Secretary of the Navy visits *USS Blue Ridge*, 7th Fleet staff

By MCSA Cale Hatch,
***USS Blue Ridge* Public Affairs**

USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19), embarked 7th Fleet staff, and Marines of Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team Pacific (FASTPAC), welcomed the secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) Aug. 29 for a tour of the amphibious command ship.

SECNAV Ray Mabus met with Commander 7th Fleet Vice Adm. John Bird, and other senior leadership to better familiarize himself with the area of operations and evaluate the material condition of the 7th Fleet flagship to determine its longevity.

"Plans are, right now, to get as much out of *Blue Ridge* as possible," said Mabus. "We're looking at extending *Blue Ridge* to around 2019. There is no replacement ship of this type, so we want to keep *Blue Ridge* as long as possible."

SECNAV took the opportunity to visit the flagship's engine room, mess decks, main deck, laundry room, Damage Control Central, main communications space, maritime operations center, fire room and a berthing during his tour.

"I've been in a lot of spaces in a short period of time," said Mabus. "I've been to some of your more exotic communication and electronic spaces that are absolutely state of the art. The main thing that has impressed me about the *Blue Ridge*, and it *has* impressed me, is that this ship was commissioned in 1970, and it is still in as good a shape today as it was then."

Following the ship tour, Mabus inspected FASTPAC Marines and held an all-hands call with Sailors from *Blue Ridge* and 7th Fleet staff and Marines from FASTPAC, and answered questions from Sailors and Marines on how to improve the Navy and the future of fleet operations.

Secretary of the Navy the Honorable Ray Mabus greets Sailors during an all-hands call following a tour of *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) Aug. 29. *Blue Ridge*, embarked U.S. 7th Fleet staff and Marines from Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team Pacific (FASTPAC) hosted Mabus' first official visit to the Republic of Korea since being appointed Secretary of the Navy in May.

U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Daniel Viramontes

Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Gregory Richardson, assigned to FASTPAC, admitted that there was a personable quality to the session, which revealed his hometown high school to be SECNAV's football rival.

"I felt like I was talking to a regular gentleman from Mississippi," said Richardson. "It was a very relaxing way to bring up my question."

This was SECNAV's first visit to *Blue Ridge* since taking office in May. His visit comes as part of a two-week Pacific tour of naval assets in Japan, Korea, Guam, Hawaii and Saipan.

The Chief says:

Did you know the 7th Fleet area of responsibility (AOR) is home to more than 50 percent of the world's population, speaking more than 3,000 languages?

Did you know there are 35 maritime countries in the 7th Fleet AOR, which includes two of the world's three largest economies (China and Japan) and 10 of the 14 smallest?

Did you know the United States has longstanding security treaties with five nations in the 7th Fleet AOR, as well as security assistance programs involving a total of 25 nations?

If you didn't know, now you know.
– MCC(SW/AW) Eric Hannah, CFAY

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During the Manila visit, the first by a U.S. aircraft carrier in more than 13 years, Sailors from CVW 5 and six different GW departments hosted their counterparts from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) for tours of their spaces and demonstrations of some of their equipment.

"No one nation wants to go it alone," said GW Operations Officer Cmdr. Anthony Calandra. "It's just so much better if we work as a team, which is enhanced by our port visits, community service projects and the exchange of knowledge."

The strike group's three port visits also provided an opportunity for Sailors to get out into the local communities to make a difference through volunteerism. According to GW Chaplain Lt. Cmdr. Tadeusz Gegotek, more than 1,000 Sailors worked on 41 different community service projects, devoting a total of 4,500 man-hours toward making a difference for their host cities.

"The best way to build a strong relationship is to interact with locals – but it's a small part of a much bigger picture," Gegotek said. "Whether interacting with local citizens while on liberty or through community service projects, both contribute toward the same goal – building lasting relationships with our host country."

Training was also a key element of the deployment. In order to maintain readiness in case of an at-sea emergency, Sailors completed 16 general quarters drills, during which Sailors battled simulated emergency scenarios with the ship in its highest state of readiness.

The high-tempo operations and training led to approximately 250 Sailors earning their Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist (ESWS) qualifications since June 10, with nearly 200 Sailors attaining their Enlisted Aviation Warfare Specialist (EAWS) qualification during that period.

"Training is essential to the mission. It is vital for Sailors to be able to react at a moments notice to keep the ship safe and ready at all times," said Lt. Cmdr. Todd Russell, GW training officer. "Warfare qualifications are a big part of that, because more Sailors with warfare pins mean that the ship is better prepared for any situation that arises."

Throughout the course of the nearly three-month deployment, aviators flew approximately 4,500 sorties to attain and maintain the highest level of readiness in carrier operations, according to Commander CVW 5 Capt. Ross Myers. Aviators spent a total of 8,326 hours in the air sustaining their strike and anti-air warfare capabilities.

Sailors from GW Supply Department worked around the clock providing essential services to the crew of more than 5,000. S-2 Division (Food Services) prepared more than 1.3 million meals, providing the crew with a variety of options for their three meals a day. GW also conducted eight underway replenishments, receiving approximately 1,500 tons of spare parts, consumable supplies and food worth about $5 million.

Sailors from S-12 Division (Postal Services) received, sorted and distributed more than 500,000 pounds of mail while underway.

"E-mail messages are great, but you can't e-mail mom's cookies," said PC2(SW/AW) Kent Landis, leading petty officer of the GW Post Office. "You can't replace the satisfaction Sailors get when they receive a package from a loved one."

For many Sailors, the inaugural summer deployment of GW from Yokosuka represented their first extended period aboard a Navy ship at sea.

Aviation Electronics Technician Airman Apprentice Christopher Jennings, a newly-reported Sailor from Aviation Intermediate Maintenance Department's IM-3 Division, joined his shipmates in early August while the ship was pier side in Singapore. The native of Missoula, Mont. said he learned many lessons underway, even if it was only for a short time.

"Even though I've only been underway for a few weeks, I've managed to learn a lot," said Jennings. "It was a little intimidating at first when I arrived, but it's been a great experience so far. It's my first time out of Montana and I've already done, seen and learned so much that I'm really looking forward to seeing what's next."