

# COVID Challenges Toughened 7th Fleet Sailors, Vice Adm. Merz Says



U.S. Navy Vice Adm. Bill Merz, then commander of U.S. 7th fleet, addressed Carrier Strike Group Nine warfare commanders on the pier in Naval Base Guam April 5, 2020. Merz arrived in Guam to assess and support the ongoing COVID-19 recovery efforts for the crew of USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71). *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Kaylianna Genier*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The coronavirus pandemic may have disrupted normal operations and planned training exercises over the last two years, but it drove U.S. Navy and Marine Corps units in the Indo-Pacific to work together and solve problems under trying conditions, a former 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet commander says.

Outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus sidelined some warships, like the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, and extended at-sea deployments for all the rest, “but a lot of good came out

of it if you put it in context," Vice Admiral William Merz, the deputy chief of naval operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy (N3/N5), told the National Defense Industrial Association's virtual Expeditionary Warfare Conference Feb. 9.

Merz, who commanded the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet before assuming his N3/N5 role, told online viewers they should be "celebrating the Sailors, how they just came alive under those oppressive conditions, coming together against this common enemy. I'll tell you, COVID's probably the best thing that's happened to 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, at least in recent memory. It allowed us to stay together as a fleet, we pretty much stayed at sea the entire time, undistracted."

Because of COVID restrictions on travel, Merz said he cut his routine trips to Washington way back, "so it allowed me to engage very heavily" with all parts of the fleet. He kept the amphibious command ship USS Blue Ridge (LCC-19), usually based at Japan's Yokosuka Naval Base, at sea for a total of 200 days during his last 15 months at 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, using its flight deck to helicopter around his command.

Once counter-virus practices were in place aboard ships, Merz said he was able to move his expeditionary force around the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet area of responsibility at sea undistracted. Other U.S. and allied naval vessels kept China's People's Liberation Army Navy from taking advantage of the Roosevelt's absence from the sea, he noted.

Construction projects and test concepts like unmanned undersea vehicles kept on track even more efficiently because exercises and other distractions were canceled during the height of the pandemic, Merz said.

"Probably most revealing was the time period that I had the Theodore Roosevelt in Guam coordinating her recovery," he said. "The whole world is benefiting from the lessons we

learned from that large scale but very focused recovery, and we had doctors from all over the globe coming to study how we moved through that.”

Commander, Task Force 75, based in Guam, built two expeditionary hospitals on the island and reopened the hotels closed by the pandemic, to treat, quarantine and house the 5,000 crew members disembarked from the Roosevelt while it was sanitized. CTF 75 also provided security and logistics for those facilities, Merz said.

CTF 75 also constructed two bubble liberty ports on Guam and Okinawa, as well as a backup one in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. “This just proved to be a life saver” and not just for the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, Merz said. Naval vessels from South Korea, Japan, France, Britain and Malaysia also made stops at the COVID-free bubbles to enjoy beer, pizza and the beach facilities.

“It just became this wonderful resetting for the crews, who were heavily stressed, not just by the virus or what was going on at home, but the much longer at-sea periods that we levied on them to make sure that once they were cleaned, they stayed clean,” Merz said.

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## **Commandant Sees Bigger Role for Marine Raiders in Great Power Competition**



Marine Raiders rehearse advanced military free fall jumps at Camp Lejeune, N.C., Sept. 1, 2021. Military free fall sustainment training is necessary for a Marine special operations team to stay proficient and ready at all times for future operations. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Ethan Green*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Like the rest of U.S. Special Operations Command, Marine Raiders will have a bigger role to play in the military's competition with a rising China and resurgent Russia, the Marine Corps commandant says.

After 20 years with a heavy focus on counter insurgency and counter terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan and other flashpoints around the globe, "I do see a bigger role for them and probably an adjusted role," Gen. David Berger said Feb. 8 at the National Defense Industrial Association's virtual Expeditionary Warfare Conference.

