EXERCISES FREEDOM BANNER AND COBRA GOLD

At the end of January three Military Sealift Command ships discharged hundreds of pieces of US Marine Corps equipment, containerized supplies and personnel in support of exercises Freedom Banner and Cobra Gold at Chuk Samet, Thailand.

Freedom Banner 2011 brought together multiple commands to offload Maritime Prepositioning Force ships USNSs 1st Lt Jack Lummus and 1st Lt Harry L Martin while both ships were anchored three miles offshore.

At the time of writing US Marines were due to deploy cargo offloaded from Lummus to the field for their participation in the 30th annual Cobra Gold exercise, which was expected to include more than 11,000 personnel from Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia and the United States. Participants were due to conduct computer-simulated and field exercises and take part in civic assistance projects in Thailand up until 18th February.

Freedom Banner provided Lummus and Martin, both assigned to Pacific-based Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Three, with valuable training for the ships’ mission is to quickly deliver military cargo and supplies in response to a military contingency or to provide humanitarian assistance. Each ship is crewed by about 30 mariners apiece working for private companies under contract to MSC.

“Freedom Banner not only offers participants valuable, hands-on training, but has the added benefit of supporting a real-world, vital exercise,” said Navy Captain Herman Awai, MPS Squadron Three commander.

Both ships arrived off Thailand’s coast on 19th January. The first phase of Freedom Banner, from 20th to 22nd January, included the offload and assembly of the Improved Navy Lighterage System. INLS includes various causeway sections and tugs used to offload combat equipment and supplies where conventional port facilities may be damaged, inadequate or non-existent. The INLS assembles at sea and connects together like building blocks to form ferries, causeway piers or a large staging area for cargo called a Roll-on/Roll-off Discharge Facility, or RRDF.

Sailors from Williamsburg, Virginia-based Navy Cargo Handling Battalion One went to work on 20th January in Lummus, offloading warping tugs, utility boats, and powered and non-powered modules that make up the INLS. Working around the clock, all cargo was offloaded by 21st January.

Nine interconnected modules forming the RRDF were offloaded from Martin on 21st and 22nd January. Fully assembled, the RRDF is equal in size to two basketball
courts. NCHB-1 sailors operated Martin’s heavy-lift cranes and placed each 80-ton module safely into the water. Sailors from San Diego-based Assault Craft Unit One operated warping tugs to carefully position each module. Next, sailors from San Diego-based Amphibious Construction Battalion One connected the modules until the platform was fully assembled. On 22nd January, warping tug boats pushed the RRDF behind Lummus’ stern and the ship’s ramp was lowered onto the RRDF. Three inter-connected barges, one of which is powered by a water jet propulsion system, then attached itself to the RRDF.

Marines from Okinawa-based Combat Logistics Group Three then began driving wheeled and tracked vehicles onto the causeway sections. In total, 176 pieces of cargo, including Humvees, trucks and amphibious assault vehicles, were delivered ashore without delay.

Also supporting Cobra Gold was MSC-chartered high speed vessel HSV Westpac Express, which delivered 246 Marines from the Okinawa-based 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force to Chuk Samet on 22nd January.

MSC reservists also played an important role. Members from Expeditionary Port Unit 113 from Fort Worth, Texas, and EPU 102 from New York City deployed in support of the exercises. Reservists crewed a mobile sealift operations command centre, a portable communications facility designed to operate and manage port operations even if port infrastructure is damaged or destroyed. EPUs can quickly deploy to a contingency operation and manage the arrival and departures of cargo ships in port.

Maritime Sealift Command operates approximately 110 non-combatant, civilian-crewed ships that replenish US Navy ships, conduct specialized missions, strategically preposition combat cargo at sea around the world and move military cargo and supplies used by deployed US forces and coalition partners.