

Shall We Play a Game? Winning Isn't the Point, Experts Say



NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – War games may be a useful tool for leaders dealing with regional conflicts and great power rivalry, but the purpose isn't to win, according to a panel of gaming experts.

“Many people think war games are a boot camp for victory, in reality, war games get you to think about multiple choices, courses of action for the tactical, the operational and the strategic levels of war, so it's really not necessarily about winning,” said panel moderator Dr. Steven Wills, Navalist, at the Center for Maritime Strategy, Navy League of the United States.

Panel members echoed Wills' comment at the Navy League's 2023 Sea-Air-Space Expo.

"A single, well-designed game predicts 'a' future, not 'the' future," said Commander Phillip Pournelle, USN (Ret.), Senior Operations Analyst and Wargame Design at Group W, an analysis, modeling and research company. The best it can do is provide insights into the future, "in a manner similar to how a shotgun hits a duck."

"Winning is the wrong way to look at wargaming," said Jeremy Sepinsky, Lead Wargame Designer, CNA. "If you win a war game, you have discovered one potential way of success among an infinite number of choices that all must follow that exact alignment for your success to be realized." But losing a wargame identifies "how your systems are going to fail," Sepinsky said, adding even if you don't know how it failed it can point to what happens if it fails and how to mitigate that failure.

The session ended with all of the panelists demonstrating wargames they had developed like the Taiwan Straits game by Dr. Matt Cancian, of the U.S. Naval War College and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Most were complex with a blizzard of rules like IUU (illegal, Unreported, Unregulated) Fishing game, with a variety of dice, playing cards representing fishing boats, tiny fish, zoned areas marked with numbers indicating fisheries' size. "You are a fishing fleet, your job is to fish," explained Sepinsky, "each of the ships has a certain profit quota that you're trying to make."

The cards representing the ships have two sets of gauges "one for the welfare of the people on your ship. What are you wages. How are your social security benefits? Are you paying into their retirement plans," said the game-co-creator." On the right hand side you've got the safety of the ship. Is it patched? Is it leaking oil. Does it meet regulations and standards for the waters you're going to be fighting in?"

In some wargames “you want them to lose just a little bit,” Dr. Yuna Wong of the Institute for Defense Analyses said. The purpose was to see what could go wrong and identify potential problems and weaknesses. Some organizations want to use wargames to validate or prove plans. “Remember wargames can’t prove anything and they can’t validate anything,” she said.

U.S. Goal: Maintaining Extended Presence in Arctic’s Harsh Environment



NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — U.S. Navy and Coast Guard officials say maintaining a reliable presence in the Arctic, by ship, aircraft or submarine, is crucial to protecting American

interests and sovereignty in the High North.

However, Coast Guard Vice Commandant Admiral Steven Poulin said maritime patrol planes and ice breakers aren't enough to achieve his "top priority" of forward presence in the Arctic's hostile environment.

Speaking on an Arctic strategy panel April 3, Poulin said consideration of the supply and repair needs of those systems and the care of the men and women who crew those systems requires investment in infrastructure to support forward basing. Both Poulin and another panel member, Vice Admiral William Houston, Commander of Naval Submarine Forces and the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, agreed there were three U.S. strategic objectives in the Arctic: sovereignty, safety, and security. They also agreed that to accomplish them U.S. Arctic maritime operations must extend beyond Alaskan waters.

Allies and partners that share values like freedom of navigation, environmental concerns and the rule of law are needed, especially since the United States has only two ice breakers and no deepwater ports or air bases bordering the Arctic Ocean. Kodiak, Alaska near the Bering Sea, is a thousand miles from Alaska's Arctic coast.

Melting Arctic sea ice due to climate change has been opening new sea lanes, untapped fisheries, and previously unreachable petroleum, natural gas, and mineral deposits across the top of the world.

The Arctic is "an area of increasing human activity" and "increasing global competition, whether it's for resources, access or presence. And so, for us, the key is good governance, a rules-based order that increases stability for the region. It's also about protecting America's sovereignty and sovereign rights," Poulin said.

Russia has increased its military presence along its Arctic coast, reopening Cold War era bases and building several new

ones. China, which styles itself a “near Arctic nation,” has made several scientific expeditions in the region and has conducted at least one naval exercise with Russia inside U.S. territorial waters.

Houston said Navy submarines have plied polar waters since 1947, and U.S. submarines, aircraft and other surface vessels have conducted 100 exercises like ICEX and Northern Edge with the United Kingdom, France, and Canada among other nations’ navies. U.S. submarines are now stopping in Tromso, Norway to pick up supplies and drop off and pick up crewmembers.

