Marine Task Force Operates Across Africa During 'New Normal' Mission

ARLINGTON, Va. — A relatively small Marine Corps task force spent seven intense months operating across the vast expanse of Africa, focusing on the "New Normal" mission of ensuring there would be no repeat of the deadly 2012 attack on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

"New Normal dominated. … That's why we were there," to support the State Department's missions, Col. Adam L. Chalkey, commander of the recently returned Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SPMAGTF) Crisis Response-Africa 18-2, said Dec. 14.

The task force's "No. 1 operational priority," and what he considered would be "the minimal mission success," Chalkey said, was "we could not have another Benghazi," with a loss of American lives.

Focusing on that mission, one of the SPMAGTF's five infantry platoons rotated on 24-hour alert status prepared to fly wherever needed to reinforce or evacuate a U.S. diplomatic facility that was threatened. That response force would have been augmented as required by additional personnel and transported by some of the unit's six MV-22 tiltrotor Ospreys, with aerial refueling and communications support by its three KC-130 tanker-transports.

Asked if he was confident that they could have met their primary mission, Chalkey noted that "there always is uncertainty" and some places in Africa are more unstable than others. But, he said, "I'm confident we're not going to have another flashpoint incident" like Benghazi.

He attributed that confidence to the fact that organizations that might think of attacking a U.S. installation “know we are there, able to respond,” which serves as a deterrent.

And it was not just the SPMAGTF that could respond. The Marine unit was tied closely in with the U.S. European/Africa commands and the conventional and special operations forces under their authority, he said.

But while part of his force was standing that fly-away alert, the rest were conducting a staggering array of cooperative security exercises across most of Western and Central Europe and the vast expanse of Africa, as far from its European operating bases as Madagascar, which is nearly twice the east-west distance across the United States. Those operations required a total of 3,077 flight hours, with no mishaps.

And he had to maintain a balance between standing alert and doing unit training, Chalkey said.

“If all we did was standing alert, we would not be able to train and stay mission-ready,” he said.

They were able to maintain that balance through the security cooperative arrangements and access to allied training areas. As a result, the colonel said his units returned home better trained than when they deployed.

“Even though our mission was New Normal, we were operating out of Europe … taking full advantage of Europe and our strategic partners,” to keep his own force well trained and to help improve the combat capabilities of U.S. allies in Europe and Africa, Chalkey said at a Potomac Institute briefing.

The unit, which averaged about 850 Marines and Sailors, rotated between out of Moron, Spain, and Sigonella, Italy, with most of its time at the latter facility on the island of Sicily.

“The efforts of and the relationships built with our host nations, Spain and Italy, gave us the opportunity to train,” he said.

And they also were conducting security cooperation missions across Africa, “helping our partners mature their skills, to the point where they could export those skills to other African nations.” That was in keeping with the intentions of Marine Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, commander of the U.S. Africa Command.

Coast Guard Commandant ‘Guardedly Optimistic’ for Icebreaker Funding in 2019

ARLINGTON, Va. — Funding for the Coast Guard’s requirement for new icebreakers in fiscal 2019 is in peril but the Coast Guard remains confident that a conference between the House and Senate will allow the service to begin procurement.

“We’re going to be guardedly optimistic,” Adm. Karl Schultz, commandant of the Coast Guard, said Dec. 14 during the Navy League’s Special Topic Breakfast at the Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City. “We’re hoping to build out a fleet of six icebreakers [three polar security cutters and three medium icebreakers].

“We need one now,” he said, pointing out the age — 42 years — of the Coast Guard’s only operational heavy icebreaker, Polar Star, which recently began its Operation Deep Freeze journey to Antarctica.

President Donald J. Trump proposed funding of the first polar

security cutter (PSC) – a name applied to the future heavy icebreaker by Schultz early in his tenure – in the 2019 Coast Guard budget, part of the budget of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The budget's passage has been delayed over differences in the marked-up Senate version of the bill – which provides the funding–and the House version, which stripped funding Dec. 13 from its version of the bill.

The icebreaker is competing for funding desired by Trump for a more extensive southern border wall in the DHS budget.

Schultz, who has seven years of experience in legislative liaison with Congress, said "I'm going to stick by my guns that I'm guardedly optimistic" for a conference report from Congress that will fund the first PSC.

