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Littoral Combat Ship sidelined again by maintenance issue



The first U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ship, Freedom (LCS 1), during trials in July, 2008. The ship is designed for littoral, or close-to-shore, operations.

LOCKHEED MARTIN/DVIDS

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SASEBO NAVAL BASE, Japan — For the second time in three weeks, the heavily scrutinized USS Freedom has been unable to perform scheduled tasks due to technical difficulties.

Repairs are under way on the littoral combat ship's port steerable water-jet feedback cable, which stopped sending signals to indicate the jet's position during steering checks Sunday, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. David Levy said in a statement Tuesday. The problem was discovered as the crew prepared to depart the following day for Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training Brunei, the last major exercise of the ship's debut deployment abroad.

"Until repairs are accomplished, the crew cannot steer the port water-jet remotely from the bridge," Levy said. "The Freedom is still scheduled to participate in CARAT Brunei."

The steering issue is the latest hiccup for the \$500 million first-in-class vessel. It was sidelined Oct. 24 due to seawater contamination in one of its steerable water-jet hydraulic systems and in July with generator and computer issues.

Navy officials have said the maintenance problems have been routine and consistent with new systems on first-in-class ships. However, the steady stream of readiness difficulties is likely to increase scrutiny of the platform that the Navy has billed as the next generation of surface warfare.

The littoral combat ship has been under the microscope since its genesis in 2002. As two different variants of the ships were built, tested and put into service, concerns about cost overruns and structural deficiencies — including hull cracks, corrosion and system failures — have given way to doubts about its combat effectiveness, design and durability.

Despite the issues, the Navy has gone all-in with the LCS, disputing Government Accountability Office recommendations in July to slow construction to see if the ships can meet the Navy's needs. The Navy instead pledged to proceed with the current delivery schedule.

The Navy expects to buy 52 littoral ships for more than \$30 billion, according to Reuters. Navy officials have said they hope to have 24 under contract by the end of 2021, including 16 assigned to the Pacific Fleet.

The Freedom arrived in Singapore in April and participated in in the International Maritime Defence Exhibition and two separate phases of the naval exercise Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training with Malaysia and Singapore while hosting thousands of visitors. The ship swapped crews in August and is slated to rotate back to San Diego at the end of the year.

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