"Now, how do we use special operations forces in great power competition?" Berger said, adding he thought Marine Special Operations Command would follow a similar path as the rest of the Marine Corps in the near future, "Back to naval roots. How

does it support the naval expeditionary forces forward?"

Among their roles, Marine Raider units train, advise and assist friendly host nation forces, including naval and maritime military and paramilitary forces. The aim is to help local forces support their governments' internal security and stability, counter subversion and reduce the risk of violence from internal and external threats, according to the MARSOC website.

"Their great value," Berger said "is their persistent presence forward" as well as their deeper cultural understanding and language skills in the places they operate. "Conventional forces don't normally have any of that. They also don't have the finer, nuanced, higher level skills that MARSOC Marines have, and I'm not talking about kicking down a door," he said.

Instead, he meant Raiders' skills in collecting information and intelligence in a discreet manner while deployed far forward. "If you married that up with a higher performing infantry battalion or conventional force, you will have the best of all worlds," he said.

In late January, Marines from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Raider Battalion worked with the 8<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on close-quarters battle training, including hallway and stairwell clearing procedures and sensitive site exploitation. The three-day training session at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, sought to improve cooperation among the conventional Fleet Marine Force and Special Operations Forces.

Going forward, Berger believed MARSOC, like the entire Corps, would have to adjust their focus from 90% counterinsurgency and counter terrorism to "a much better balance of integrated deterrence, campaigning, crisis response, in other words, meeting us somewhere in the littorals, where the Corps' skillset strength is."



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# Navy, Marine Corps Dismissals for Declining COVID-19 Vaccination on the Rise



Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro talks with Chief Engineman Stephen Bashore, aboard the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Milwaukee (LCS 5) in Ponce, Puerto Rico, Jan. 25. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class T. Logan Keown

ARLINGTON, Va. – The number of U.S. Marines and Sailors dismissed from the services for refusing vaccination against COVID-19 has grown to well over 600, officials say.

On Feb. 2, the Navy announced it has dismissed 118 Sailors, 96 active duty and 22 recruits who had served less than 180 days. All have received honorable discharges, according to the Navy. No reservists have been dismissed to date.

The next day, the Marine Corps reported 469 uniformed personnel have been separated from the service for incomplete vaccination. According to Marine Corps guidance, any active duty Marine who did not receive a final vaccination dose, by Nov. 14, 2021, or reservist by Dec. 14, 2021 "is considered unvaccinated."

According to Defense Department statistics, 194,689 active duty and reserve Marines were fully vaccinated by Feb. 2 and 384,586 Sailors and reservists met full vaccination requirements. Both the Navy and Marine Corps, as well as the Pentagon, consider COVID-19 a readiness issue requiring full vaccination for all military personnel.

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro became the latest Pentagon official to test positive for COVID-19 on Jan. 31. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Mark Milley, all tested positive in early January.

Del Toro, who was fully vaccinated and had received a booster shot, said he would quarantine for a minimum of five days in accordance with the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. He planned to attend key meetings and discussions virtually and when necessary, be represented by Meredith Berger performing the duties of undersecretary of the Navy.

The Navy has granted 269 Sailors medical exemptions to mandatory vaccination, all but 10 of them temporary. The nine medical exemptions granted reservists were all temporary. By Feb. 2, the Navy also granted 60 administrative exemptions for active duty Sailors and 23 for reservists. However, not a single request for exemption from vaccination on religious grounds, has been granted to any of the 3,288 active duty Sailors and 773 reservists who requested one.

The Marine Corps reported a combined 665 administrative or

medical exemptions had been approved by Feb. 2. Of 3,538 requests for religious accommodation to skip the vaccine mandate, 3,414 have been processed and only three requests were approved. The Marines are the only armed service, so far, to issue a religious exemption for the vaccine mandate. In a letter to Rep. Darrell Issa (R-California), first reported by Military.com, a Marine Corps official explained that even those three Marines granted religious accommodation were, in effect, no longer serving or soon leaving the Marine Corps.