He pointed out that the first PSC would replace Polar Star, which is dedicated to annual Antarctic resupply missions. The deployment of a new icebreaker to the Arctic would have to await the commissioning of a second PSC.

Schultz plans for construction of the first PSC to begin in spring 2019. He estimates the cutter would be launched in six years and operational a year later.

Strike Fighter Squadron 147 Declared Safe for Flight Operations

PACIFIC OCEAN –The "Argonauts" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 147 completed their carrier qualifications Dec. 12 aboard USS Carl Vinson, the final required component for

Commander, Joint Strike Fighter Wing, to issue the squadron its safe-for-flight-operations certification. This marks a major milestone for the U.S. Navy toward declaring initial operating capability next year.

The safe-for-flight operations certification is the final step for VFA-147's transition from the F/A-18E Super Hornet to the F-35C Lightning II. This process ensures a squadron is manned with qualified personnel to implement maintenance and safety programs in support of fleet operations. All transitioning squadrons are required to complete this certification prior to independently conducting flight operations.

When introducing a new aircraft to the fleet, the appropriate fleet replacement squadron (FRS) is assigned oversight responsibility for the transitioning unit. The VFA-125 "Rough Raiders" were reactivated in January 2017 to fulfill the appropriate FRS role for the Lightning II. Since completing its combat deployment last winter, VFA-147 has been working with the Rough Raiders to accomplish the safe-for-flight-operations certification. The Argonauts will be able to operate independently from the Rough Raiders, having received safe-for-flight-operations certification.

"Since we returned from deployment last December, our team has been driving toward fully bringing this platform online for the Navy," said VFA-147 Commanding Officer Cmdr. Patrick Corrigan. "As the Argonauts close out 2018 and the final stages of our safe-for-flight certification, we continue to exhibit the relentless drive required to meet transition goals and milestones. With this certification, we are announcing that we have the right skills, training and people to take this mission and execute it, to its fullest potential."

The safe-for-flight-operations certification encompasses areas such as equipment, personnel and programs. Not least among them is the requirement for the squadron to be in the physical custody of at least 30 percent of the assigned aircraft. Other

requirements include the installation and operation of management information systems such as Autonomic Logistics Information System and its accompanying support networks. There is also a requirement for operational F-35C squadrons to maintain robust, on-track maintenance programs, as well as complete various inspections ranging from weapons to safety. Aircrew complete a transition flight syllabus and maintain certain proficiencies in accordance with Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures and Standardization.

“The Argonauts’ safe-for-flight operations certification was earned through the herculean effort of squadron Sailors and is an acknowledgement that they have developed the skills to safely maintain and operate the F-35C Lightning II,” said Joint Strike Fighter Wing Commander Capt. Max McCoy. “We eagerly look forward to declaring IOC and integrating the F-35C into the carrier strike group. This aircraft is a key component to maintaining the U.S. Navy’s dominance anywhere in the world.”

“VFA-147 continues to accomplish significant milestones, advancing this program closer to its ultimate goal of integrating the F-35C into the fleet,” said McCoy. “The exceptional performance of the squadron throughout the entire transition process is a testament to the hard-working Sailors who make the U.S. Navy F-35C program a reality. We will succeed because the professionals in this program will not let it fail. It is evident in all that they do. It is who we are as a team.”

Commander, Joint Strike Fighter Wing, headquartered at Naval Air Station Lemoore, California, ensures that each F-35C squadron is fully combat-ready to conduct carrier-based, all-weather, attack, fighter and support missions for Commander, Naval Air Forces. With its stealth technology, advanced sensors, weapons capacity and range, the F-35C will be the first fifth-generation aircraft operated from an aircraft carrier. The Navy F-35C program is scheduled to declare

initial operating capability by the end of February.

L3 OceanServer Awarded Contract for UUV to Support the Marine Corps

FALL RIVER, Mass. – L3 OceanServer was awarded a contract to support the U.S. Marine Corps Systems Command with an Iver3 unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) to be used for testing and evaluation, the company announce in a Dec. 13 release.

