French Warship Seizes Illegal Drugs in North Arabian Sea

MANAMA, Bahrain – A French warship seized illegal drugs worth a total estimated U.S. street value of $24 million from a fishing vessel transiting international waters in the North Arabian Sea, Dec. 27, Combined Maritime Forces Public Affairs said in a Jan. 3 release.

French Marine Nationale frigate FS Guépratte (F714) was patrolling regional waters in support of Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 when it seized 3,492 kilograms of hashish and 472 kilograms of heroin from the fishing vessel.

Led by the Royal Saudi Navy, CTF 150 is one of four task forces organized under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the largest international naval partnership in the world consisting of 34 member-nations.

CMF has seized nearly $1 billion worth of illicit narcotics since 2021 while patrolling international waters in the Middle East.

Guépratte previously seized 271 kilograms of heroin from another fishing vessel while patrolling the Gulf of Oman in February 2022.

Cohesion at Sea: Maritime Deterrence and Defense throughout 2022

Naples, Italy – In the Baltic Sea, Estonian troops and U.S. Marines rehearse amphibious assault drills, storming the beach and quickly seizing objectives in concert as the Wasp-class amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge (LHD 3) patrols the horizon.

Farther south, in the Mediterranean Sea, a French Navy Rafale lands aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) during multicarrier operations comprising Bush, the FS Charles de Gaulle (R 91) Carrier Strike Group (CSG), and ITS Cavour (C-550) CSG.

In the Atlantic Ocean, the Officer of the Deck on the first-in-class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) looks out at the Canadian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, and Spanish ships in company during Silent Wolverine, an exercise designed to test the carrier's capabilities through integrated high-end naval warfare scenarios during its first overseas deployment.

Through combined evolutions like these, NATO Allied and partner maritime forces exhibited unparalleled cooperation and interoperability throughout 2022. From the High North to the Mediterranean, and in nearly every body of water in between, these navies and coast guards embarked on a banner year of sustained, uncompromising strength and vigilance throughout the European theater. Lt. Cmdr. Tyler Barker of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa.

"Our Allies and close partners like Finland and Sweden have never been more unified than we are today," said Adm. Stuart Munsch, commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa (NAVEUR-NAVAF) and commander, Allied Joint Force Command Naples. "Our interoperability at sea delivers true warfighting advantage for NATO, enabling the Alliance to deter and defend In the midst of armed conflict in Europe."

The ships of the Harry S. Truman carrier strike group (HSTCSG), including the Royal Norwegian Navy frigate HNoMS Fridtjof Nansen (F310), kicked off 2022 with a bang and set the pace for the year to come with port visits to Cyprus, Greece, Spain, and Türkiye. Deployed to the NAVEUR-NAVAF area

of operations in December 2021, the HSTCSG remained in the region until August 2022, flying hundreds of sorties in support of NATO's enhanced Air Policing and other missions, safeguarding the integrity of Allied airspace before turning over these duties to the George H.W. Bush Carrier Strike Group (GHWBCSG).

The HSTCSG, along with other Allied and partner maritime forces, came under NATO command and control for vigilance activities Neptune Strike 22.1 and Neptune Shield, in January and May, respectively. Neptune Strike 22.1 marked the first time since the Cold War NATO assumed command and control of a U.S. carrier strike group.

The GHWBCSG picked up where the HSTCSG left off, leading the way during Neptune Strike 22.2 in October, the eighth phase of the overall Project Neptune series, which includes named activities as well as vignettes within Allied strike group training events.

"The full integration into NATO of powerful Allied Carrier Strike and Expeditionary Strike Groups, and additional capabilities from across the Alliance, is a perfect example of our deter and defend strategy," said Rear Adm. James Morley, deputy commander, Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO). "We demonstrate through coordinated Vigilance Activities and routine operations just how closely national and Alliance military plans are aligned, as we exploit every opportunity to improve interoperability at sea, in the air, and on the ground, seamlessly aligning military effects with political objectives."

This flexible command and control structure and rapid and seamless integration of Allied forces in multiple domains was a hallmark of NATO operations in 2022. Throughout the year, Allied strike groups, including those gathered around aircraft carriers Harry S. Truman, George H.W. Bush, Gerald R. Ford, FS

Charles de Gaulle, ITS Cavour, HMS Queen Elizabeth (R08), and ESPS Juan Carlos I (L-61), validated NATO's ability to coalesce credible combat power. Allied surface combatants routinely integrated into other nations' strike groups, too, increasing the pace and scale of multinational strike group interchangeability.

