

LPDs: THE GATOR NAVY'S AVIATION GEM

By LCdr. Pete Corrao



PHCS Mahlon K. Miller

Let's be serious. As a first-tour H-46D Sea Knight driver in Helicopter Combat Support Squadron 5, I couldn't tell an LPD (amphibious transport dock) from an LSD (dock landing ship). Both are gray, have some type of flight deck and travel with an amphibious ready group (ARG). Both have well-deck ramps at the stern and cranes amidships, and both are aviation capable. But since taking the reins as Air Boss on board *Duluth* (LPD 6), I have seen the light and now fully understand the quiet but awesome power of the aviation capabilities in the mighty LPD.

The ship's full-time Air Department comprises three divisions: aircraft handling, fuels and aviation support equipment. Many personnel have big-deck experience, which adds significantly to the department's proficiency.

Although not as robust as amphibious assault ships or aircraft carriers, LPDs can fuel aircraft and move cargo just as fast as their larger deck counterparts. They are also ordinance capable with magazines located directly under the tower for quick buildup and hanging. LPDs are fully night-vision goggle compatible and can conduct flight operations in any ambient light conditions. In

addition, they have a first-class Aircraft Direction Center (ADC) that can provide emergency low-visibility approaches and tactical aid to navigation system approaches, as well as fill the ADC role for the entire ARG.

The real capability multiplier for the LPD is the ability to conduct expanded spot operations both day and night. Normally configured for two spots, the flight deck has certifications to use spots on the port and starboard sides, which adds four more spots. For AH-1 Sea Cobras and UH-1 "Hueys," the LPD can work four turning



aircraft at the same time. For H-46s and H-53 Sea Stallions, the ship can have only two turning but can also support folded aircraft on the opposing expanded spots. What this equates to is that LPDs can easily accommodate a detachment of up to four H-46s or H-53s, simultaneously launching two at a time with the other two folded. For obvious reasons, helicopter detachments are becoming the norm aboard LPDs.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, *Duluth's* flight deck was utilized from the beginning of the war. With a relatively shallow draft of 22 feet, she was able to steam within sight of the Al Faw peninsula to act as a refueling platform for the numerous aircraft transiting from the big decks located in deeper waters to the southeast. *Duluth* also provided the deck for two combat search and rescue HH-60H Seahawks participating in the capture of two Iraqi oil platforms. *Duluth's* ability to conduct simultaneous well-deck and flight deck operations made her the ideal platform for an enemy

prisoner of war (EPW) transfer. EPWs were extracted from captured oil platforms via landing craft and ferried to an EPW camp in Kuwait by helicopter. These actions were bracketed by a very successful Marine Expeditionary Unit offload and onload. During the offload, all spots saw a lot of action as a mix of every rotary-wing asset in the Marine Corps inventory visited *Duluth's* flight deck.

No one looks forward to a disassociated sea tour, but operations on an LPD have been a very pleasant surprise and a valuable education. When I head back to sea as a helo driver in a couple of years, the LPD will be my go-to deck. For now, I just have to figure out how to drive the boat. ✈️

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Facing page top, *Duluth* (LPD 6) departs San Diego Bay, Calif., in January for a six-month deployment. Her ability to get close to the action made her a key player in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Left, *Duluth* crew members prepare to refuel a Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 161 (Rein) CH-46E Sea Knight. Above, an HMM-161 CH-46E and a British Lynx are parked on *Duluth's* flight deck as another HMM-161 Sea Knight comes in for a landing during combat operations.