The high rejection numbers for exemption requests, particularly for religious accommodation, have sparked numerous complaints to members of Congress that they are being handled in a pro forma review with nearly identical rejection letters.

That prompted Issa, a highly vocal critic of the Pentagon's vaccination mandate, to write Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger Jan. 17 for an explanation of the exemption process. In a statement released by his office, Issa said the vaccine mandate "is ending careers of distinction, ruining lives of service, and weakening America's force readiness. This isn't how the military wants to treat its own – it's how the president and his team show their unprecedented hostility to our men and women in uniform. I will not stand for this betrayal."

Issa and 14 other House Republicans have written House Appropriations Committee Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-Connecticut) urging funding for the vaccination mandate be prohibited in any pending defense spending bill.

In a Jan. 21 letter to Issa, J.J. Daly, deputy legislative assistant in the Marines' Office of Legislative Affairs, explained that of the three Marines who received a religious exemption, two were "on terminal leave" and the other "has transitioned into the Department of Defense Skill Bridge Program, a 180-day training program in private industry."



Marine Corps leadership determined that “the likelihood of their vaccination status impacting military readiness and health and safety was remote because the requestors are no longer serving with Marine Corps commands.”

He noted chaplains counsel every Marine who submits a religious accommodation request and provide advice to the adjudication authority for each request. However, “the ultimate question is whether or not approving the request will have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, good order and discipline, or health and safety. This is a decision that requires consideration of factors that fall outside the expertise of a trained chaplain,” Daly wrote.

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## **Navy Tweaks Guidance for COVID Shipboard Measures to Comply with Updated CDC Advice**



A group of first class petty officers take the Navy-Wide Advancement Exam at Commander, Fleet Activities Sasebo, Jan. 25. In alignment with Navy guidance, CFAS Sailors are taking the NWAEE over a three-day testing period allowing for smaller groups of test takers to maintain adequate social distancing as part of continued COVID-19 mitigations. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Jeremy Graham*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy has updated guidance to commanders for keeping COVID-19 infections off ships, and what to do if prevention measures fail.

The latest Standardized Operation Guidance (5.0), issued by Vice Adm. William Merz, deputy chief of Naval Operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy, makes changes to how long Sailors testing positive for the coronavirus must be isolated based on the latest recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The guidance, issued Jan. 15, includes information for commanders on restriction of movement, when to test and quarantine Sailors. It also streamlines health protection measures for ships.

After the massive COVID outbreak on the USS Theodore Roosevelt

in 2020 that sidelined the carrier in Guam for months, Navy leadership determined “that our guidance to our commanding officers was insufficient, that we really needed to be much more detailed, that we had to consult with scientists and environmental experts” on how to operate effectively in a contained environment during a pandemic, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday told the Surface Navy Association symposium Jan. 11,

“It is my responsibility to deliver the most capable force and this guidance helps us maximize mission readiness,” Merz said in an Aug. 26 statement about the new guidance. “Vaccinations, vaccine boosters, command engagement, and personal accountability are the foundation of our success in fighting COVID.”

The announcement came the same day the Navy revealed it had dismissed another 23 Sailors for refusing vaccination, bringing the total to 45 kicked out since the vaccination deadline expired in late 2021.

The Navy’s new guidance, which applies to all uniformed Navy personnel “at home and deployed,” cuts isolation time for Sailors testing positive for COVID but showing no, or greatly improving, symptoms – such as no fever for 24 hours – to five days, although they must wear masks for another five days to minimize the risk of infecting others.

The CDC said the change “is motivated by science demonstrating that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurs early in the course of illness, generally in the 1-2 days prior to onset of symptoms and the 2-3 days after.” While vaccine booster shots are not yet required, the Navy guidance recommended them “because all studies are converging on the need for a vaccine booster to ensure enduring protection.” The booster “has essentially become the next-shot in a series and will likely become mandatory in the near future,” according to the guidance.