While these strike groups ensured the integrity of European waters and airspace, Allied amphibious forces also enhanced their effectiveness, operating in a variety of climates and conditions, from Norwegian and Icelandic fjords to the sands of North Africa and to the rocky beaches and islands of the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Though a series of bilateral and multinational exercises and training events, the Kearsarge Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and embarked 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) sharpened their skills in joint and coalition amphibious evolutions as they bolstered trust and refined tactics with like-minded nations.

"Bringing the capability and expertise of the Kearsarge ARG-MEU into theater fostered relations with our counterparts in Europe and Africa and provided some of the best hands-on training our team could have hoped for," said Capt. Aaron Kelley, commander, Kearsarge ARG and Amphibious Squadron (PHIBRON) Six. "A recurring theme our team took away from deployment is that our Allies and partners are incredibly proficient at what they do, and training together allows us to become stronger together."

These evolutions paid dividends on all sides and laid a foundation for continued collective improvement in amphibious operations across the Alliance, all while demonstrating NATO's resolve and commitment to the region. U.S. forces gained invaluable experience operating in European areas, while European Allies and partners honed their skills alongside their American counterparts.

“Exercises and operations with NATO nations, including USS Kearsarge ARG-22 MEU’s participation in the Estonian exercise Siil, are invaluable toward enhancing our overall capability,” said Commodore Jüri Saska, commander of the Estonian Navy. “All of our Allies and partners are committed to the security and stability of the Baltic Sea region, and we validate that commitment through our coordinated work together in the maritime domain.”

Numerous U.S., Allied, and partner surface combatants, including cruisers, destroyers, frigates and corvettes, delivered continuous presence throughout the region, whether sailing with a strike group, or independently. These warships, hailing from multiple nations, surface action groups, and Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG), manned the watch, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing unremitting vigilance across the continent. These ships joined an extensive array of bilateral and multinational exercises and operations, underscoring the versatility maritime forces supply to the Alliance.

“2022 has been a significant year in improving our maritime coordination with our many NATO Allies and partners,” said Vice Adm. Aurelio De Carolis, commander, Italian Naval Fleet Command. “Through our multinational exercise Mare Aperto, integration with Allied carrier strike groups, and routine operations with Allied units, we have shown the true power and proficiency of our combined maritime forces. We very much look forward to continuing the pace in 2023.”

As surface ships sailed the seas, maritime patrol aircraft, submarines, and special operations forces personnel provided continuous maritime domain awareness, furthering warfighting advantage and enhancing joint and coalition expertise. High in the skies, deep below the ocean surface, on land, and in the littorals, these units and personnel accomplished their missions with skill and precision.

In multi-domain operations, the ability to synthesize capabilities from such a wide variety of assets and mission areas is essential to overall success. Altogether, the Alliance has illustrated their unrivaled unity in the maritime domain as they continue to advance their interoperability and interchangeability.

“As NATO Allies face a complex and uncertain security environment in Europe, we face it together,” said Vice Adm. Thomas Ishee, Commander, U.S. Sixth Fleet and Commander, Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO). “Through activities, exercises, and operations, our nations and commands prove every single day that NATO is the strongest Alliance in the history of the world. We and our Allies and partners remain vigilant, operate professionally, and stand ready to defend our nations and our Alliance.”

For over 80 years, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-U.S. Naval Forces Africa (NAVEUR-NAVAF) has forged strategic relationships with allies and partners, leveraging a foundation of shared values to preserve security and stability.

Headquartered in Naples, Italy, NAVEUR-NAVAF operates U.S. naval forces in the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) areas of responsibility. U.S. Sixth Fleet is permanently assigned to NAVEUR-NAVAF, and employs maritime forces through the full spectrum of joint and naval operations.

Coast Guard Leverages Aviation Workhorse to Overcome Challenges in Cutter Logistics in Oceania

SANTA RITA, Guam – Guam is home to three 154-foot fast response cutters commissioned in 2021. These ships are built in Lockport, Louisiana. After initial workups, they sailed from Key West through the Panama Canal, more than 10,000 miles to Guam. In the time since the crews have stayed busy conducting the U.S. Coast Guard's core missions in Micronesia and supporting our Blue Pacific partners.

The Operations Area

For many of the Nation’s fast response cutters, the transit to homeport from Key West is one of the most extended trips they make. Those stateside remain close to most essential services needed to maintain the vessels, designed to operate within 200 nautical miles of homeport. In the case of the Guam-based fleet, they routinely go more than 200 nautical miles to get to the operations area. U.S. Coast Guard Forces Micronesia/Sector Guam has one of the largest areas of responsibility of any sector at 1.9 million square miles. Like its other overseas counterparts, the region can be austere and presents unique challenges.