Over the past four years, L3 OceanServer has leveraged hundreds of thousands of operational hours on Iver vehicles to build a system with warfighter-driven attributes. With more than 300 vehicles sold to various customers worldwide, the Iver is a commercial, off-the-shelf product that delivers the latest advances in technology with proven performance in real-world situations.

The Iver is a purpose-built UUV that carries the highest-performance, man-portable sensor package available, including the iXBlue PHINS Compact Inertial Navigation System and the EdgeTech 2205B Bathymetry and Side Scan Sonar. The longer runtimes of the Iver, paired with its precise navigational accuracy, enable long ingress/egress missions to allow the operator greater standoff distances, increasing overall mission safety.

“L3 OceanServer has been focused on supporting the Marine Corps’ total mission profile,” said Daryl Slocum, general manager, L3 OceanServer. “We have incorporated their direct feedback into two of our vehicle platforms, the Iver3 and

Iver4, to build a premier product that supports nearshore and very shallow hydrographic surveys.”

The Iver is an open platform and often the vehicle of choice for development programs interested in designing and testing new behaviors to be used across the fleet. Many of the recent mine countermeasure behaviors and automatic target recognition algorithms were originally designed and validated on the Iver platform. Today, there are more than 50 Iver systems in use by the U.S. Navy.

L3 OceanServer is part of the Maritime Sensor Systems sector within L3’s Communications & Networked Systems business segment.

Coast Guard Cutter Abbie Burgess Returns After Great Lakes Patrol

BOSTON – The crew of Coast Guard Cutter Abbie Burgess returned to its homeport of Rockland, Maine, Dec. 12 after a 37-day patrol to the Great Lakes region in support of Operation Fall Retrieve.

During the patrol, Abbie Burgess’ crew assisted in efforts to remove or replace 1,219 seasonal aids to navigation in the 9th Coast Guard District area of responsibility. The crew also serviced two Canadian weather buoys.

Abbie Burgess transited through the St. Lawrence Seaway, making stops in Montreal, Buffalo, New York, and Cleveland.

“Although it was an unusually long trip for a cutter this

size, I think the whole crew saw the benefits to our shipmates in District 9," said Chief Warrant Officer Michael Bollinger, commanding officer of Abbie Burgess. "It was an amazing journey, both accomplishing the mission and growing together as a crew. The morale of the crew during the patrol was phenomenal, and the amount of support provided by everyone in District 9 was incredible."

Abbie Burgess is a 175-foot coastal buoy tender with primary missions of maintaining aids-to-navigation and light icebreaking. It is named after a heroic lighthouse keeper from Rockland, Maine.

Marine Corps Awards OTAs to Assess Handheld Targeting Capabilities

MARINE CORPS BASE QUANTICO, Va. – Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC) has awarded four Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs) to assess industry's capability to produce a Next Generation Handheld Targeting System (NGHTS) that is compact, rugged and lightweight.

The use of OTAs were approved by Congress in 2016 as a procurement method to pay for prototypes and to use nontraditional defense companies to spur innovation. The OTAs were awarded to BAE Systems, Elbit Systems of America, Fraser Optics and Northrop Grumman Systems Corp. The four companies will explore possibilities focused on the following criteria:

■ The system's overall ergonomics for supporting forward deployed, foot mobile users.

■ Target recognition, location and designation ranges during day and night operations.

■ The ability to integrate the system with the Target Handoff System Version 2 to view and manipulate target information.

■ Technological maturity, manufacturability and value engineering.

■ Sustainability at the operational user level.

NGHTS is a single, lightweight, man-portable system that enables Marines to quickly acquire targets; perform guidance of against targets; and generate target location data during combat operations.

“During the first phase, the four awarded companies will explore potential system capabilities and provide Marine Corps Systems Command with an in-depth study of the best solution for our Marines at the best price,” said Megan Full, contract specialist supporting Program Manager (PM) Fires at MCSC. “We will collect the findings by the second quarter of fiscal year 2019 and choose one or more vendors to move onto phase two where they will develop and demonstrate prototypes.”

Currently, the Marine Corps uses four legacy systems: the Portable Lightweight Designator Rangefinder, Joint Terminal Attack Controller, Laser Target Designator and Thermal Laser Spot Imager. The intent is for NGHTS to replace all four systems.

