

Mobile and South Alabama reentered the Navy shipbuilding business when Austal USA located to the Port City in 1999. Since then, the company's workforce of 2,800 – which is growing by the month – has made a name for itself by not only turning out eye-catching, fast-moving ships for the US Navy, but also for its safe and efficient shipbuilding methods.

On May 3, 2012, I was invited to "authenticate the keel" for Austal's third joint high speed vessel (JHSV-3) during the official keel-laying ceremony. This all-aluminum catamaran design (twin-hulled) troop transport ship will be over 300 feet long when completed. The keel-laying actually marked the beginning of final assembly for the vessel, which is comprised of 43 separate modules, 32 of which are currently being built.

Austal – working with its partner contractor, General Dynamics, which is responsible for onboard electronics – has two contracts to produce ships for the Navy, including an order for ten JHSV's. The first JHSV, the USNS Spearhead, recently completed its initial testing in the Gulf of Mexico, and the second JHSV, the USNS Choctaw County, which is still under construction, will be launched later this year.

This new class of ship will perform several roles for our military, including the transport of Navy combat forces, Marines, Seabees, Coast Guard Law Enforcement detachments, and Army personnel as well as equipment. It also has capability to support a helicopter and vehicles as large as an M1 Abrams tank.

Austal is also hard at work building another new class of ship for the Navy – the littoral combat ship (LCS). The USS Independence was commissioned in January 2010 and the USS Coronado was christened in January. The Navy is scheduled to purchase up to ten of the trimaran design (tri-hulled) aluminum shallow water ships from Austal but envisions a fleet of 55 LCS' upon completion of the program. Lockheed Martin also builds an LCS in Marinette, Wisconsin for the Navy, but their ship is based upon a different, more traditional steel hull design. Austal's LCS is immediately recognizable for its high-tech, stealthy appearance.

Austal's Mobile River shipyard is distinctive not just for its size, but also for the way it builds ships. It employs a modular assembly line, fabricating sections of the ship in the rear portion of the yard, which are then brought forward to the river front assembly bay for final assembly and launch.

The company's innovative ship manufacturing process has not only attracted visits from the Navy brass, but also earned it honors for worker safety. For the fourth year in a row Austal has won the Shipbuilders Council of America Award for Excellence in Safety, garnered by member shipyards with the lowest rate of recordable workplace injuries.

Austal's LCS and JHSV lines will play important roles in the Navy's new missions in combating piracy and responding to threats along the coast, as well as ferrying troops and equipment to distant battlefronts.

As Austal turns out more ships for the Navy, its shipyard will expand and its workforce is expected to nearly double, making it one of the largest employers in Southwest Alabama.

Honor Flight Returns to DC:

Ninety South Alabama World War II veterans traveled from Mobile to Washington, DC last week. This was the seventh Honor Flight since they began in the spring of 2009.

The chartered plane left Mobile early last Wednesday morning and returned home approximately 12 hours later after a busy day of sight-seeing. I joined 50 students from St. Luke's Episcopal School in welcoming our South Alabama veterans to the National World War II Memorial (located on the Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument).

It was a beautiful day and emotions ran high as veterans from America's wars in Europe and the Pacific relived their service nearly 70 years ago. The ages of the Honor Flight veterans ranged from 84 to 94. They came from Mobile, Eight Mile, Semmes, Robertsdale, Theodore, Atmore, Brewton, Jackson and everywhere in between.

For most it was their first visit to Washington, DC and the National World War II Memorial. Some were in wheelchairs, some walked with a cane, but they all enjoyed their visit to the grand memorial and the warm welcome they received from the St. Luke's students as well as the

public.

I was pleased to present our visiting veterans with a flag flown over the US Capitol in their honor as well as a copy of a tribute honoring their flight that was printed in the Congressional Record.

It was a moving experience both in Washington and in Mobile when the Honor Flight veterans returned home last Wednesday night to a hero's welcome.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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