However, the guidance asserted that Navy Surgeon General Rear Adm. Bruce Gillingham is the authority for Navy COVID-19 measures. Changes in CDC guidance on virus behavior should first be evaluated by Gillingham “prior to fleet implementation.”

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## Navy Still Plans to Start New Frigate Construction in April 2022



Then-Secretary of the Navy Kenneth J. Braithwaite announces USS Constellation (FFG 62) as the name for the first ship in the new guided missile frigate class of ships while aboard the museum ship Constellation in Baltimore Inner Harbor, Baltimore, Md., Oct. 7, 2020. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication*

### *Specialist 2nd Class Levingston Lewis*

ARLINGTON, Va. – As the first new U.S. Navy frigate works its way through detailed and functional design phases, officials still plan an April start for building the lead ship of the Constellation class.

“Right now, as far as construction, we’re targeting that date,” Capt. Kevin Smith, the frigate program manager told a briefing at the Surface Navy Association annual symposium. However, “there could be some risk to that [during the detailed design phase] but we’re looking hard at that,” he said, adding, “the one thing that we want to make sure of is, that we don’t start building a ship where the design is not mature.”

After the design phases are completed, a critical design review and a production readiness review are slated to follow in fiscal 2022. Only “then, when we’re ready” will construction begin on what will become the USS Constellation guided missile frigate (FFG 62), Smith told the Jan. 11 briefing.

The Navy began the acquisition process for a new multi-mission frigate FFG(X) in 2017, awarding a \$795 million detailed design and construction contract in April 2020 to Marinette Marine, a Fincantieri company based in Marinette, Wisconsin. Marinette based its design on the Fincantieri FREMM frigate, which is in service with the French and Italian navies.

Among the capital improvements Fincantieri is making at Marinette to accommodate the first frigate’s construction is a syncrolift platform to move the 496-foot hull from dry land into the water. Unlike the littoral combat ships Marinette is building in Wisconsin, the Constellation will be too big for a side launch down a slipway. Frigate construction will be in Marinette’s Building 34, the new hull erection building, which Smith predicted would be a game changer. Big enough to accommodate two full-size frigate hulls and one-third of

another, it will allow work to continue indoors during Wisconsin winters. The frigate will be “probably close to near completion before they float it off,” and move on to integration of the propulsion plant and combat systems, Smith said.

The frigate will have a combination diesel electric and gas turbine propulsion system, which will be tried and assessed at a Land Based Engineering Test Site being built near the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Philadelphia. Testing on land will feature a full configuration of the frigate’s power plant so “we’re not learning at the waterfront where it’s a little more expensive” to fix problems, Smith said.

The Constellation will also have a beam of 64.6 feet, a draft of 18 feet and a fully loaded displacement of 7,300 tons. “The only thing aluminum on this ship is the mast. Everything else is steel,” Smith said.