Both Poulin and Houston said communications at high latitudes was a challenge. The Navy is investing “a quarter of a billion dollars” in the Arctic where communications is absolutely key, said Houston. “If you cannot communicate, you can get yourself in a lot of trouble.” The Navy has no surface vessels with ice hardened hulls. The Coast Guard’s first polar security cutter, a heavy, armed ice breaker, is not expected to be available for years. Poulin said the Coast Guard was hoping for delivery in Fiscal 2026.

Joint, Combined Exercise Shows Marine Littoral Regiment Idea is on “Right Track”



U.S. Marines with 3d Marine Littoral Regiment, 3d Marine Division present arms during the redesignation ceremony of 3d Marines to 3d MLR aboard Marine Corps Base Hawaii, March 3, 2022. The 3d MLR will serve as a key enabler for joint, allied, and partnered forces, will integrate with naval forces, and will enable multi-domain maneuver and fires within contested spaces. The transition of 3d Marines to 3d MLR is in accordance with Force Design 2030 and one of the first major steps to facilitating a shift as the Marine Corps divests in legacy capabilities and builds a force that is optimized for operations envisioned within the Commandant's Planning Guidance. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Patrick King)

ARLINGTON, Va. – Now that the first Marine Littoral Regiment has been created, U.S. Marine Corps leaders say they're experimenting to determine how best to equip the pioneering unit as the forward-based eyes and ears of the fleet inside a contested maritime environment.

The 3rd Marine Regiment was [redesignated the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment](#) (MLR) in a March 3, 2022 ceremony at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, where the new regiment will continue to be headquartered. The first of three planned littoral regiments for the Indo-Pacific region, the 3rd MLR is a key part of the Marines' ambitious force redesign to contend with near-peer

militaries like China and Russia.

"We have not only built the organization, now we are equipping it, experimenting and doing the testing and evaluation with those concepts we've come up with," Marine Corps Col. Lance Lewis told the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) [Expeditionary Warfare Conference](#) Feb. 22. "We're definitely on the right track when it comes with MLRs," added Lewis, the Assistant Vice Chief of Naval Research at the Office of Naval Research (ONR), "That is how we are going to enable the Stand-In Force."

The Marines' evolving Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept envisions littoral operations by specialized mobile, low signature units within larger distributed maritime operations areas. Plans call for the MLRs to be organized, trained and equipped to support sea control and sea denial operations as part of a larger naval expeditionary force integrated with the joint force and allied and partnered forces.

Currently the MLRs are divided into three elements: a littoral combat team made up of a one infantry battalion equipped with a ship-killing missile battery, an anti-aircraft battalion, and a combat logistics battalion. All three elements were dispersed over three separate islands in their debut inclusion [in RIMPAC 22](#)

, the huge joint multinational maritime exercise in Hawaii. The MLR provided multi-domain awareness to the Combined Task Force, the Combined Force Maritime Component Command, and the Combined Force Air Component Command.

As the "eyes and ears of the fleet," Lewis said, "You need not only to restructure, but how do you maneuver those forces around the battlefield so it's not a standard set of battalions but a different task organization, and then how do you now equip those forces."

Marine Corps, Navy Cease Administrative Actions to Dismiss COVID Vaccine Refusers



5/12/22: Covid Vaccine – Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Mark Forrey administers a COVID-19 vaccine to Navy Seaman Micah Dayoub aboard the USS Ronald Reagan, in Yokosuka, Japan, Sept. 9, 2022. The Ronald Reagan, Carrier Strike Group 5's flagship, is the Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier. (Photo By: Navy Seaman Natasha Chevalier Losada)

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps have halted administrative actions to discharge Sailors and Marines for

refusing mandatory vaccination against the COVID-19 coronavirus variant.

In accordance with updated guidance from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III, "Commanders will immediately discontinue administrative separation processing of Marines solely for declining to receive the COVID-19 vaccine," Capt. Ryan Bruce, a Marine Corps spokesperson, told Seapower in a Jan. 20 email.

A [Marine administrative message](#) (MARADMIN) signed Jan. 18 by Lt. Gen. D.J. Furness, the Marine Corps deputy commandant for Plans, Policies and Operations directed commanders to, "immediately suspend any new or ongoing adverse administrative actions associated with declining the COVID-19 vaccine."

The MARADMIN also instructed commanders to cease any ongoing reviews of requests by current service members for a religious, administrative, or medical exemption, including pending appeals.

