

U.S. Coast Guard heavy icebreaker returns to the U.S. following completion of Antarctic mission



U.S. Coast Guard 13th District, April 4, 2024

SAN FRANCISCO – The Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star (WAGB 10) and crew returned to the United States Sunday, following a 138-day deployment to Antarctica to support Operation Deep Freeze 2024.

This deployment marks the Polar Star's 27th journey to Antarctica in support of Operation Deep Freeze, an annual joint military service mission to resupply the United States Antarctic stations, in support of the National Science Foundation (NSF) – the lead agency for the United States Antarctic Program (USAP). This year also marks the 64th iteration of the annual operation.

The Polar Star crew [departed Seattle](#) bound for Antarctica on Nov. 15, 2023, traveling more than 27,500 miles through the North Pacific, South Pacific, Indian, and Southern Oceans, as well as the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska, which included stops on four continents.

While en route to Antarctica, the Polar Star made three logistical stops in [Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Sydney, and Hobart, Australia](#). In Hobart, the cutter and crew hosted the U.S. Ambassador for Australia, Caroline Kennedy, Australian members of parliament, Australian and Tasmanian government representatives, and local industry partners.

After arriving in Antarctica, the cutter broke a 38-mile channel through fast ice up to 12 feet thick, creating a navigable route for cargo vessels to reach McMurdo Station. The Polar Star and crew executed three close-quarters ice escorts for cargo vessels through difficult ice conditions to guarantee the delivery of nine million gallons of fuel and 80 million pounds of cargo to advance scientific endeavors in the most remote region of the world. The cutter departed the Antarctic region on Feb. 14 after 51 days of operations in support of [Operation Deep Freeze 2024](#).

On the return journey, the Polar Star evaded a severe bomb cyclone in the Southern Ocean and had stops in Auckland, New Zealand, Yokosuka, Japan, and Dutch Harbor, Alaska. The Polar Star's stop in Yokosuka consisted of a media visit and formal reception hosted aboard the cutter, where the crew conducted professional exchanges with senior maritime representatives from the United States, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, underscoring the importance of collaboration within the Indo-Pacific to promote security and stability across the region.

"The successful completion of this mission stands as a testament to the relentless commitment and selflessness exhibited by our crew," said Capt. Keith Ropella, Polar Star's commanding officer. "Despite adverse weather, difficult ice, and formidable mechanical challenges, the crew of Polar Star not only achieved their mission but did so with remarkable expertise and teamwork, proof of their devotion to duty and dedication to their shipmates."

Operation Deep Freeze is the annual logistical support mission the Department of Defense provides to the NSF, which the USAP manages. This includes strategic and tactical inter-theater airlift and airdrop coordination, aeromedical evacuation support, search and rescue response, sealift, seaport access, bulk fuel supply, port cargo handling, and transportation requirements supporting the NSF. This unique mission

demonstrates U.S. commitment to the Antarctic Treaty and scientific research programs. The Polar Star and crew contribute to this yearly effort by breaking the solid ice channel to clear the way for supply vessels.

The Polar Star is now in Vallejo, California, for phase four of its five-year Service Life Extension Project (SLEP). SLEP was awarded to Mare Island Dry Dock, LLC to recapitalize targeted systems, including the propulsion, communication, and machinery control systems, and conduct significant maintenance to extend the cutter's service life. The Coast Guard will mitigate the risk of lost operational days due to unplanned maintenance or system failures by replacing obsolete, unsupportable, or maintenance-intensive equipment. Each phase is coordinated so that operational commitments, like Operation Deep Freeze missions in Antarctica, will still be met.

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