“For the last four years, we have worked diligently to explore an option that condenses the legacy versions into one lightweight system with a reliable power supply that is rugged enough to throw onto a Marine’s pack,” said Jeff Nebel, Fire Support Coordination Team lead, PM Fires.

“The NGHTS will combine all of the legacy capabilities into one system that is compatible with both current and future

fire support systems, and will support the Marine Corps for the next 15 to 20 years."

"The NGHTS will be an important advancement because it is planned to reduce the current weight of the laser designation and laser spot imaging capability by 60 percent, which will increase the mobility and lethality of our fire support-focused Marines," said Maj. Nathan Morales, Targeting Systems project officer, PM Fires. "This capability is focused on our ability to fight in the compartmentalized terrain outlined in the Marine Operating Concept."

San Pedro-Based Cutter Returns to Homeport Following First Drug Bust

SAN PEDRO, Calif. – The crew of a San Pedro-based Coast Guard cutter returned to their homeport Dec. 8 following a two-week patrol that included the ship's first drug bust, the 11th Coast Guard District said in a release.

The crew of the recently commissioned Cutter Forrest Rednour interdicted approximately 1,000 pounds of marijuana from a suspected smuggling vessel on Nov. 28 in international waters, approximately 30 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico maritime border.

A Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Air and Marine Operations Multi-Enforcement Aircraft spotted a northbound 25-foot cuddy cabin boat with three people aboard just before midnight, Nov. 27. The Forrest Rednour crew arrived on scene, deployed their interceptor boat and stopped the suspect boat.

The ship’s law enforcement team initiated a boarding of the U.S.-registered boat and discovered more than 40 bales of marijuana.

The Forrest Rednour crew transferred the marijuana and suspects to Customs and Border Protection agents at Ballast Point.

“These cutters are designed to seamlessly integrate with multiple agency partners to successfully execute an array of missions, so it was great to see it play out flawlessly so early in the ship’s time in service,” said Lt. Graham Sherman, commanding officer of Forrest Rednour. “All members of the Regional Coordinating Mechanism worked well together, and it led to a successful outcome.”

The Regional Coordinating Mechanism (ReCoM) is an evolution of joint operations among interagency partners. Located in San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the ReCoM partnership includes the U.S. Coast Guard, CBP’s Air and Marine Operations, Office of Field Operations, U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations in cooperation with state and local law enforcement partners operating along the California coast.

Forrest Rednour was commissioned in San Pedro Nov. 8, and it is one of two new fast response cutters (FRCs) to be homeported in San Pedro. Two additional FRCs are scheduled to be homeported in San Pedro by next summer.

FRC’s are 154-foot multimission ships designed to conduct drug and migrant interdictions; ports, waterways and coastal security operations; fisheries and environmental protection patrols; national defense missions; and search and rescue.

Marine Corps Declares Remaining Marines Involved in Aviation Mishap Deceased

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP BUTLER, Okinawa, Japan – The Marine Corps has pronounced the five remaining Marines involved in the F/A-18 and KC-130 aviation mishap deceased, the III Marine Expeditionary Force said in a Dec. 10 release. The change in status comes at the conclusion of search and rescue operations.

The next-of-kin for the five deceased Marines have been notified.

“Every possible effort was made to recover our crew and I hope the families of these selfless Americans will find comfort in the incredible efforts made by U.S., Japanese, and Australian forces during the search,” said U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Eric Smith, commanding general, III Marine Expeditionary Force.

“Our most valued asset is the individual Marine. We remain faithful to our Marines and their families as we support them through this difficult time. We ask for members of the public to please respect the family and allow them privacy.”

The KC-130 Hercules was assigned to Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152, call sign “Sumo”), 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

“All of us in the Sumo family are extremely saddened following the announcement of the conclusion of search and rescue operations,” said U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Mitchell T. Maury, commanding officer of VMGR-152. “We know this difficult decision was made after all resources were exhausted in the vigorous search for our Marines. Our thoughts are heavy, and

our prayers are with all family and friends of all five aircrew.”

The F/A-18 Hornet involved was assigned to Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 242. The aircraft were conducting regularly scheduled training. It is not confirmed that aerial refueling was ongoing when the mishap occurred.

