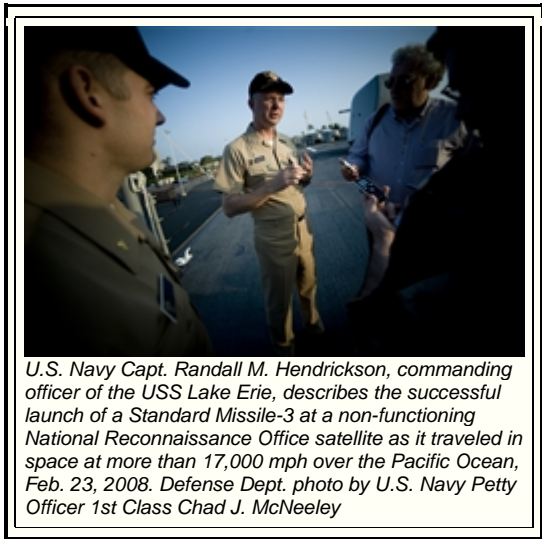




Lake Erie Crew Describes Satellite Shot

By Jim Garamone
American Forces Press Service

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii, Feb. 24, 2008 – The crewmembers of the USS Lake Erie were calm as they fired the latest shot heard round the world. The Aegis-class cruiser fired the missile that destroyed a dead spy satellite that posed a threat to humans Feb. 21.



U.S. Navy Capt. Randall M. Hendrickson, commanding officer of the USS Lake Erie, describes the successful launch of a Standard Missile-3 at a non-functioning National Reconnaissance Office satellite as it traveled in space at more than 17,000 mph over the Pacific Ocean, Feb. 23, 2008. Defense Dept. photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley

Navy Capt. Randall M. Hendrickson, the Lake Erie's commanding officer, spoke to reporters today aboard the ship, which has just returned from the mission. The visiting reporters are traveling with Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who visited the ship.

The captain said the crew worked intensively for a month and a half before the shutdown. "We kept working up with a team of government experts and technicians, as well as industry partners," Hendrickson said.

The group worked to gather information and modify the Standard Missile 3 and the Aegis weapon system, he said. They started tracking the satellite at different times to get radar cross-section data, which helped build the program software, Hendrickson said.

"Obviously there was a lot of anticipation building up each time we practiced, each time we tracked," he said.

The ship's weapons systems officer, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Drew Bates, said the rehearsals really helped when push came to shove. "By the time we did this, we had seen it a hundred times," he said. "We were practicing what to do in case things go wrong. Fortunately nothing went wrong. This went just the way it was designed to happen, and hats off to the industry team for giving the nation a system that was able to have the excess capability to do this."

The satellite was unlike any target the system was designed to go after, the captain said. The satellite was in orbit rather than on a ballistic trajectory. Also, the satellite was traveling at incredible speeds.

The Lake Erie left here the day officials announced President Bush's decision to try to shoot down the satellite. Hendrickson said the ship was in position when the shuttle Atlantis returned from its mission.

The ship received the order that Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates had OK'd the mission at mid-morning on Feb. 21. "From that point on, the ship was very calm," Hendrickson said. "Obviously, the closer we got, there was a lot of anticipation. The firing team was very calm when we did it and, with the exception of the 'whoosh' when it went out of the launcher, it was just as scripted."

He said that when the missile's seeker opened its eyes it had the satellite "right dead center."

When the missile hit the satellite, "there was a lot of cheering" aboard the ship, he said.

The crew knew from the kinetic warhead imagery in the nose of the missile that it was a good hit, the captain said.

"The radar scope went wild," he said. "At that point, there was a lot of debris, a lot of pieces and, at that point, we thought we had a pretty good impact. Then that was confirmed by the aircraft that were airborne, the radars ashore and some other sensors that it was pretty much obliterated. Over the next three to four hours, a lot of it was burning up as it was coming down, which was the whole point of it."

Civilian experts from the Navy facility in Dahlgren, Va., and contractors from Lockheed Martin and from Raytheon Co. helped the crew prepare for the shot. But Navy sailors manned the consoles for the mission.

Everyone on the USS Lake Erie contributed, the captain said. "Whatever the task is, there's no small task on a ship," he said.

The reaction of the crew is unbelievable, said Command Master Chief Petty Officer Mack Ellis, the highest-ranking enlisted sailor on the Lake Erie. "Even the youngest sailor who didn't understand it at first, every time they walk somewhere and people know they are from Lake Erie, they say congratulations. It puts a smile of their face and makes their day."