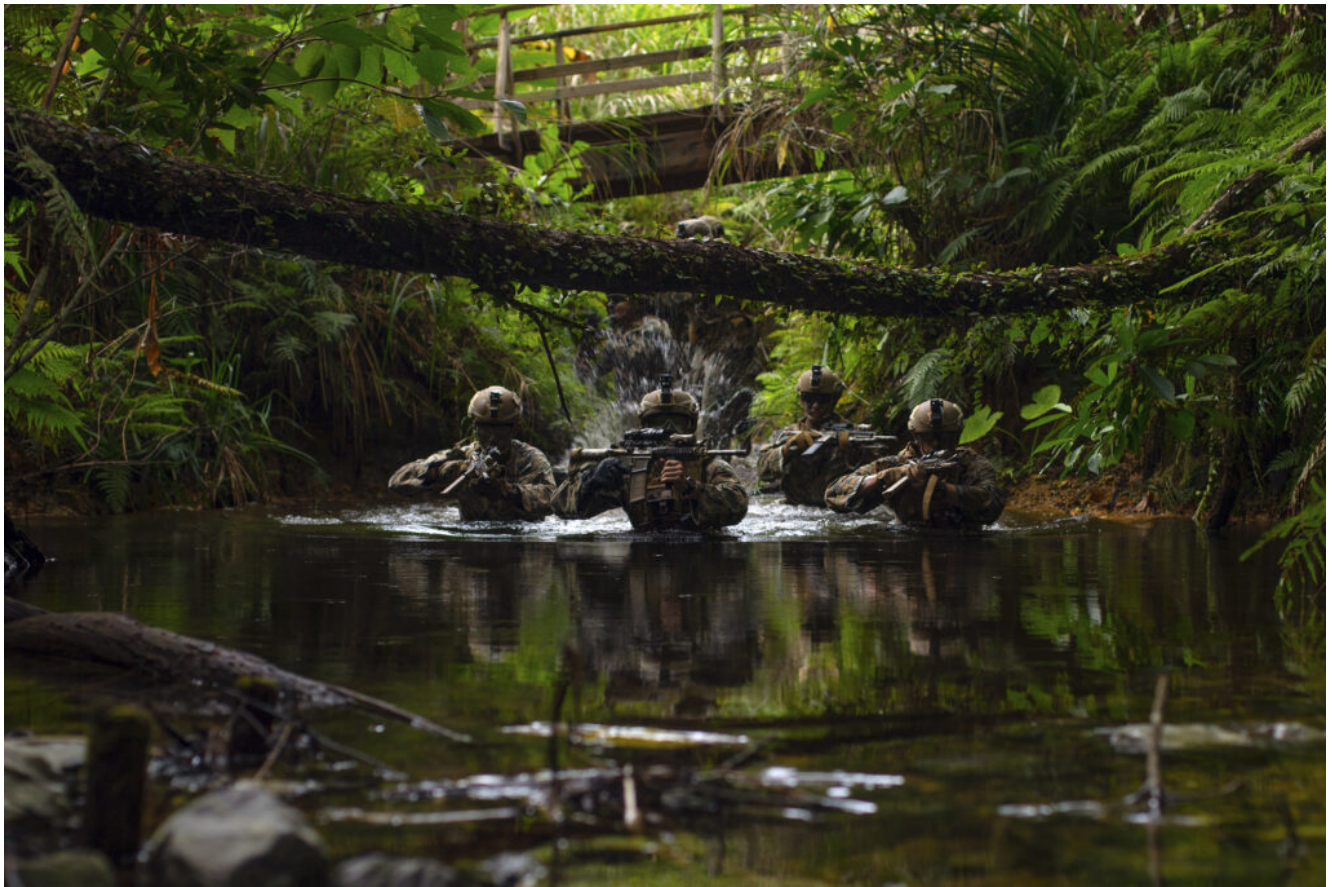
The layout is very similar to the FREMM frigate, although to meet U.S. Navy standards for reliability, survivability, maintainability, habitability and lethality, Fincantieri designers “had to lengthen the hull a bit” before submitting their proposal, Smith said. The only changes the Navy made after awarding the contract were to include “buy America” provisions mandated by Congress, he said.

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## **General: Undersea Domain Critical to Marines’ Role as**



# Maritime Chokepoint Defenders



Marines participate in a squad competition at Camp Gonsalves, Okinawa, Japan, Jan. 6, 2022. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. Jonathan Willcox*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps' role in distributed maritime operations will require technology that can identify underwater threats as well as dangers posed by surface vessels and long range aircraft and missiles, a top commander says.

