



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
Admiral Scott H. Swift
U.S. Seventh Fleet Change of Command
Yokosuka, Japan
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As delivered

Good evening everyone. It's great to be back in Yokosuka. I was just here in July, and it seems like only yesterday on July 31st, 2013 in Cairns, Australia that I read my orders and turned over the reins of Seventh Fleet to the accomplished submariner, Vice Admiral Robert Thomas. In fact it was four years ago today that I relieved another submariner, Vice Admiral Van Buskirk, and took over the reins of Seventh Fleet. It's rare that a past, current and future Seventh Fleet commander share the same stage and I wonder as I look into the audience, if another prospective commander is with us here as well.

Returning now as the Pacific Fleet commander, it is clear to me that the challenges faced when I began my Seventh Fleet tour are just as pressing today, if not more so, than at any time in the last four years. In fact, we may be entering a new phase in which the marshalling of various instruments of national power – which includes the U.S. Pacific Fleet as part of the U.S. rebalance to the region – reflects the magnitude of the challenges.

The United States, the region and indeed the world, have benefitted from the past 70 years of peace, stability and prosperity that emerged from the ashes of World War II. For all of that time, the U.S. Pacific Fleet has worked with regional navies to be the indispensable ally and partner of choice in Asia. In fact I think my good friend Admiral Takei characterized it best recently during comments in Washington D.C. when he said our collective post war efforts had turned a sea of war into a sea of peace, and now into a sea of prosperity. Just as history shapes our modern nation, it is this deeply rooted naval heritage in Asia that brings form to our modern Pacific Fleet.

Through the constant presence of our ships, aircraft, Sailors and Marines – operating whenever and wherever international law allows – we remain committed to continuing that legacy now and well into the future.

In my new role as Pacific Fleet commander, I'm often asked when traveling in the region if more forces are on the way as part of the rebalance. Depending on how far you look back, it is important to note, from a Navy perspective, we haven't left, having been here since the mid-1800s when U.S. Navy ships began patrolling the Western Pacific. Our Navy is dynamic and the distribution of naval forces across the globe has changed as part of the rebalance – and rightfully so when you consider the staggering volume of international commerce, and relatedly, the importance of maritime security in this region. Running just the numbers, about 58 percent of our ships, aircraft and personnel are now assigned to the Pacific Fleet.

This presence is more than just hulls in the water and wings in the sky – it’s about capability. That is why we continue to send our most capable ships and aircraft, and our most talented people here first. Whether it is BMD-capable destroyers, littoral combat ships, Virginia-class submarines, P-8A Poseidon aircraft, and F/A-18G Growlers, all of these capabilities deployed to Seventh Fleet first. More, like the DDG 1000 and Joint Strike Fighter, are on the way.

Seventh Fleet demonstrates the value of these capabilities every day. Forward deployed to Japan, and operating where it matters, when it matters, with what matters in the Indian and Pacific oceans, Seventh Fleet has been – and continues to be – the leading edge of the Pacific Fleet in Asia. We see this manifested daily by Seventh Fleet’s forward deployed carrier strike group, its expeditionary strike group, and its network of eight task forces operating from Busan, Atsugi, Misawa, Okinawa, Sasebo, Yokosuka, Singapore and Guam.

Anchored here in Japan by the U.S.-Japan alliance, these forces work in concert with all of our allies, partners and friends in this region to advance shared interests and promote shared values. We could not do all of this from naval fortresses in Pearl Harbor, the Puget Sound or San Diego. Being part of this region is precisely what allows Seventh Fleet forces to deter aggression credibly, respond to crises quickly, and build partnerships to ever increasing levels.

We’ve seen this happen numerous times over the past two years under the brilliant leadership of Vice Admiral Thomas. As I noted earlier, we send the best and brightest to this region, and I am very pleased that Robert – the Berkeley graduate – will bring the same mental rigor he applied to Asia back to Washington, D.C., in his new role as the Director of Navy Staff for the Chief of Naval Operations.

He has shown, again and again, why Seventh Fleet is the partner of choice in response to situations that are beyond the resources of any single nation. When our Philippine allies asked for help after the devastation of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, Vice Admiral Thomas sent the USS George Washington strike group and amphibious ships embarked with Marines to support relief operations. In 2014, USS Bonhomme Richard and U.S. Navy salvage experts assisted our Korean allies in the search for Ferry Sewol victims.

That same year, P-8A aircraft and destroyers searched thousands of miles at sea for flight MH-370 in response to a request from our Malaysian partners. When our Indonesian partners called in response to the loss of flight QZ-8501, the USS Fort Worth and USS Sampson got underway from Singapore to join search efforts in the Java Sea. Closer to home in Saipan, USS Ashland and embarked Marines supported Typhoon Soudelor relief efforts just last month. The common thread in each case is that Vice Admiral Thomas’ forces were deployed and ready to answer calls from regional allies and partners when needed. Demonstrating through decisive action that being where it matters, when it matters, with what matters is not a slogan, but a mandate we take seriously in the Pacific.

Our naval relationships in this region have never been stronger than under Vice Admiral Thomas. In 2014 alone, Seventh Fleet conducted 160 exercises, 370 port visits and 500 leadership engagements and community exchanges in the region. Through his personal interaction with counterparts in the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, the Republic of Korea Navy, and the Royal Australian Navy, our forces have never been more closely tied together. We saw this play out during highly successful exercises like Keen Sword, Foal Eagle, and Talisman Sabre. He has also promoted multilateral exercises as a realistic way to strengthen practical cooperation among regional navies.