Furness's directive came a week after similar guidance for Navy commanders issued by Vice Adm. Richard J. Cheeseman, Jr., deputy chief of naval operations for Personnel, Manpower, and Training, N1.

Cheeseman told all commands to discontinue administrative separation processing of vaccine-refusing Sailors and, "suspend immediately any new adverse administrative actions associated with refusing the COVID-19 vaccine."

Thousands of Sailors and Marines have been separated from the sea services for vaccination refusal, following Austin's Aug. 24, 2021 memo making COVID vaccination mandatory for all active duty and Reserve members of the armed services and the National Guard.

Austin said the vaccination mandate was necessary to protect the force and maintain readiness. However, language in the

fiscal 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), enacted in late December, [required the defense secretary to rescind the mandate](#), which had sparked complaints from lawmakers and lawsuits from service members.

The legislation stopped short of requiring the Pentagon to reinstate troops who were dismissed for refusing the shot. It also did not mention giving them back pay.

However, on Jan. 17, Pentagon Press Secretary Brigadier Gen. Pat Ryder told reporters, “Right now, we are not currently pursuing back-pay to service members who were dismissed for refusing to take the COVID vaccination.”

As of Dec. 20, 2022, the latest [Defense Department COVID-19 statistics](#), almost 2 million service members have been fully vaccinated, including 389,177 in the Navy and 200,186 Marines.

Coast Guard Has No Personnel Retention Problem, But Recruiting Is Another Story



USCGC Richard Snyder (WPC 1127) navigates in the Labrador Sea on Aug. 13, 2021. Snyder worked alongside USCGC Escanaba (WMEC 907), the Royal Canadian Navy's HMCS Harry Dewolf (A0PV 430), and HMCS Goose Bay (MM 707) in Operation Nanook to enhance collective abilities to respond to safety and security issues in the High North through air and maritime presence activities, maritime domain defense, and security exercises. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by USCGC Richard Snyder)

ARLINGTON, Va. — Retaining veteran personnel is not a problem for the U.S. Coast Guard says Commandant Adm. Linda Fagan, but recruiting the right people who want to go to sea remains “a challenge.”

From patrolling the Arctic, conducting counter-narcotics trafficking operations in the Caribbean Basin, helping vulnerable nations across Oceania protect their resources from illegal, [unreported and unregulated \(IUU\) fishing](#), to joining U.S. Navy ships in freedom of [navigation transits through the Taiwan Strait](#), “We have never been in greater demand around

the world,” Fagan said.

However, the Coast Guard, like the [other armed services](#) and employers across the nation, “is facing the challenge of recruiting,” Fagan told attendees at the [Surface Navy Association’s annual national symposium](#) Jan. 11.

New USCG Recruiting Programs

The Coast Guard has several pilot programs to address the recruiting challenge, including one that would allow lateral entry for civilians with key skills, like culinary specialists and certified EMTs, to move more quickly into their chosen service job after basic training.

The Coast Guard’s first female commandant, Fagan said her number one priority is managing talent to keep a workforce “trained, ready and relevant for the work ahead.” The problem, she said, is getting young people to see the opportunity that service brings.

“We’re a sea-going service, and having a workforce that’s excited to go to sea on the state-of-the-art ships that we’re building is a priority,” Fagan said. The Coast Guard has set up sea duty readiness council to lead efforts to mitigate the challenges that go along with serving at sea.

That includes being responsive to the expectations of the generation that the Coast Guard wants to recruit, such as reliable internet service. To that end, the Coast Guard has made antenna upgrades and increased spending on satellite reception and bandwidth.

“Improved connectivity helps people stay in touch with their friends and family and eliminates some of the arduousness of sea duty,” Fagan said.

While the Coast Guard has used incentive pay and signing bonuses to encourage old hands to stay and new ones to join,

“I don’t think we can buy our way out of this,” Fagan said. “If you get the system right, the structure, the conditions of employment, that bonus becomes just a cherry on top. You’ve already sold them on the work and the values.”

SECNAV Wants to Put Naval Strike Missiles on All Littoral Combat Ships



Known for its “sea-skimming” capability, the Naval Strike Missile can fly at very low altitudes over water and land. (Photo: Kongsberg)

ARLINGTON, Va. – Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro is still keen on the role the littoral combat ship (LCS) have yet to play, despite a troubled history.