Speaking Jan. 13 at the Surface Navy Association's annual symposium in Arlington, Lt. Gen. Karsten S. Heckl, head of the Marine Corps Combat Development Command and deputy commandant for Combat Development and Integration, explained the Marines' evolving expeditionary warfare role in the Navy strategy for dealing with potential adversaries in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept envisions littoral operations by specialized mobile, low signature units within larger distributed maritime operations areas. New

Marine Littoral Regiments “uniquely designed to maneuver and persist inside a contested maritime environment,” will have a primary mission “to conduct sea control and denial operations as part of a larger naval expeditionary force,” Heckl said. Equipped with rockets, missiles and other long range fires, as well as surface and amphibious craft to increase their mobility, EABO units will control access to choke points while limiting an adversary’s ability to target them.

But “if you’re telling me that we’re going to occupy and control – sea control, sea denial – critical maritime slots, that means probably more critical than anything, the undersea domain,” Heckl said.

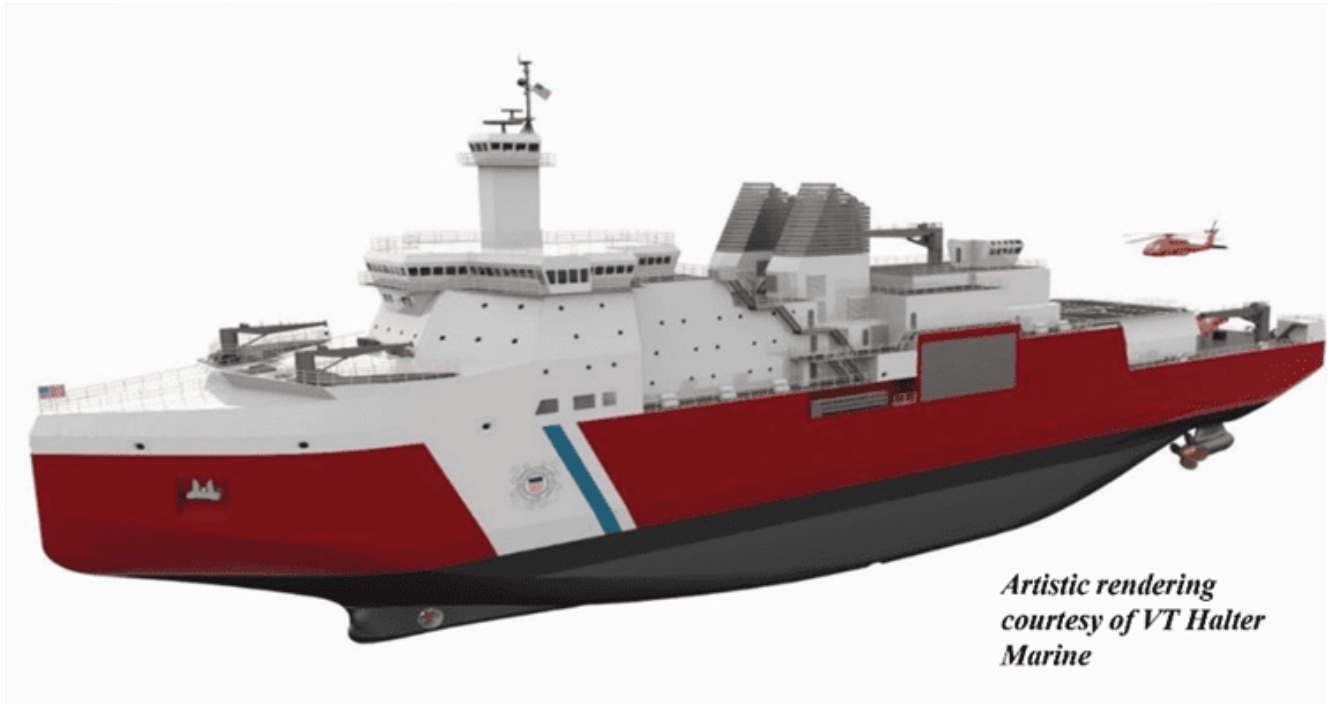
Drawing on his experience as a former commander of I Marine Expeditionary Force, Heckl said, “there are things that exist today to sense underwater. Not expensive, persistent, in fact for the price of probably one P-8 I could sense the majority of the first island chain.”

