

Only U.S. Heavy Icebreaker Departs for Annual Antarctic Operation



Family of a crew member aboard Polar Star wave from the pier in Seattle on Nov. 26. The Polar Star crew departed its homeport for a deployment to Antarctica that will last several months. U.S. Coast Guard/Petty Officer 3rd Class Michael Clark
SEATTLE – The crew aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star departed Nov. 26 for their annual deployment to Antarctica, where the cutter and crew will support Operation Deep Freeze 2020, a joint military service mission to resupply U.S. interests in Antarctica, the Coast Guard Pacific Area said in a release.

“We set out today on an important mission, saying goodbye to the friends and families who have supported us and our ship for the past seven-months since we returned from Operation Deep Freeze 2019,” said Capt. Gregory Stanclik, commanding officer of the Polar Star.

“We are looking forward to this year’s mission to McMurdo Station with a ship that is running the best it has since reactivation. This mission is critical to the United States and our continued strategic presence on the Antarctic Continent and I have the best crew possible to ensure we safely accomplish our goal.”

Homeported in Seattle, the 43-year-old Coast Guard cutter is the United States’ last remaining operational heavy icebreaker. This is the cutter’s seventh deployment in as many years to directly support the resupply of McMurdo Station – the only U.S. main logistics hub in Antarctica.

Each year, the crew aboard the 399-foot, 13,000-ton Polar Star

create a navigable path through seasonal and multiyear ice, sometimes as much as 21 feet thick, to allow a resupply vessel to reach McMurdo Station. The supply delivery allows Antarctic stations to stay operational year-round, including during the dark and tumultuous winter.

Commissioned in 1976, the Polar Star is showing its age. Reserved for Operation Deep Freeze each year, the Polar Star spends the winter breaking ice near Antarctica, and when the mission is complete, the cutter returns to dry dock in order to complete critical maintenance and repairs in preparation for the next Operation Deep Freeze mission.

The Coast Guard has been the sole provider of the nation's polar icebreaking capability since 1965 and is seeking to increase its icebreaking fleet with six new polar security cutters in order to ensure continued national presence and access to the polar regions.

In the fiscal year 2019 budget, Congress appropriated \$655 million to begin construction of a new polar security cutter this year, with another \$20 million appropriated for long-lead-time materials to build a second.

The Coast Guard and U.S. Navy, working through an integrated program office, awarded VT Halter Marine Inc. a fixed price incentive contract in April for the detail design and construction of the lead polar security cutter, including options for the construction of two additional PSCs.