

# U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star completes Operation Deep Freeze 2024 mission, departs Antarctica



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SOUTHERN OCEAN – The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star (WAGB 10) and crew departed McMurdo Station, Antarctica, Feb. 12, after operating for 51 days below the Antarctic Circle in support of Operation Deep Freeze 2024.

The Polar Star and crew broke a 38-mile channel through fast ice to create a navigable route for vessels to reach McMurdo Station and escorted a cargo vessel and oil tanker through the ice to and from the station.

“This year, the fast ice in McMurdo Sound was exceptionally thick due to the winds and temperature at the end of last season” said Lt. Cmdr. Don Rudnickas, operations officer. “It challenged our ship and our crew in almost every way, but we met those challenges to achieve our ultimate concern – the resupply of McMurdo Station by sea.”

Before departing the Antarctic Region, the cutter also visited the Bay of Whales, where members from all three of the Coast Guard Regional Dive Lockers dove 90 miles south of the previously documented record for southernmost scuba dive. The crew also went ashore adjacent to the Ross Ice Shelf in the Bay of Whales where they conducted their Antarctica Service Medal ceremony and were able to walk up to the ice shelf.

“Operation Deep Freeze demands more than just breaking ice; it requires navigating the complexities of keeping a 48-year-old

cutter operational while subjecting her to the most extreme conditions possible,” said Capt. Keith Ropella, commanding officer. “We rely on the crew’s technical expertise, teamwork, and their commitment to overcoming the relentless obstacles posed by time and nature. It’s also the collaboration of a Joint Task Force, comprised of servicemembers from the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Navy, that play a crucial role in mission success.”

Operation Deep Freeze is the annual logistical support mission provided by the Department of Defense to the National Science Foundation (NSF) managed by the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP). This includes coordination of strategic inter-theater airlift, tactical intra-theater airlift and airdrop, aeromedical evacuation support, search and rescue response, sealift, seaport access, bulk fuel supply, port cargo handling, and transportation requirements supporting the NSF. This is a unique mission demonstrating U.S. commitment to the Antarctic Treaty and to research programs conducted for the betterment of all humanity. The Polar Star and crew contribute to this yearly effort through icebreaking to clear the channel for supply vessels.

The Polar Star is the United States’ only asset capable of providing access to both Polar Regions. It is a 399-foot heavy polar icebreaker commissioned in 1976, weighing 13,500 tons and is 84-feet wide with a 34-foot draft. The six diesel and three gas turbine engines produce up to 75,000 horsepower.