The subsurface is very important, Heckl said. “We are continuing efforts on that in conjunction with [Marine Corps commandant’s] force design.” A “kill web” of Navy and Marine Corps sea-based and land-based sensors and shooters that gives “a fleet commander the capability to sense a critical slot or a critical piece of maritime terrain, and not have to use a capital asset is pretty significant.”

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**USCG      Commandant:      COVID,  
Design      Complexity      Added**

# Construction Delays to Polar Security Cutter



A rendering of the U.S. Coast Guard's forthcoming Polar Security Cutter. *U.S. COAST GUARD*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The coronavirus pandemic and the complexity of building the first U.S. heavy ice breaker in nearly 40 years were among the reasons for another year's delay in the expected delivery of the Polar Security Cutter, Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz said Jan. 12.

"We have publicly stated that the delivery date for Polar Security Cutter number one is going to be May 2025, so it slipped about a year," Schultz told an audience at the Surface Navy Association's annual symposium in Arlington. Originally, officials thought the PSC program of record for three heavy ice breakers, with two already fully funded, would begin rolling vessels starting in 2023.

"It's just a complex thing. COVID really layered in some challenges there," Schultz said, adding that the United States hasn't built a heavy ice breaker "in the better part of four-plus decades." He noted the new vessel requires "complex steel

work that shipyards don't necessarily do every day." There also were some issues with international partnerships.

The operational U.S. polar icebreaking fleet currently consists of one heavy polar icebreaker, Polar Star, built in 1976, and one medium polar icebreaker, Healy, which is also used for polar research.

"It's tough to be an Arctic nation when you have one heavy [ice] breaker that's almost 50 years old and one medium breaker that's really science," Schultz said.

Since the 2013 U.S. [National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#) described the United States as "an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests," the Coast Guard, Navy and other armed services have developed strategies for operating in the northern polar region. Melting sea ice has turned the top of the world into a potential economic, diplomatic and military flash point as sea lanes have opened up increased commercial sea lanes in summer to large cargo ships, fishing fleets, oil and gas exploration and tourism.

"I think the goal right now would be to continue to work with the Navy Integrated Project Office, continue to work with the shipbuilder, finish up the complex, detailed design and start cutting steel here in 2022," Schultz said, adding "I think if we stay at that track line, I am guardedly optimistic we'll take delivery of that ship in 2025 and be off to the races."

In the meantime, Schultz said the Coast Guard has been sending its larger cutters into the high latitudes to participate in exercises with partners like France, Canada, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

"It's one of those places where very few of the Arctic nations, outside of Russia have a whole lot of capacity, Schultz said, noting that Russia currently holds the chairmanship of both the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard organization.



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# Navy Secretary Sees Climate Change, Illegal Fishing as Global Maritime Security Challenges



USCGC Stone (WMSL 758) patrols high seas observing fishing activity to support Operation Southern Cross in the South Atlantic, Feb. 6, 2021. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 3rd Class John Hightower*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Linking climate change’s impact on trade, fishing, energy and employment with the economic and environmental toll of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, U.S. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro says the world’s “blue economy” has never been more important or more

challenging.

“From climate change to illegal and unreported fishing, the environmental challenges facing our oceans are global challenges that require truly a global response,” Del Toro told an ocean security forum at a Washington think tank Dec. 16.

The Navy secretary told a live audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and others watching remotely, that the Navy-Marine Corps team “is determined to do our part.”

The World Bank defines the blue economy as the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem.”

On climate change, Del Toro said the marine environment is under threat from receding shorelines, melting sea ice, extreme weather and “a more aggressive competition for resources” like fish stocks and underwater energy and mineral deposits.

Prompted by President Joe Biden and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s concerns about the climate challenge, Del Toro said the Navy Department, among other actions, is implementing hybrid technology to power five classes of combat ships and eight classes of logistics ships, purchasing zero emission vehicles and assessing a renewable energy system at Marine Air Station Miramar, California, to reduce reliance on San Diego’s power grid.