U.S. Coast Guard Forces Micronesia/Sector Guam (CGFM/SG) differs. The USCGC Oliver Henry (WPC 1140) undertook a more than 6,000-mile expeditionary patrol south through Oceania with inaugural FRC port calls in Papua New Guinea and Australia. Its sister ship, the USCGC Frederick Hatch (WPC 1143), just concluded a similar patrol in support of Operations Rematau and Blue Pacific, the southeast of Guam. The patrol countered illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing off the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Nauru by enforcing regulatory schemes and individual countries’ sovereignty while strengthening partnerships through shiprider operations, subject matter exchanges, and community engagements.

“What often goes unsaid is the logistics piece enabling the operations,” said Chief Warrant Officer Manny Pangelinan, engineering officer for CGFM/SG. The Oliver Henry required a last-minute shipment of fuel injectors while underway, a package coordinated by the CGFM/SG logistics department with some support from the Surface Force Logistics Center in Baltimore. The package was shipped via a commercial carrier and met them in Australia.

But more oversized items and hazardous materials can present a more complex challenge. Guam is a strategic location, and as a

U.S. territory, it is the first line of defense against regional competitors. Logistically, it is remote and depends on maritime cargo for most items. Nearly 90 percent of imports come through the Port of Guam, and travel by sea varies in cost and takes time. Commercial air freight requires less time but can be very expensive.

The Logistics Challenge

Each FRC has four bottles of compressed gas onboard as part of the fire suppression system. The current design of the FRCs uses FN200 powder and nitrogen gas. Over time these bottles lose nitrogen and need to be recharged, the same as any fire extinguisher. If an extinguisher or system loses its prime, it may malfunction and not adequately suppress a fire. Stateside servicing this equipment is a simple endeavor, but service providers in Guam still need to be created. To further complicate matters, if a local provider converted existing equipment to service this system, it could only be used on FN200 to prevent cross-contamination. The U.S. Coast Guard is currently the only FN200 client on the island.

As the Frederick Hatch prepared for their patrol, the crew noted one of the four bottles was borderline between yellow and red on its pressure. No one wants to be over a thousand miles from shore, with a fire, and risk a system malfunction. But how do you get a 277-pound replacement bottle, considered a hazardous material, shipped from the mainland United States to the territory of Guam? And how do you do it in time to meet the ship’s schedule and enable the crew to fulfill their mission requirements in Micronesia? You keep it in-house and leverage the naval aviation community.

Coast Guard Aviation in Oceania

U.S. Coast Guard Air Station Barbers Point in Hawaii conducts search and rescue, maritime domain awareness and surveillance, law enforcement, and cargo and transportation operations

throughout Oceania. They are currently the only U.S. Coast Guard air station in the U.S. Coast Guard 14th District, with the next closest aviation unit in California. Still, from 1947 until 1972, they operated an air detachment in Guam known as Naval Air Station Agana to provide LORAN support for Western Pacific stations.

Today, the Barbers Point team operates four MH-65 Dolphin helicopters and four HC-130 Hercules airplanes. The Hercules airframes were recently upgraded from the H model to the J model. For Guam, this is significant. The J is more capable as a long-range surveillance aircraft providing heavy air transport and long-range maritime patrol capability. Each plane can serve as an on-scene command and control platform or as a surveillance platform with the means to detect, classify, and identify objects and share that information with operational forces. It also has "long legs." Where the H crews needed to stop for fuel en route to Guam from Hawaii, the J could make the trip in one leg if necessary. This advantage matters when time is of the essence, particularly in search and rescue cases.

Capt. John Rivers, CGAS Barbers Point commanding officer, recently visited Guam. He met with the CGFM/SG team to discuss options for more aviation support to Western and Central Pacific operations. Those ideas include more hours of Hercules activity in this region and possible use of the Dolphin helicopters outside Hawaii.

The Workhorse

Regarding transporting equipment, the aircrew, particularly the loadmaster, has the final say on what goes aboard the plane. The Barbers Point team and the loadmaster were crucial to keeping the Frederick Hatch on schedule.

The team flew the HC-130 Hercules CG 2009 to Sacramento to pick up the shipment of fire bottles, then returned to Hawaii

to rest and refuel. Subsequently, they flew to Majuro and landed in Guam on Nov. 9 at the A.B. Won Pat Guam International Airport. The CGFM/SG engineering team and environmental contractors met them to further transport the bottles to the pier.