The same is true for allies and partners in South and Southeast Asia. In addition to deepening relationships with counterparts in these regions, Vice Admiral Thomas has championed rotational deployments of littoral combat ships, like USS Fort Worth, to Singapore. From there, these ships can go places larger ships cannot go, patrol regional waters, and work with regional navies that operate smaller, capable warships like the LCS. In fact, Fort Worth has already worked with comparable ships from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore as part of the CARAT exercise series, and alongside Vietnam People's Navy ships during our annual Naval Engagement Activity. Next month, she will transit to the Bay of Bengal to train with the Bangladesh Navy.

Robert also took a personal interest in advancing and deepening our cooperation with the PLA Navy, meeting with counterparts in the East and South Sea fleets and sending his flagship, USS Blue Ridge, to a port visit in Zhanjiang, China, in which Seventh Fleet Sailors had the opportunity to meet South Sea Fleet sailors and see a bit of their country. These types of interactions have to happen across all levels of our naval and maritime forces to reduce the risks of miscommunication and miscalculation. As the Pacific Fleet commander, I expect that when our forces encounter each other on the high seas, or in the airspace above, that those interactions will be safe, professional and constructive. The implementation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea in Seventh Fleet, which also happened on Vice Admiral Thomas' watch, was a step in the right direction. More work needs to be done to continue this trend and I look forward to the application of CUES to our encounters with the Chinese Coast Guard.

In sum, we need more leaders like Robert Thomas returning to Seventh Fleet. I'd like to thank Robert for his superb leadership over the past two years and wish him and Kathleen all the best as they rebalance back to Washington, D.C.

I'd like to welcome Robert's relief, Vice Admiral Aucoin, his wife Cassandra (and family) to Yokosuka and Seventh Fleet. It's been a few years since the Aucoins lived here, but they are no strangers to the region. Continuing the trend of sending the best and brightest here, Vice Admiral Aucoin's reputation in the Pentagon is so good, that I'm amazed they let him out of the building. There isn't an office in the OPNAV requirements, acquisitions and budget world that he hasn't improved through his direct leadership over the past decade.

He also served as Carrier Air Wing Five commander aboard USS Kitty Hawk when she was the forward deployed aircraft carrier in Seventh Fleet. His headquarters experience and Seventh Fleet expertise make him the ideal fit to fill behind Vice Admiral Thomas. I am confident his integration will be seamless.

As strong as Seventh Fleet is, it is important to remember that Seventh Fleet and Third Fleet are two parts of a whole – the whole being Pacific Fleet. Both Numbered Fleets must be focused materially and mentally on warfighting first, being ready and operating forward. If Seventh Fleet is the leading edge, then Third Fleet is the sustaining thrust. As I said at the Third Fleet change of command in San Diego just over a month ago, the only navy that is more powerful, by any measure, than the combined power of Seventh Fleet and Third Fleet encompassed by the Pacific Fleet, is the United States Navy itself.

I questioned why we are so allegiant to the International Dateline as a line of demarcation between the two most powerful numbered Fleets in the world. I'm not talking about moving homeports or headquarters, or the ships and Sailors that make them up. I'm talking about taking a page from past playbooks where our Sailors worked together to accomplish missions with forces from both numbered fleets, focused together in those areas with the greatest instability.

This is already becoming the new normal, as demonstrated most recently during exercise Talisman Sabre in July, when former Third Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Floyd acted as the maritime component commander over all forces. And during Third Fleet exercises like RIMPAC, it is the relationships developed here in Seventh Fleet that make RIMPAC the gold standard of multilateralism in the region. It is reflected in the ongoing patrol of the South China Sea by USS Preble, a Third Fleet ship, temporarily assigned to Seventh Fleet.

Over the next two years, Vice Admiral Aucoin and Third Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Tyson will refine these concepts further. I would not be surprised to see more of Vice Admiral Tyson operating forward as part of this concept development process.

I have also asked admirals Aucoin and Tyson to transition Pacific Fleet to the next phase of warfare optimization in this region. Formally known as Air-Sea Battle, now replaced by the new concept known as the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons or JAMGC, I am excited about the increased capability and capacity this new joint concept will bring to the Indo-Asia-Pacific theater.

With Air-Sea Battle, the Navy looked at how to address emerging challenges by more effectively and efficiently developing with our U.S. Air Force partners a better understanding of what it would take to succeed in today's threat environments. We have made a lot of headway incorporating ASB concepts into high-end training and certification events. JAMGC will extend the advances that Air-Sea Battle has brought to our air and naval forces and extend their continued advancement to all our joint partners.

Today Robert turns over the reins of Seventh Fleet to Joey, who will now guide the leading edge of Pacific Fleet's forward presence and demonstrate our enduring commitment to allies, partners and friends in what is arguably the most consequential region in this world.

Robert as you and Kathleen take advantage of some well-deserved leave, you can rest assured in the knowledge that Joey has the watch, bolstered by the legacy of presence, partnerships, readiness and heritage you leave behind in Seventh Fleet. There is no doubt that the advances you and Kathleen fostered in Seventh Fleet will continue under Joey and Casandra's leadership and guidance. Robert, please join me center stage so we can appropriately recognize your achievements.