

USS Milwaukee set for christening, launch Wednesday

Written by Nathan Phelps Press-Gazette Media

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Moving the future USS Milwaukee

A time lapse video from Lockheed Martin of the future USS Milwaukee leaving one of the production buildings at Marinette Marine Corp. can be seen at: <http://tinyurl.com/lgs6xrz>

The future USS Milwaukee is expected to be christened and launched at Marinette Marine Corp. in Marinette Wednesday. The ship is expected to be delivered to the U.S. Navy in early 2015. / Lockheed Martin Corporation - Michael Rote

Littoral Combat Ship vitals

Some technical specifications for the Lockheed Martin version of the Littoral Combat Ship. • Length: 378 feet • Width: 57.4 feet • Speed: 40-plus knots (46+ mph) • Lockheed Martin ships in service: USS Freedom; USS Fort Worth • Armament: Includes a 57MM gun and a surface-to-air missile system. • The ship is also able to support helicopter and unmanned aerial operations and boat operations. Source: U.S. Navy

The ground reverberated with a thud when the hull of the USS Fort Worth hit the waters of the Menominee River at Marinette Marine Corp. in December 2010.

That scene will be repeated Wednesday with the christening and launch of the USS Milwaukee, which is one of four Littoral Combat Ships under construction at the Marinette shipyard.

The Milwaukee is about 80 percent finished. Work on the ship will continue through the winter before it starts testing and trials next year.

“It marks the point where we’re done with the erection of the ship,” Chuck Goddard, president and CEO of Marinette Marine Corp., said about the launch. “Her major structures are in place and her major systems are installed. ... The engines, the reduction gears, the water jets, and the major mission systems are on board.”

Work on the \$437 million ship started in 2011. In addition to the ships already under construction, funding has been authorized for two similar vessels to be built at Marinette.

The future Milwaukee is expected to be delivered to the navy in early 2015 before leaving Marinette that summer, said Joe North, vice president of Littoral Ship Systems for Lockheed Martin.

With a major overhaul of the shipyard complete, Lockheed Martin and Marinette Marine officials say LCS production has entered a phase where multiple ships are under construction at the same time.

“We’re in the testing mode (on Milwaukee) already,” North said. “This is go time. We’ve finished the ship from the modular production side and now we get her into the water and will go into full test mode and the final outfitting.

“It makes way for one (more ship) right behind it,” he said.

The ships are comprised of 46 modular sections that are pulled together to form the vessel.

The Littoral Combat Ship program has followed a long and contested path to development on topics ranging from cost to design of the ships to the plan to procure two different designs of the Littoral Combat Ship.

The Navy is buying dramatically different versions of the ships from Lockheed Martin and Austal USA. Marinette Marine, owned by Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri, is building the Lockheed Martin design of the ship. The other version of the LCS is being built by Austal in Alabama.

The ships are designed to fulfill a number of duties, including surface and anti-submarine warfare, designed to change out equipment for those different roles. Some of that equipment is still undergoing testing and development.

Despite scrutiny over the program's high cost from Congress, Navy leadership said it backs the Littoral Combat Ship program and would like to acquire more than 50 of the ships in the coming decades.

The Lockheed Martin team has delivered a pair of ships, the USS Freedom and USS Fort Worth, to the Navy. Fort Worth was delivered in the summer of 2012 and Freedom was handed over to the Navy in 2008.

The shipyard in Marinette has a little fewer than 1,400 employees, Goddard said, and is looking to add to that total by the end of this year and into the first part of 2015 when employment numbers are expected to near 1,500 workers where it will likely hold.

"We're not looking for entry level people any more, we're looking for people who are in the mid-skill level in terms of welders, aluminum workers, and pipe fitters," he said.

Including subcontractors, about 2,000 enter the gates of Marinette Marine each day, Goddard said.

The shipyard is among the last shipbuilders in the nation to launch ships sideways into the water. Milwaukee will drop about 6 feet into the water and hit the surface at roughly 10 mph, Goddard said.