All told, the movement cost flight hours and personnel time – but that is the nature of logistics. Per Commandant Instruction 7310.1V Reimbursable Standard Rates, the inside government rate for an HC-130J is $19,782 per hour. This includes Direct Costs like labor, employee benefits, fuel, maintenance, etc.; Support Costs: Costs allocated to a particular asset class for the support received from Coast Guard support activities, including but not limited to Area Commands, Districts, Sectors, Sector Field Offices, Bases, etc.; and General and Administrative: Costs allocated to a particular asset class to represent benefit received from Coast Guard general and administrative activities such as legal services, payroll processing, etc.

However, aircrews make the most out of every flight, coupling logistics with other missions and training whenever possible. Flight crews must also fly a certain number of monthly hours to maintain currency and proficiency.

The personnel hours, in this case, include the coordination and research by the CGFM/SG Engineering Team to enable the technician from the fire services company to come out, install and certify the new bottle. The team kept the cost down by more than $16,000 by flying out one technician instead of two and doing all the manual labor of removing and replacing the existing bottle with the ship’s force. Transporting a 277-pound bottle across the pier, onto the cutter, and into the space with a tripod and chain fall in 90-degree heat with 90 percent humidity is quite an undertaking. According to Reimbursable Standard Rates, the inside government cost of a CWO2 is $79 per hour, a Chief Petty Officer is $71, and a Petty Officer 2nd Class is $55. Still, these personnel, like

the aircrew, are salaried. The figures come into play if the Service seeks reimbursement from another branch or outside entity for services. The outside government rate is higher.

One might ask how to avoid this challenge in the future, as this won't be the last time these bottles need to be recharged. One possible alternative was building a facility to support the maintenance of these systems in Guam to the tune of more than a million dollars. Ultimately, this option was deemed unrealistic. Instead of a new facility, the engineering team procured a larger bottle of FN200 and equipment to be kept onsite to recharge the FRCs' systems. The team will do the heavy lifting and fly out a technician for the final assembly and certification. Two complete sets of bottles were procured at the same time. The first set came aboard the Hercules, and the second will come by cargo ship at a fee of just under $4,000. However, as of Christmas, the second set of bottles are still in transit and will take around 75 days total to arrive, emphasizing the importance of the Engineering Team's efforts and choices.

Forecast

"This team continues to deliver on the Commandant's mandate to be creative and innovative to craft solutions to the challenges we face as a service," said Capt. Nick Simmons, commander of CGFM/SG. "I am impressed by their commitment and resolve to consistently deliver superior engineering support, keeping us operational in a remote environment."

In the Fiscal Year 2022, the three Guam-based FRCs spent 324 days away from homeport, with 243 of those days physically underway conducting missions at sea. The other days away from homeport account for port calls, community engagements, and maintenance away from the home station. They worked 25 patrols throughout the region, enforcing the rule of law and strengthening partnerships. Guam's sister sector in Honolulu also has three FRCs doing local and long-range missions. By

comparison, they spent 202 days at sea for roughly the same number of patrols. This underscores the distances and demands Team Guam is covering.

“We have better platforms to help our crews get after the ever-growing mission demand here. But we must not lose sight of the demand on the crews and what is necessary to maintain our availability and effectiveness as a preferred partner in the region,” said Simmons. “That means putting steel on target, remaining flexible, and ensuring our crews have the support they need to succeed in a dynamic operational environment. I thank the CGAS Barbers Point team for ensuring our success and enabling the Frederick Hatch crew to work with our partners in Oceania and protect the Nation.”

This fire bottle transport is an excellent example of integrated logistics across the U.S. Coast Guard enterprise and innovation to find a timely cost-reasonable solution to keep the ship operational and on schedule. It is also a model for expanded Coast Guard aviation support to Guam.

Navy Orders Fourth Lot of TH-73A Thrasher Training Helicopters

ARLINGTON, Va.—The U.S. Navy has exercised a contract option to order a fourth lot of Leonardo TH-73A Thrasher training helicopters.

Leonardo said in a Dec. 24 release that it was awarded a $110 million firm, fixed-price contract modification through AgustaWestland Philadelphia Corp. for 26 TH-73As. The option will bring the total number of TH-73As ordered to 130, the Navy's program of record requirement.