“I’m very enthused about the future of LCS and what we’re

going to do with it,” Del Toro said Jan. 11 at the [Surface Navy Association’s 2023 National Symposium](#). “We need to put a Naval Strike Missile on each and every single one of them.”

Littoral combat ships were [designed to be fast, optimally manned](#), mission-tailored surface combatants that could operate in near-shore and open-ocean environments. The 33rd ship in the LCS program, the future USS Augusta, was christened in December.

However, LCS, were plagued with reliability and maintainability issues. Serious propulsion problems developed with the newest Freedom-class littoral combat ships. The Navy wanted to retire nine LCS, but Congress pushed back on the plan. The fiscal 2023 [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA), signed into law by President Biden Dec. 23, 2022, blocked early retirement of five of the nine LCS on the Navy’s hit list.

Creative Use

Del Toro acknowledged a small number of LCS deemed “least capable in the high-end fight” still may have to go. When he became Navy secretary, Del Toro said he and Navy leaders were confronted with problems on the Freedom class, and, “so we had to make some difficult choices.”

Del Toro noted LCS was being used creatively by the Navy in Central and South American waters. The five-month deployment of USS Sioux City (LCS 11) with the 5th and 6th Fleets demonstrated LCS utility. Sioux City was the first LCS to deploy in the Baltic, Mediterranean and Red seas, the Gulf of Aden, Northern Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Gulf.

“I look forward to deploying LCS to its fullest with all the years that they have remaining,” Del Toro said.

Concern about COVID Policy

After his speech, Del Toro met with reporters and was asked about the impact of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ending his 2021 mandate requiring all members of the armed forces, to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Austin's recission of the mandate was required by language in the fiscal 2023 NDAA.

Before the legislation passed, Del Toro was concerned that a repeal of the vaccine mandate might lead to potential movement restrictions. "It will create almost two classes of citizens in our services – those that can't deploy and those that can deploy," he said on Dec.6.

Del Toro said the Navy Department had followed Austin's directive, but he expected additional guidance from the Pentagon.

Asked if he anticipated any short-term problems absent specific guidance, Del Toro said, "No, I think the majority of service members, across all services, quite frankly, get the COVID vaccination whether they're told to, or not."

While more than two million service members have been fully vaccinated, according to the Defense Department, thousands who declined the shot were separated from the military. "I suspect that a lot of people who wanted to leave the military, perhaps, did not go down that path [vaccination], so they could leave the military, perhaps before their contract expired," Del Toro said.

CENTCOM Naval Chief Says Mesh of Sensors and Unmanned Systems Could Protect Region's Waters



ARLINGTON, Va. — An interconnected mesh of sensors and unmanned systems could provide better maritime security in the Middle East than any single Navy could, the head of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) naval forces says.

“No Navy acting alone can possibly protect against all the threats,” Vice Adm. Brad Cooper told an audience Jan. 10 at the Surface Navy Association’s 2023 National Symposium. “The region is simply too big,” he said.

Maritime Security in the Middle East

CENTCOM's maritime area of responsibility includes the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, parts of the Indian Ocean and three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb, and Suez Canal.

"Threats emanating from Iran are very real and they have our attention," said Cooper, who is also commander of the Navy's 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, citing incidents last year and as recently as Jan. 7, 2023.

In late August, the Navy prevented a support ship from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy from capturing an unmanned surface vessel operated by the 5th Fleet in the Arabian Gulf. A Nov. 15 aerial drone attack on a Liberian-flagged commercial tanker transiting international waters in the Middle East, was identified as a Shahed-136 UAV; the same aerial drone Iran has supplied to Russia for use against Ukraine.

On Jan. 7, U.S. naval forces [seized more than 2,000 AK-47 assault rifles](#) from a fishing vessel transiting along a maritime route from Iran to Yemen.

The vessel was sailing on a route historically used to traffic weapons to the Houthis in Yemen. A team from the Cyclone-class patrol ship USS Chinook ship boarded the vessel with support from the Cyclone-class patrol ship USS Monsoon and the guided-missile destroyer USS The Sullivans, according to CENTCOM.

Strengthening Partnerships

The most effective way to monitor the region's waterways is through strengthening partnerships with other navies and accelerating innovation, Cooper remarked. A good example of

that strategy was Digital Horizon, a three-week unmanned and artificial intelligence event in Bahrain.

During Digital Horizon, which ended Dec. 15, Task Force 59 leveraged artificial intelligence to create an interface on one screen, also called a “single pane of glass.” The screen displayed relevant data from multiple unmanned systems for watchstanders in Task Force 59’s Robotics Operations Center.

