Lassen visits Vietnam in storybook return of its commander

By MC2 Matthew R. White, Navy Public Affairs Support Element Japan

The guided-missile destroyer *USS Lassen* (DDG 82), commanded by a man who as a boy sought escape from those once war-torn Vietnamese homeland waters, arrived in Da Nang, Vietnam Nov. 7, for a scheduled port visit.

"My crew and I are proud to be able to represent our country to the people of Vietnam," said *Lassen* Commanding Officer Cmdr. H. B. Le. "This visit is a symbol of the friendship between our two nations, and we are deeply honored to be a part of it."

Nearly 35 years prior, Le left Vietnam aboard a fishing trawler; he now returns at the helm of a U.S. Navy warship.

"I'm very humbled by the amazing opportunity to get to Vietnam after more than 34 years," Le said. "I feel so fortunate to bring *Lassen* and my crew to Vietnam."

Le's story of escape followed by prosperity in the United States can read like a Hollywood script.

"My father was a commander in the South Vietnamese Navy and was serving as the deputy commanding officer of Nha Be Naval Support Base when we left Vietnam," he said. "The evening of the 29th of April, 1975, his commanding officer left the country with his family without telling my dad, and when his officers told him about that he assumed command.

"The next day, only after realizing Saigon had fallen, did my dad tell his remaining men to go home to their families and to make sure to take care of them," Le continued. "My dad navigated a fishing trawler with 400 passengers out to sea, where we were picked up by *USS Barbour County* (LST 1195) on May 2, 1975.

"Leaving Vietnam had a profound impact on my family," said Le. "My parents had to start all over again with no money in their pockets. Thanks to some truly generous and wonderful Americans who sponsored us, my Dad was able to forge a new beginning."

The Le family immigrated to the U.S. and settled in northern Virginia. As Le grew older, he heard the call of the seas as his father heard many years before him. After becoming a U.S. citizen in 1985, Le attended the U.S. Naval Academy, graduating with merit in 1992 and was commissioned a U.S. Navy officer.

"Growing up, my father never pushed me to join the Navy or anything like that," Le said. "He said do what you want to do, but whatever you do, do your best at it. So when I did decide to go to the Naval Academy, he was proud of me for that."

The crew that Le leads is one of few in the Navy who have had the opportunity to visit the Asia-Pacific nation since the end of hostilities in 1975.

"I never thought I'd have a chance to visit Vietnam," said Logistics Specialist Seaman Michael McLean, who hails from Gahanna, Ohio. "All that history that happened in Vietnam, and now I get to see it first hand."

***USS Lassen* (DDG 82) Commanding Officer Cmdr. H.B. Le, speaks to the press in front of the U.S. 7th Fleet command ship *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) Nov. 7. *Blue Ridge* and *Lassen* are in Da Nang for a scheduled port visit. This is Le's first visit to Vietnam after leaving the country with his family in 1975.**
U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Cynthia Griggs

McLean and his fellow Sailors will have the opportunity to interact with the local people of Da Nang as well as experience their customs and culture. The crew will also compete in soccer and basketball games against students from the University of Da Nang. The visit is not just about fun and games, though, as many of the *Lassen* crew will take part in two community service projects in the Da Nang area.

Le assumed command of *Lassen* and its crew of nearly 300 in April. The ship is one of seven destroyers assigned to Destroyer Squadron 15, forward-deployed to Yokosuka, Japan, as part of the U.S. 7th Fleet.

Blue Ridge delivers goodwill to Vietnam

By MC2 Cynthia Griggs,
***USS Blue Ridge* Public Affairs**

USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19) and embarked 7th Fleet Sailors delivered medical and hygiene supplies, sewing materials, school supplies and toys to residents in Da Nang, Vietnam, as part of Project Handclasp Nov. 7.

Project Handclasp is a Navy program started in 1962 to collect and distribute donated humanitarian, educational and goodwill materials using empty cargo space on Navy ships to help less fortunate people.

Blue Ridge recently departed Singapore, the collection point for Project Handclasp materials, where more than 20 pallets of supplies were brought on board for delivery.

"*Blue Ridge* has been involved in Project Handclasp from the beginning," said Chaplain Steven Benefield. "Whenever we make a port visit to Singapore, it's beneficial to take advantage of the opportunity."

Benefield said delivering the Project Handclasp materials comes at a crucial time for the people of Da Nang.

"Typhoon Ketsana recently struck Da Nang," he said. "Many homes, businesses, roadways, and schools were badly damaged, and I think the people of Da Nang could really use our help."

(Center) Lt. Jeffery Hanson shows Vietnam navy officers the engine room's main control during the port visit of *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) to Vietnam.
U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Matthew D. Jordan

The estimated value of the Project Handclasp supplies delivered by *Blue Ridge* is nearly $73,000. Project Handclasp relies on individuals, service organizations and industries for donations of humanitarian materials.

During its historic visit to Vietnam, *Blue Ridge* and 7th Fleet Sailors will also participate in community outreach projects at schools badly damaged from the typhoon.

Fitzgerald arrives in Hong Kong

By Ensign Bill Morrison,
7th Fleet Public Affairs

USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) arrived in Hong Kong for a scheduled port visit Nov. 7.

Hong Kong, a favorite of Sailors for decades, offers *Fitzgerald* a wide variety of unique cultural experiences. While in the international city, Sailors will tour local historical and cultural sights, enjoy the city's famous cuisine and participate in community service projects.

U.S. Navy ships visit Hong Kong more than 40 times a year and appreciate its status as an open and international city.

"Our Sailors always look forward to visiting Hong Kong because U.S. ships are greeted with such a warm welcome," said *Fitzgerald* Commanding Officer Cmdr. Richard Dromerhauser. "Visits like these support the constructive relationship we are building through military to military engagement."