The Navy previously ordered three lots of Thrashers: 32 for $176 million in January 2020; 36 for $171 million in November 2020; and 36 for $159.4 million in December 2021. The first order included "spares, support, dedicated equipment and specific pilot/maintenance training services," Leonardo said.

The TH-73As are replacing the Navy's three-decade-old TH-57B/C Sea Ranger training helicopters in Training Air Wing Five at Naval Air Station Whiting Field, Florida. The helicopters are used to train rotary-wing pilots for the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. The Thrasher will enable the services to meet

advanced rotary wing and intermediate tilt-rotor training requirements.

The TH-73A will develop pilot training and skills by using current cockpit technologies and a modernized training curriculum “that reflect the capabilities in the current Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard inventory,” the Navy said. “Using a skills-based approach to training with just-in-time methodology, incorporating modern technology, the TH-73A will ensure rotary wing aviators are produced at a higher quality, more efficiently, ready to meet the challenges faced in the fleet.”

The first twelve rotary wing students began training on the TH-73A in September 2022. The first of those students completed an inaugural solo flight in November 2022.

The helicopters will be built in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with an expected work completion date of December 2024.

U.S. Navy Approves Full-Rate Production for Sikorsky CH-53K Helicopter

Stratford, Conn. – The U.S. Navy declared full rate production of the Sikorsky CH-53K helicopter, a decision that is expected to increase production to more than 20 helicopters annually in the coming years, Lockheed Martin said in a Dec. 2 release. Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin company, is procuring long-lead items and critical materials to support building full rate production CH-53K helicopters in its digital factory.

“Ramping up production of the most technologically advanced helicopter in the world allows the U.S. Marine Corps to build out its CH-53K King Stallion fleet and support mission success,” said Bill Falk, director of the Sikorsky CH-53K program. “This production authorization stabilizes Sikorsky’s domestic supply chain and is a testament to our enduring partnership with the Marine Corps.”

This full-rate production decision instills confidence in the diverse network of more than 200 CH-53K suppliers across 34 states. The Marine Corps’ commitment to the CH-53K will allow suppliers to purchase in bulk, creating efficiencies and driving down overall costs for the U.S. military and

international allies.

The Marine Corps' approved acquisition objective is 200 aircraft.

The U.S. Marine Corps declared Initial Operational Capability (IOC) for the CH-53K helicopter in April 2022, validating the platform's operational readiness to forward deploy Marines and equipment across the globe.

The CH-53K is a multi-mission helicopter with heavy-lift capabilities that exceed all other U.S. Department of Defense rotary wing aircraft and is the only heavy-lift helicopter that will remain in production through 2032 and beyond. The CH-53K can carry a 27,000-pound external load over 110 nautical miles in high/hot conditions, which is more than triple the external load carrying capacity of the legacy CH-53E aircraft.

The CH-53K King Stallion is designed to conduct expeditionary assault transport of armored vehicles, equipment, and personnel to support distributed operations deep inland from a sea-based center of operations, critical in the Indo-Pacific region. The CH-53K is a digitally designed, market available aircraft, enabling a range of operations such as humanitarian relief, firefighting and search and rescue.

NSW Forces Wrap Up SOF Engagement with Indian Navy

Marine Commandos

GOA, India – Naval Special Warfare forces deployed to U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific concluded a joint combined training exercise with the Indian Navy Marine Commando Force on Dec. 22, said Petty Officer 1st Class Alex Smedegard in a Dec. 22 release.

The three-week exchange built upon the two forces' collective maritime capabilities and long-standing relationship.

"We are committed to operationalizing the U.S.-India partnership through enhanced information sharing, regional security cooperation, integrated deterrence and cooperation in new domains," said the senior team leader of the U.S. Naval Special Warfare unit. "This exercise provides us the opportunity of a common understanding of a shared working environment at sea through practical hands-on scenarios as a

combined team.”

The exercise included tactical training with weapons, close-quarter combat drills, military free fall evolutions, helicopter insertions, and maritime boat operations.

“We started off doing subject matter expert exchanges and familiarizing with standard procedures,” said the U.S. team lead. “And through this development with the [Indian Navy Marine Commando Force], we were able to cultivate and execute real-world scenarios towards the latter half of the exercise.”

The realistic scenarios served as a capstone to the training and included maritime interdiction operations, visit, board, search and seizure operations, and direct-action missions.