The Marine Corps rigorously investigates all aviation mishaps to identify the causes, learn from them, and mitigate future incidents. The circumstances of the mishap are currently under investigation. There is no additional information available at this time. The identities of the Marines will be provided 24 hours after next of kin have been notified.

Transportation Secretary Announces $1.5 Billion in BUILD Grants to Revitalize Infrastructure

WASHINGTON – U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine L. Chao Dec. 11 announced $1.5 billion in discretionary grant funding to 91 projects in 49 states and the District of Columbia. The grants are made through the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Grants program and support road, rail, transit, and port infrastructure projects across the country.

“BUILD transportation grants are major investments in road, rail transit, and port projects that serve as a down payment on this administration’s commitment to America’s

infrastructure," Chao said.

Demand for BUILD grants far exceeded available funds, and the locally driven nature of the applications was clear in their volume and geographic diversity. 851 eligible applications from all 50 states, as well as U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, were sent in response to the BUILD Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), nearly double the applications received in 2017. Overall, applicants in 2018 requested more than $10.9 billion in funding.

Project applications were evaluated by a team of 222 career staff in the department and selected based on established criteria, which included safety, economic competitiveness, quality of life, environmental protection and state of good repair. Further criteria included innovation, such as projects supporting Connected or Autonomous Vehicles infrastructure, broadband service to underserved communities, as well as projects that demonstrate partnerships between the public and private sectors, and non-federal revenue for transportation infrastructure investments.

The department prioritized rural projects that aligned with the criteria and addressed rural infrastructure needs. The grant announcements made today will contribute to the construction or refurbishment of over 200 bridges nationwide, from North Carolina to the refurbishment of the Brooklyn Bridge.

The BUILD Transportation Grants rebalance a 10-year, historical underinvestment in rural communities. Rural applications more than doubled from the previous year's Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery applications. Underinvestment in rural infrastructure has led to a decline in the routes that connect communities in rural America. In this round, in which 59 percent of the applications were for rural projects, 62 projects were awarded to rural grant applications.

Several selected projects will contribute to America's energy independence. The Permian Basin projects and the Port Arthur Multimodal Rail Expansion and Berth Expansion Project will both contribute to the efficient transportation of domestic energy products. Border security infrastructure is also supported through BUILD Transportation grants, with projects such as the Calexico East Port of Entry Bridge Expansion in California making bridge improvements to accommodate freight traffic and improving other transportation facilities at the border crossing.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 appropriated $1.5 billion for BUILD Transportation grants. For this round of BUILD Transportation grants, the maximum grant award is $25 million for a single project, and no more than $150 million can be awarded to a single state. There is a $5 million minimum award for projects located in urban areas, and a $1 million minimum for rural projects.

Standard Missile-3 Block IIA Destroys Target in First Intercept from Land

PACIFIC MISSILE RANGE FACILITY, Hawaii – The Missile Defense Agency completed the third successful intercept of a ballistic missile target by a Raytheon Co. Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IIA missile, the next-generation variant that defeats missile threats outside the earth's atmosphere, the company announced Dec. 11.

The test evaluated the system's overall performance and achieved three milestones for the IIA variant:

■ The first successful intercept from a land-based launch.

■ The first intercept of an intermediate-range ballistic missile target.

■ The first intercept using tracking data from remote sensors, known as “engage on remote.”

Raytheon’s missile defense solutions continue to expand the defended area by protecting against increasingly sophisticated threats with the use of remote sensors. In this test, Raytheon’s AN/TPY-2 radar served as a remote sensor, tracking and providing the missile with data on the incoming threat, instead of using the phased-array connected to the Aegis Ashore system.

“This is a versatile and sophisticated missile,” said Dr. Taylor W. Lawrence, Raytheon Missile Systems president. “Our partnership with the Missile Defense Agency and Japanese industry made these results possible.”

The IIA variant has larger rocket motors and a bigger kinetic warhead, raising its effectiveness against evolving threats. The advanced missile obliterated a medium-range ballistic missile target at sea in October. SM-3 is the only ballistic missile interceptor that can be launched at sea and on land, and has achieved over 30 intercepts in space.