The task force was established in 2021 to rapidly integrate unmanned systems and artificial intelligence with maritime operations in the 5th Fleet area of operations. The task force also launched an unmanned aerial vehicle from a U.S. Coast Guard cutter for the first time. The launch enhanced Task Force 59’s ability to create a mesh network for unmanned systems to relay imagery to command centers ashore and at sea in a communications-denied environment.

**Marine Corps General:
Strategic Overseas Bases
Critical to Detering
Adversaries**



U.S. Marines with the Maritime Raid Force, 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, tread water during a limited scale raid on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan, Nov. 21, 2022. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. Manuel Alvarado*

WASHINGTON – The commanding general of the U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory and Futures Directorate says overseas bases are an underestimated key to deterring competitors from aggression and coercion against friendly nations and allies in the Pacific region.

The value of strategic basing “deserves more attention in any discussions of deterrence,” Brigadier Gen. Kyle B. Ellison told the U.S. Naval Institute (USNI)’s Defense Forum at the Spy Museum Dec. 6. Overseas bases are “one of the most critical aspects of the deterrence effort, in my opinion,” said Ellison, who is also vice chief of Naval Research in the Office of Naval Research.

Speakers at the USNI event focused on integrated deterrence, one of three ways cited by the 2022 National Defense Strategy to achieve Defense Department goals that include defending the

homeland against the growing multi-domain threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Integrated deterrence seeks to bring a whole of government approach across services, government agencies, regions, commands and Ally or partner organizations to thwarting competitors' aggression.

The other paths to attaining Defense goals are through campaigning and building enduring advantage.

"While we modernize our power projection capabilities, we must not lose focus on broadening our stance in the Pacific or hardening our forward installations," Ellison said. "The value of our overseas bases cannot be overstated and our investment in the resilience of these overseas locations will have a far-reaching impact on our ability deter."

Another aspect of integrated deterrence is a stand-in force operating inside a weapons engagement zone, a point that emerged from the Marines' Force Design 2030 plan. While China has increased the challenges of anti-access/aerial denial over the mainland and created stand-off areas and protective bubbles in the littorals, Ellison said U.S. Allies and partner stand-in forces "will survive in this high threat environment" because they are "nimble, moving often and avoiding enemy intelligence collection efforts."

The stand-in force could include, not just Marines, but elements of the Navy, special operations, Allies and partner nations. To support the consistent persistence of the stand-in force, Ellison said the Marines were reducing their sustainment burdens and maximizing maneuverability by "reducing logistics demands across the life cycle of the stand-in forces. This will give them a position of strength and advantage in coordination with Allies and partners."

Cold War Era Emissions Control Could Protect Navy Assets from Cyber Attacks, Expert Says



The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Paul Ignatius (DDG 117) sails through the Baltic Sea, Sept. 4. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Aaron Lau*
ARLINGTON, Va. – A rediscovered Cold War practice and the U.S. Navy's unique command and control culture could protect the service's assets from cyberattack, according to a U.S. Naval Academy cybersecurity expert.

While most information systems across the Defense Department tend to be similar, "the Navy has a different command and control culture," Martin Libicki, holder of the academy's Keyser Chair of Cybersecurity Studies, told a live-streamed

panel discussion at Annapolis on Cyber Disruption and Disinformation Sept. 29.

Historically, the Navy has put a premium on independent action, “and one of the things navies do to protect themselves against sophisticated adversaries is not communicate. It’s called emissions control. We used to do it a lot in the Cold War, then we forgot it,” he said.

“Now we’re relearning it and that tends to isolate certain Navy assets from the rest of the world. The more you isolate them, the harder it is to carry out cyber operations against them,” noted Libicki, who researches cyberwar and the general impact of information technology on domestic and national security.

The discussion, presented by the U.S. Naval Institute, focused largely on Russia’s use of cyberattacks and disinformation before, as well as since it began its illegal invasion of Ukraine in February.

Bilyana Lilly, geopolitical risk lead at the Krebs Stamos Group and previously a cyber expert at Deloitte and the RAND Corp., noted that Russians hacked the Facebook accounts of Ukrainian military leaders to send messages urging their troops to surrender. “The Russians are trying to erode the Ukrainians’ will to fight,” she said.

Lilly also stressed the importance for the United States as well as Ukraine to practice cyber civil defense: Training the population to recognize disinformation and be aware that they could be a target. The Russian government has a military doctrine that stipulates “every single one of us is a target. I think that message has to be made very clear,” she said.