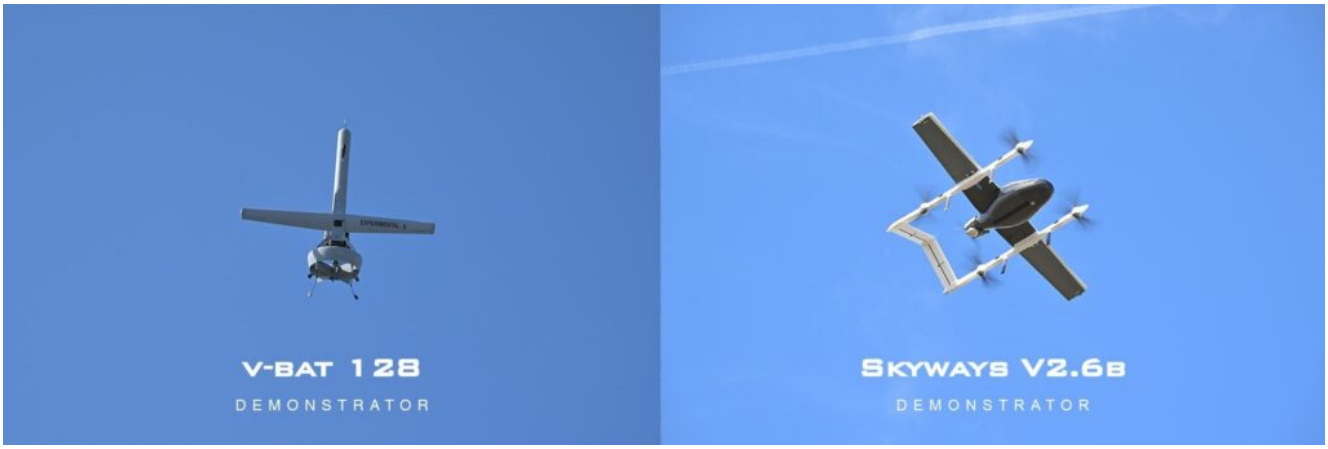
U.S. special operations forces provide flexible response to contingencies in the Indo-Pacific. Integral to this capability is a forward-deployed posture and continuous engagement with partner and ally forces, heightening mutual interoperability and regional expertise.

“We consistently look for opportunities to enhance this ongoing professional partnership,” said Rear Adm. Jeromy Williams, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific. “The U.S.-India defense partnership is critical to securing a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

India, the U.S., Australia, and Japan concluded naval exercise Malabar 2022 Nov. 15, a multi-national exercise designed to advance the collective planning, integration and employment of advanced warfare tactics between participating nations.

As part of Malabar 2022, there was a special operations forces-specific tri-lateral exercise between U.S. Naval Special Warfare, Indian Navy Marine Commando Force and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force Special Boarding Unit, focusing on maritime interdiction and tactical combat casualty care training.

Navy Successfully Demonstrated Unmanned Cargo Delivery Systems for Ship at Sea



PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – The Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) recently demonstrated multiple unmanned systems in a first-of-its-kind mission to move supplies to ships at sea without the use of manned aircraft during an event at Naval Air Station Patuxent River in St. Inigoes, Maryland, the Naval Air Warfare Center said in a Dec. 21 release.

The demo, held in collaboration with the Small Tactical Unmanned Aircraft Systems program (PMA-263), employed unmanned vehicles to transport cargo weighing less than 50 pounds, which accounts for 90% of Navy logistics deliveries.

"We are seeing an increase in manned and unmanned logistics," said Col. Victor Argobright, PMA-263 program manager. "For the Marine Corps, the Commandant is enthusiastic about where we are going with unmanned logistics, and is beginning conversations about operations and contested environments. The

Navy is currently identifying areas where unmanned logistics would be a critical enabler to operations at sea, and the Blue Water Maritime Logistics UAS is a great demonstration of this emerging requirement."

During the event, industry partners Skyways Air Transportation, Inc., and Martin UAV operated their unmanned systems through long-range flights from ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore, and shore-to-ship situations, carrying a variety of objects to mimic critical supplies. Both systems successfully delivered cargo over 200 nautical miles onto a moving ship underway.

"[For the future], we are looking at continued long-term experimentation, how the fleet operates, and how we get the technology out to our Sailors," said Tony Schmidt, NAWCAD's Experimentation Office director.

The unmanned systems under consideration are capable of vertical take-off-and-landing to operate from most naval ships at sea and stations ashore, as well as systems that do not require dedicated launch and recovery equipment.

NAWCAD acquired the original Blue Water UAS prototype in 2019 to demonstrate long-range unmanned naval ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore cargo transport. Navy test pilots and engineers have since worked with industry partners to develop a system that best meets maritime requirements.

