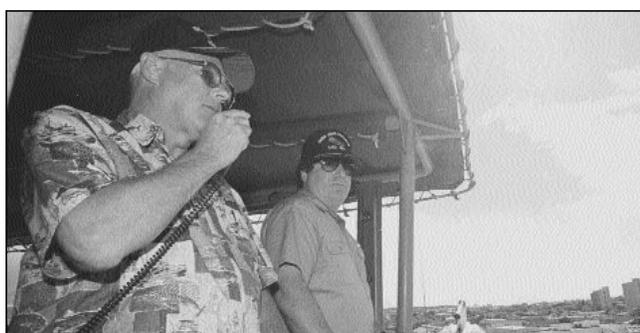




(Left) Rig captain Michael Voss waits for USS Russell's (DDG 59) arrival alongside to begin pumping fuel during an underway replenishment.

(Below left) Harbor Pilot Capt. Toomey and Ericsson's Master Robert T. Wiley navigate the ship as it gets underway past USS Hopper (DDG 70).

(Below) Deck machinist Regan Tucker sports personal safety gear for protection from the elements.



Underway with the USNS John Ericsson

Aboard USNS John Ericsson (T-AO 194), life is a little different than what you find on other Navy ships.

The crew consists of 60 civilians and 22 Navy enlisted Sailors, representing only four ratings: radioman, electronics technician, signalman and operations specialist. But, where are the machinist's mates and boatswain's mates, two rates every Navy ship needs to do its job? Or where's the quartermaster to navigate?

The members of the Military Sealift Command fill all of these billets. Designed to do the same job as a regular "USS" logistics ship, MSC ships do it as efficiently and safely, but with an average crew age of 40. MSC operates more than 105 ships with civilian crews, including fleet oilers such as Ericsson, as well combat stores ships, ocean going tugs, ammunition ships and two hospital ships.

Robert T. Wiley, Ericsson's master, is the civilian equivalent of a Navy ship's commanding officer. He explains, "Most of the civilian crew are retired Navy senior enlisted. With that level of experience we are able to step over a ship with 300 crewmembers onboard where a third are usually being trained to do their jobs. That's what allows us to work with a much smaller crew at a fraction of the cost." The MSC's noncombatant status also means that the ships don't carry any weapons to make them a possible target to enemy fire. This frees up personnel to fill billets on combatant ships.

As for the military detachment, or "mil-det" aspect of life onboard a MSC ship, it's also quite a bit different than what is expected aboard other ships. While tours onboard are only for one year, it's unaccompanied, and considered arduous duty. That, Wiley said, scares off a lot of prospective Sailors from coming aboard.

"What they don't see is 'Welcome aboard Seaman Jones, here is your stateroom. You aren't going to be assigned to the mess decks. You aren't going to be assigned to the pier sentry. There aren't any Mil-det assigned quarterdeck watches."

If Sailors extend their tour for a year aboard Ericsson, their entire tour counts as a three-year sea tour for rotational purposes. Many Sailors tend to repeat their sea tours aboard MSC ships.

"For a single Sailor, or a married Sailor with a stable home life, this is the sea tour you want to do," Wiley added.



RM2 Victoria Flint (left) tends to line onboard Ericsson as the ship prepares to get underway.

Ships Boatswain Melvin Rivers (above) and Able Seaman Bill Hoff rapidly haul in mooring lines as Ericsson gets underway.

ET2 Tom Hathcock (above left) signals to USS Russell (DDG-59) during an UNREP.

*Story and photos by
PH2 Chad McNeeley*