and that's what we did," said Kawas, who described all contact with Chinese Navy vessels as professional. He spoke to Gannett Wisconsin Media during a telephone interview from San Diego.

"The first interaction you have with any foreign warship is always pretty interesting. Then you learn how routine it is ... it happens daily, and eventually that becomes routine for everybody," he said.

The Littoral Combat Ship is designed to operate in shallower coastal waters, carrying out a number of different missions including surface warfare and anti-submarine operations. USS Fort Worth, operating out of Singapore, is in the midst of a 16-month deployment that has included patrols of the South China Sea, helping search for a lost AirAsia airliner and participation in a number of military exercises and exchanges.



Naval Aircrewman 2nd Class Ian Carpenito observes the littoral combat ship USS Fort Worth as it conducts routine patrols in international waters. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

LCS Program

The vessels have been a magnet of criticism in Congress. A number of U.S. Government Accountability Office reports have pointed out design and operational deficiencies in the initial ships. Those issues, the Navy and contractors say, have been worked out.

The program has largely overcome funding hurdles through sequestration and a tightening federal budget. Company and shippard officials say they continue to look for ways to reduce production time and costs. Fincantieri, the Italian shipbuilding company that owns Marinette Marine, poured \$74 million for production facility improvements — to largely support LCS construction.

Late last year, the Department of Defense said the program would get an overhaul, after the first 20 ships are built, seeking a design with more armor and more firepower. Lockheed Martin said it will offer the Navy a beefier version of the ship it is currently building in Marinette.

Far East operations

USS Freedom made a similar Far-East deployment in 2013 that helped provide the Navy information, and lead contractor, Lockheed Martin, with important information about using the ship in real-world operations. While the general use of the ships are understood, Kawas said crews continue to test the limits of the ships and systems and are finding new capabilities along the way.

"Within about a week of taking over the ship, we were sailing near Korea and Japan, the first time an LCS had gone up into Northeast Asia," he said. "This deployment has been about seeing what you can do while you're up there." Fort Worth was able to work in shallow — too shallow for a destroyer — waters with ships from the South Korean Navy. The ship also took on a small dive and salvage unit to help in the search for the AirAsia airliner, and it's also delivered troops to shore.



The USS Fort Worth underway during exercise Foal Eagle 2015, a series of annual training events designed to increase readiness and maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

"We were able to bring on a very small contingent of Marines and use (our small boats) to put them ashore and do missions for the exercise," said Kawas. "Neither one of those were anything the mission packages were designed to do, but it was kind of a hybrid capability we were able to drop in ... and use. Those are the kinds of things we're learning on this deployment."

Navy officials have touted a number of firsts during the deployment, including a hybrid air detachment operating the unmanned MQ-8B Fire Scout and MH-60R Seahawk helicopter. Pilots are trained to fly both aircraft.

A little more than 50 officers and sailors run the ship, but the number expands when the air detachment and mission system specialists are added to the complement. In all, about 100 sailors make up the crews sailing Fort Worth during the deployment.

"I have yet to be able to find something to ask my sailors to do that they couldn't figure out a way to get done," Kawas said. "It's the sailors that are making these ships work. Once people learn about LCS and what LCS can do, and meet the sailors, I've found that generally changes people's opinions of what the ship can do and they start to realize the potential of what these ships are going to bring."

Forth Worth is expected to spend the summer and fall participating in an annual U.S. Navy and Marine exercise with nine other regional nations including Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

"It's been exciting to get in on the ground floor as we look to operationalize what people had written these ships would do," Kawas said. "Testing is one thing, but getting a chance to take them on deployment — and actually execute the missions — that's really the fun the part."

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