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FISC, Army personnel, Navy Reservists haul massive Mendonca loadout

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Working around the clock in 12-hour shifts, a team of U.S. Army personnel, Naval Reservists from Navy Cargo Handling Battalion 8, and Ocean Terminals employees from the Fleet and Industrial Supply Center (FISC) Pearl Harbor conducted one of Hawaii's largest military loadouts in years. Altogether, the team members loaded approximately 1,600 pieces of cargo aboard the USNS Mendonca (TAKR 303).

The massive operation was complicated by the diverse cargo that was loaded. Rather than easily-handled crates and boxes, nearly all of the 1,600 pieces were composed of war-fighting equipment, containers, tanker trucks, construction vehicles, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, humvees, large trucks . . . and even a bulldozer or two.

In addition, the Mendonca loadout was not able to begin until the ship was first offloaded. When the Mendonca arrived at FISC on Nov. 17, its holds were filled with containerized cargo and 14 brand new Chinook CH-47 helicopters belonging to the 25th Infantry Division's Combat Air Brigade. As soon as the ramp was set in place and safety meetings had been held, stevedores and Naval Reserve cargo handlers swarmed onto the ship to begin the offload. In no time, containers and helicopters were being hooked up, hoisted by the ship's crane, and eased over the side to the pier.

The loadout began on Saturday, Nov. 20, allowing no time for the Naval Reservists to enjoy a weekend in Hawaii. One by one, their engines straining, the

trucks and other vehicles were driven up the ship's ramp and lashed in place on one of the ship's seven decks. Readers who have never lashed cargo can't possibly realize how demanding the job can be. As the vehicles and containers come aboard, they are situated as close together as possible in one of the immense cargo holds below deck. Stevedores use heavy chains to lash the vehicles down, preventing them from careening across the hold during rough seas. As each additional vehicle is lashed into place, the work area becomes more and more confining, and stevedores find themselves squeezing through a labyrinth of chains and closely-packed vehicles.

The Mendonca certainly did not lack for cargo space. The ship has the equivalent of eight football fields of cargo area and is capable of carrying an entire U.S. Army armor or air assault battalion. The Mendonca is one of 19 large, medium-speed, roll-on/roll-off (LMSR) ships belonging to the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command.

It is named for Army Sergeant Leroy Mendonca, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for heroic action during the Korean Conflict.

If the back-to-back offload and loadout seem like they took a lot of time, they did. Although the operation was still underway when this article was written, it was expected to be completed the day prior to Thanksgiving, which will give everyone a well-deserved rest after nearly eight days of hot, demanding work on the pier.

The unloaded cargo belongs to the 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade Combat Team and is bound for the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, where it will be used in training exercises.