To view a video of the demonstrations, go to https://youtu.be/YazljfUCMs0

USS Paul Ignatius Completes First Forward-Deployed Naval Forces-Europe Patrol

ROTA, Spain – The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Paul Ignatius (DDG 117) returned to Rota, Spain, Dec. 20, marking the completion of her first Forward-Deployed Naval Forces-Europe (FDNF-E) patrol in the U.S. Sixth Fleet area of operations, Lt. j.g. Andrew Halus, USS Paul Ignatius Public Affairs, said in a Dec. 20 release.

After commissioning in 2019, Paul Ignatius served three years in Mayport, Fla., before shifting homeports to Naval Station Rota, Spain, as part of the phased rotation of forward-deployed surface units assigned to Commander, Task Force 65/Destroyer Squadron 60.

The ship began its inaugural Sixth Fleet patrol in August,

operating in the Arctic Ocean, Baltic Sea, and North Sea, providing theater antisubmarine warfare, air and missile defense, surface warfare, and expeditionary warfare capabilities to regional Allies and partners.

“I couldn’t be more proud of this crew,” said Cmdr. Corry Lougee, executive officer of Paul Ignatius. “We have been operational since February, and this ship continues to excel. Our Sailors executed the most successful homeport change to date, fought through the adversity of patrol, and now return to our new homeport stronger than ever. The mental toughness of this crew is beyond words and we are so appreciative of the overwhelming support from our families, the base, Destroyer Squadron 60, and the amazing Spanish people of Rota.”

In the Baltic Sea, Paul Ignatius integrated with the Kearsarge Amphibious Readiness Group and Marines from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, under the command of Amphibious Squadron Six and Task Force 61 Naval Amphibious Forces Europe/2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (TF-61/2). The ship and her crew provided persistent presence in the Baltic, demonstrating solidarity with Baltic Sea Allies and partners. This involved frequent interoperability opportunities with NATO Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM)’s Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG) 1.

In November, Paul Ignatius participated in the Royal Navy’s Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) alongside Royal Danish Navy Iver Huitfeldt-class frigate HDMS Niels Juel (F363), Royal Navy Type 23 frigate HMS Northumberland (F238), and German Navy Baden-Württemberg-class frigate FGS Sachsen-Anhalt (F224).

In the challenging December weather conditions of the Baltic Sea, the crew participated in the Finnish Navy Command-led exercise “Freezing Winds,” enhancing integration and interoperability with Finland. Freezing Winds involved units and personnel from 12 countries, including Finland, Sweden,

the United States, and SNMG 1. The exercise highlighted joint maritime operations with both naval and amphibious aspects, testing allied and partner nations' interoperability and proficiency through a variety of warfare areas.

The crew enjoyed port calls in Tallinn, Estonia; Riga, Latvia; Gdańsk and Gdynia, Poland; Plymouth, England; Helsinki, Finland; and Kiel, Germany during the patrol. In every port, they conducted personal exchanges and key leader engagements with host nation personnel, bolstering relationships and bonds at all levels to strengthen and develop operational effectives with Allies.

"The crew of Paul Ignatius has demonstrated time and again during this patrol that the U.S. Navy will sail, fly and fight in any conditions as we stand unified with partners and allies," said Cmdr. Aaron Arky, Paul Ignatius' commanding officer. "The ship and our embarked helicopters from HSM-79 have embodied NATO's slogan that we are stronger together. Our nation's dedication to the security of the Baltic region and Europe as a whole was on full display as we operated in the Baltic Sea and the North Sea this year."

Four U.S. Navy destroyers, including Paul Ignatius, are based in Rota, Spain and are assigned to Commander, Task Force 65 in support of NATO's Integrated Air Missile Defense architecture. These FDNF-E ships have the flexibility to operate throughout the waters of Europe and Africa, from the Cape of Good Hope to the Arctic Circle, demonstrating their mastery of the maritime domain.

SECNAV Names Future Oceanographic Survey Ship USNS Robert Ballard

Military Sealift Command oceanographic survey ship USNS Pathfinder. *U.S. NAVY*

WASHINGTON – Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) Carlos Del Toro announced Dec. 21 that a future Pathfinder-class oceanographic survey ship will be named USNS Robert Ballard (T-AGS 67).

The future USNS Robert Ballard will honor Dr. Robert Ballard, a retired U.S. Navy commander, and former director of the Center for Ocean Exploration. A tenured professor of oceanography at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography, he is widely known as a discoverer of the final resting place of the R.M.S. Titanic. The name

selection follows the tradition of naming survey ships after explorers, oceanographers and distinguished marine surveyors.

