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USS Pelican welcomes new commanding officer

Command of coastal mine hunter USS Pelican (MHC 53) will change hands Friday, Jan. 23, when Lt. Cmdr. John E. Shassberger turns over the helm to Lt. Cmdr. Keith A. Knutsen.

Shassberger's next assignment will take him to Norfolk, Va., where he will serve as Assistant Chief of Staff for Logistics, Material and Training for Commander, Cruiser Destroyer Group Two.

Pelican has had many accomplishments since Shassberger took the helm in February 2002, and has compiled an exceptional record of awards including Excellence Awards in Maritime Warfare, Engineering, and Command and Control in 2002. The ship earned the 2002 green "H" award for shipboard safety and earned her third Retention Honor Roll pennant.

Additionally, during Shassberger's tour, Pelican completed a three-month Eastern Atlantic deployment with port visits in Key West, Fla., Mayport, Fla., and Little Creek, Va. The ship also received exceptional scores on her overall material maintenance inspection, and certified four engines during Pelican's diesel engineering inspection. Shassberger also led his crew through the certification process culminating in a nomination for the Captain Edward Ney Memorial Award for Excellence in Food Service. During Joint Task Force Exercise 02-1, Pelican remained on station during deteriorating weather conditions and completed her mine-hunting task, clearing six out of six exercise mines.

Knutsen reports to Pelican from Commander, U.S. Naval Forces, Southern Command, where he served as surface operations officer, current operations officer, scheduler and Pacific region officer.

Knutsen received his bachelor's degree in engineering from the United States Naval Academy and his master's degree in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College.

His first sea duty tour was as auxiliaries officer, main propulsion assistant, navigator and chief engineer aboard USS Fletcher (DD 992) from March 1991 to August 1994. During Knutsen's first shore duty assignment, from September 1994 to September 1996, he served as chief engineer of the CG-47 Gas Turbine Propulsion Plant Trainer and later as Director, U.S. Naval Gunnery Schools, Service Schools Command, Great Lakes, Ill. His first department head tour was aboard USS Kinkaid (DD 965) as chief engineer, from June 1997 until February 1999. He then served as chief engineer on board USS Port Royal (CG 73) until March 2001. After serving aboard USS Port Royal, he attended the United States Naval War College at Newport, R.I.

Knutsen's personal decorations include the Meritorious Service Medal, four Navy Commendation Medals and two Navy Achievement Medals.

Pelican is the third ship in the U.S. Navy's Osprey Class and the third Navy ship to bear that name. The ship's keel was laid on June 6, 1991, and was commissioned Nov. 18, 1995. Osprey Class coastal mine hunters are the world's largest glass reinforced plastic (GRP) ships. Pelican's mission is to clear harbor, coastal and ocean waters of acoustic, magnetic, pressure and contact-type mines, using reconnaissance, classification and neutralization tactics. Pelican is homeported at Naval Station Ingleside, the Navy's "Mine Warfare Center of Excellence."

