

LCS 2 RIMPAC 23 July 2014

RIMPAC 2014: US LCS conducts near-simultaneous helicopter and small boat launches during boarding drills with Chinese warships

Grace Jean, On board USS Independence - IHS Jane's Navy International
19 July 2014



The US Navy's (USN's) lead Independence-class Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) conducted near-simultaneous helicopter and small boat launches for the first time during maritime interdiction operations with two Chinese warships, during the Rim of the Pacific ('RIMPAC') exercise.

USS *Independence* (LCS 2), an aluminium trimaran, is participating in the biennial exercise for the first time. Embarked with a surface warfare mission package consisting of two 11 m rigid hull inflatable boats (RHIBs), two 30 mm Bushmaster II cannons, a 23-sailor maritime security

boarding team, as well as an aviation detachment flying two MH-60S helicopters, *Independence* has been conducting a number of missions with multinational forces.

"The one thing we've been able to demonstrate, which we haven't done before, is simultaneous helicopter-boat operations," the commanding officer of *Independence*'s Blue Crew, Commander Joseph A Gagliano, told *IHS Jane's* on 18 July. "It's the same crew that does both of them. So what we'll do is, we'll have the helicopter and the boat staged and ready to go, and when it's time to go, we launch the helicopter. The crew then goes down to the boat deck and launches the boat, which is very important when you're doing maritime interdiction operations, because that allows you to get both the helo and the boat on the target very quickly."

Independence practiced the skill during two boarding exercises with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) on 16 and 17 July 2014. In both drills, the PLAN ships - the Type 052C Luyang II-class guided-missile destroyer *Haikou*, and the Type 054A Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate *Yueyang* - acted as the target, with the USN conducting the boarding operations.

Cdr Gagliano said the drill enabled *Independence* "to demonstrate near simultaneous helicopter and boat launches to get on the target Getting into the spirit of RIMPAC, [this] allows us to work with the Chinese in a way that this ship has never done before". The USN has had few opportunities to work side-by-side with the Chinese navy, which is participating in 'RIMPAC' for the first time. *Independence*'s commanding officer referred to both drills with the PLAN as being "very professional".

"Anytime we do a boarding on a ship, we give them very specific instructions as to how we're going to board their ship. What was unique about this, once we got on board, was a chance for them to ask questions," Cdr Gagliano added. "They had a lot of questions about how we do boardings, about the equipment we use to do boardings ... so for two navies that have had limited interaction together, it was really a good opportunity for sailors to speak to sailors."

COMMENT

The US Navy's Littoral Combat Ships operate with a ship's company of 50 sailors. The crewmembers are expected to be cross-trained in a number of roles to enable them to conduct a range of missions, such as launching helicopters and small boats in a near-simultaneous fashion.

USS *Independence* (LCS 2) has been focused on conducting testing and evaluation of the LCS mine countermeasures mission package in recent years and has had fewer opportunities than its Freedom-class peers to execute surface warfare missions. Even though the mission packages are accompanied by operators specialised in conducting operations in the respective warfare areas, it remains the responsibility of the ship's company to launch and recover those detachments and equipment so the drill would have provided a very relevant test for the crew.

IMPAC 2014: USS Independence proving LCS modularity concept, says CO

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The US Navy's (USN's) decision to include its first Independence-class Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) in the Rim of the Pacific ('RIMPAC') exercise in Hawaii has helped prove the programme's modularity concept, the ship's commanding officer told *IHS Jane's* on 18 July.

Commander Joseph A Gagliano, who is leading the USS *Independence* (LCS 2) Blue Crew, explained that the conversion process that the vessel went through in order to join the 48 other ships participating in the biennial exercise is testimony to the LCS concept.

LCS represents the USN's newest class of small surface ship, designed with the ability to swap out containerised mission packages that enable the vessels to conduct one of three missions: surface warfare (SuW), anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and mine countermeasures (MCM).

"Just six weeks ago, we were a mine countermeasure ship operating off the coast of California," Cdr Gagliano said. "We got the call that we needed to be here in a surface warfare role, so within a matter of a week, we had switched out our mission package from mine countermeasures to surface warfare, checked out the gear, and came over. We've become a surface warfare-configured ship operating in the middle of the Pacific and really could do the same thing again. Just imagine that four weeks from now, we could be an ASW-configured ship operating in the Western Pacific."

Since commissioning in 2010, *Independence* has largely been involved in testing and evaluating the MCM mission package, which includes unmanned underwater vehicles and helicopter-tethered vehicles that prosecute and destroy mines.

About 20-25 sailors specialise in operating each mission package, and when new packages are embarked, the associated operators come on board the host vessel as a detachment. In the case of the SuW mission package currently embarked on *Independence*, the detachment spent about a week working up with the ship to integrate with the crew.

"They came from a Freedom-class ship," said Cdr Gagliano: the Freedom class is the steel monohull variant of LCS built by the Lockheed Martin-led team. "They had worked on that class of ship, came over here, and [it was] a nearly seamless integration from one ship class to the other."

COMMENT

In the months leading up to 'RIMPAC 2014', the US Navy (USN) had been questioned about whether it would indeed be sending any Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to its largest naval exercise in the Pacific. Indeed with four LCS now operational in the fleet - two Freedom-class ships and two Independence-class ships - and the second Freedom-class ship USS *Fort Worth* (LCS 3) working up for the navy's second LCS deployment to the Asia-Pacific region, the potential absence struck casual observers as puzzling.

However, the USN has been under fire by Congressional watchdogs for the lagging development of its LCS mission packages. Though there are four commissioned ships in the fleet, the initial operational capability (IOC) of the three mission packages meant to give the vessels warfighting ability has yet to be declared. The surface warfare (SuW) mission package is to attain IOC in 2014, the mine countermeasures mission (MCM) package in 2015, and the anti-submarine warfare package in 2016.

Independence largely has been saddled with responsibility for the test and evaluation of the MCM mission package since it joined the fleet in 2010. Fiscal year 2014 (FY 2014) has been a critical test year for both the SuW and MCM packages. Sending *Independence* to 'RIMPAC' with the SuW package means that the ship has had to postpone testing on the MCM package. Whether or not the pause will cause a delay in the IOC of the package remains to be seen. Once *Independence* completes its 'RIMPAC' deployment, it is to return home to San Diego, California to resume the MCM tests.



In USS Independence's (LCS 2) mission bay, two 11 m RHIBs and a 20-foot shipping

**container - part of the US Navy's Littoral Combat Ship surface warfare mission package -
are embarked during the Rim of the Pacific 2014 exercise. (Grace Jean/IHS Jane's)**