“Dr. Ballard’s career, explorations, research and focus on teaching the next generation of oceanographers is remarkable, and I am pleased to name T-AGS 67 in his honor,” said Del Toro. “One of my enduring priorities is building a culture of warfighting excellence, and that includes lifelong learning amongst DoN personnel. The name Robert Ballard displayed across the stern of this ship will serve as an inspiration to all who see it while highlighting the results of commitment to education and exploration.”

Ballard was born in 1942, growing up in San Diego, Calif. After he graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1965, he earned an Army Reserve Commission, ultimately requesting and transferring to the U. S. Navy when called to active service in 1967. Assigned to the Office of Naval Research as a liaison officer at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, Ballard worked extensively with deep-submergence vehicle Alvin (DSV-2). After transitioning to the Naval Reserve in 1970, he completed a Ph.D. in marine geology and geophysics at the University of Rhode Island. He continued to work at Woods Hole, where he was part of a team that discovered deep-sea thermal vents near the Galapagos Rift. Best known for his 1985 discovery of R.M.S. Titanic at a depth of 12,000 feet, Ballard also led other shipwreck discoveries, including USS Yorktown (CV-5), USS Quincy (CA-39) and President John F Kennedy’s PT-109. Ballard retired from U.S. Naval Service in 1995. In 1989, he founded the distance learning program the JASON Project, which reached 12 million school children; and the Institute for Exploration in Mystic, Conn, and is also the founder and president of the Ocean Exploration Trust.

“I am humbled to have the U.S. Navy’s oceanographic ship, USNS Robert Ballard (T-AGS 67) as a namesake. As a 17-year-old, in

1959, I went on my very first oceanographic cruise, and very early in my oceanographic career, the U.S. Navy placed a central role and continues to do so to this day," said Dr. Robert Ballard. "It is indeed an honor to know that the USNS Robert Ballard will continue to explore the oceans long after I am gone."

Secretary Del Toro has designated Mrs. Barbara Earle Ballard, Dr. Ballard's spouse and president of Odyssey Enterprises, as the ship's sponsor.

Military Sealift Command's Special Mission program supports worldwide oceanographic programs with ships that perform acoustical, biological, physical and geophysical surveys. These ships gather data that provides much of the military's information on the ocean environment. The collected data helps to improve technology in undersea warfare and enemy ship detection. The oceanographic and hydrographic survey ships' multi-beam, wide-angle precision sonar systems make it possible to continuously chart a broad strip of ocean floor. Survey ships have charted three-fourths of the world's coastlines, making it easier for navigators to find their way along both well-traveled and not-so-familiar shipping routes.

General Dynamics Electric Boat Awarded $5.1 Billion for Columbia-Class SSBNs

An artist’s rendering of the Columbia class of submarines, currently under construction. *GENERAL DYNAMICS*

GROTON, Conn. – General Dynamics Electric Boat announced Dec. 21 the U.S. Navy has awarded a $5.1-billion modification of the previously awarded Columbia Integrated Product and Process Development Contract for the Columbia class of submarines, the nation’s next-generation sea-based strategic deterrent.

Electric Boat is the prime contractor on the Columbia program, which will replace the aging Ohio class ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs). The District of Columbia (SSBN 826) and Wisconsin (SSBN 827) are presently under construction.

The contract modification has a value of $5,134,324,189. Work will be performed in Groton, Connecticut; Quonset Point, Rhode Island; and Newport News, Virginia; and is expected to be completed by October 2030. The award funds advance procurement and advance construction of critical components and material to support Build II (the next five ships in the class), efforts to support continuous missile tube production, enhancements to develop the Submarine Industrial Base, and sustained class maintenance and support.

“This award enhances Electric Boat’s efforts to maintain the

Columbia-class production and delivery schedule. Advance procurement of long lead time materials and component construction is critical to the program, and the strategic investments in the development and expansion of the Submarine Industrial Base will help stabilize and grow the supply chain, which increases manufacturing capacity, reduces risk and ultimately drives timely delivery of submarines to the Navy," said Kevin Graney, president of General Dynamics Electric Boat.

At 560 feet long with a displacement of nearly 21,000 tons, the submarines of the Columbia class will be the largest ever built by the United States. Ships of the Columbia class will have a fuel core that will power the submarine for its entire service life, eliminating the need for a mid-service refueling. Electric Boat will deliver the lead ship to the Navy in 2027.