COVID-19 Vaccination Mandate Still an Issue Across the Sea Services



Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Joseph Casassa, assigned to USS Gerald R. Ford's (CVN 78) dental department, administers a COVID-19 vaccine at the McCormick Gym onboard Naval Station Norfolk, April 8, 2021. The Defense Department is now authorizing the use of Novavax COVID-19 vaccinations for service members. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Jackson Adkins*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Seven cadets at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy who refused to comply with the military's COVID-19 vaccination mandate were disenrolled and ordered off the school's New London, Connecticut, campus in late August.

"While the seven cadets have been disenrolled, they have not been separated from the Coast Guard Academy and are continuing to receive cadet pay and entitlements until their separation

is processed," the Coast Guard said in a statement sent to *Seapower* Sept. 8.

Two days after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's Aug. 24, 2021, mandate requiring COVID-19 vaccine for all service members to protect the force and maintain readiness, the Coast Guard announced a vaccination requirement.

Fifteen cadets filed medical exemption or religious accommodation requests in September 2021. They were evaluated on a case-by-case basis by the Coast Guard's Office of Military Personnel Policy and denied. The 15 cadets were notified March 14, 2022, and given 10 business days to file an appeal. The appeals were denied by Coast Guard Headquarters and all 15 were directed to report to the Academy clinic for their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Four chose vaccination, four others resigned from the Academy, the Coast Guard said.

On June 13, the remaining seven cadets were told they were "in violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice Article 90, Willfully disobeying a superior commissioned officer, and Article 92, Failure to obey [an] order or regulation," according to the statement. They were given an additional five days to comply. On June 22, they were notified of their disenrollment and given a chance to appeal to Coast Guard Headquarters. The cadets were notified Aug. 15 their disenrollment appeals were denied and were directed "to proceed to an alternate worksite status beginning on August 19th, 2022."

All seven "departed the Academy at their own convenience on August 19" based on their individual travel arrangements assisted by Academy staff. "All seven cadets are currently residing at a safe location, having either returned to their families or are being hosted by the families of fellow cadets," according to the Coast Guard statement.

Several federal lawsuits are challenging the military's process for granting religious exemptions from the vaccination mandate, including two in South Carolina and Texas involving some of the dismissed Coast Guard cadets.

Almost 5,000 Sailors and Marines have been separated from the sea services since late 2021 for vaccination refusal. The Navy has received 4,251 for religious accommodation, the Marines 3,733. Only a handful have been approved. However, a federal judge in Texas certified a class action by Sailors, including several Navy SEALs, seeking a religious exemption and issued a preliminary injunction March 30, halting separation for members of the class. A similar injunction was issued against the Marine Corps Aug. 18 by a federal judge in Florida.

A coalition of more than 20 state attorneys general has filed an amicus brief before the 5th U.S. Court of Appeals, supporting the religious liberty claims of Navy SEALs seeking exemptions from the mandatory vaccination requirement in the Texas case. While lower courts have blocked separation of vaccine refusers, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled the Navy could consider a Sailor's vaccination status in making deployment and other operational decisions while court challenges move through the system.

As of Aug. 31, the latest Defense Department COVID-19 statistics, 1.99 million service members have been fully vaccinated, including 387,477 in the Navy and 200,435 in the Marine Corps.

Nevertheless, as of Aug. 24, 3,000 active duty Sailors and 3,376 in the Ready Reserve remain unvaccinated. The Marine Corps' latest COVID update doesn't give specific figures, only stating that as of Aug. 4, just 5% of both the active duty and the reserve force were not vaccinated.

Novavax Arrives

In a related development, the Defense Department announced Aug. 29 a new COVID-19 vaccine, Novavax, will be available as an option at military clinics. Officials hope Novavax, which is approved by the Food and Drug Administration under an emergency use authorization for individuals 12 years of age and older, may be more acceptable to the thousands of troops who have refused the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines for religious or moral reasons.

Novavax uses technology that has been used in other vaccines required by the military, like hepatitis B vaccine. Novavax is not made with, or tested on, cells from fetal tissue. It does not use mRNA or DNA technology and does not enter the nucleus of cells, Pentagon officials said.

"We now have a range of COVID-19 vaccines available at our military medical treatment facilities and they all provide strong protection against hospitalization, severe illness and death," Dr. Michael Malanoski, deputy director of the Defense Health Agency, said in a statement. However, as in the early days of the three other vaccines, the FDA's emergency use authorization approval means service members cannot be compelled to take Novavax.