Del Toro said IUUF is having “profoundly destabilizing effects on many regions. This is happening on an industrial scale as nations like China not only refuse to restrain their distant waters fishing fleet, but actively subsidize the devastation they’re actively causing,” he said.



IUUF has taken such a toll on the economies of small maritime nations and world fish stocks – while increasing geo-political tensions and spawning instability – that the U.S. Coast Guard says it's a greater security threat today than piracy at sea.

The combined Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard Maritime Strategy includes IUUF as part of the threat posed by near peer competitors China and Russia. The document notes China's "state-subsidized distant water fishing fleet steals vital resources from nations unable to defend their own exclusive economic zones."

Del Toro noted Coast Guard law enforcement teams have been deployed aboard several Navy ships as part of the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative.

Also speaking at the forum, Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz said his agency has taken an increasing leadership role in building trust and partnerships with foreign maritime states, particularly with the small island nations of the Pacific who lack the resources to enforce sovereignty over their resources and waters. Ocean-going Coast Guard cutters have trained partner nation coastal protection forces and aided them with situational awareness.

He noted the National Security Cutter Stone (WMSL 758), on its first voyage sailed down the east coast of South America, partnering with the maritime forces of Guyana and Brazil, and later with Ecuador and Colombia on the Pacific coast.

The Coast Guard, with approximately 57,000 personnel, does not have the capacity to be "the world's fish cops," Schultz said, "but I think we could bring some leadership. We could stitch together partners. We have a recognized brand that's sort of known across the globe."

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# Corps Discharging 103 Marines for Refusing COVID vaccine; Navy to Separate Sailors Who Stay Unvaccinated



Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Cory Troche, left, assigned to the “Blue Blasters” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 34, administers a COVID-19 booster vaccination to Aviation Electronics Mate 3rd Class Mark Galloway, assigned to the “Sunliners” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 81, aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75).

*U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication 3rd Class Bela Chambers*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Marine Corps has discharged 103 Marines for refusing to be vaccinated against the coronavirus COVID-19, officials announced Dec. 16.

“Per Marine Corps policy (MARADMINs 462/21, 533/21, and 612/21), any active-duty Marine and Ready Reserve Marine in an active duty status who did not receive a final vaccination dose by Nov. 14 is considered unvaccinated,” Maj. Jim Stenger, a Marine Corps spokesperson, said in a statement. “All unvaccinated Marines without a pending or approved administrative exemption, medical exemption, or religious accommodation, or appeal, will be processed for administrative separation.”

Marine Corps guidance directed units to document a specific code in the Marine Corps Total Force System upon separation for vaccine refusal. “To date, 103 Marines have been separated from the Marine Corps with the vaccine refusal discharge code,” Stenger’s statement noted.

The Marines’ decision came a day after the Navy announced plans to remove Sailors who refuse to comply with the Navy’s vaccine mandate. In addition to separation from the service, Sailors and officers rejecting vaccination will not be eligible to promote or advance. Enlisted personnel will not be able to re-enlist and could lose education benefits and bonus pay. As of Dec. 16, 2021, 5,472 active component Sailors remain unvaccinated, according to the Navy.

The Navy removed the executive officer of the Arleigh Burke-class missile destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill for rejecting COVID vaccination and refusing to be tested for the virus.

In late August, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, with the approval of President Joe Biden, ordered mandatory COVID vaccines for all U.S. military personnel. Both the Navy and Marine Corps set a Nov. 28 deadline for active duty Sailors and Marines to be fully vaccinated.

“The Marine Corps recognizes COVID-19 as a readiness issue. The speed with which the disease transmits among individuals has increased risk to our Marines and the Marine

Corps' mission," Stenger's statement says.

As of Dec. 15, 94% of the active duty Marine Corps is fully vaccinated, with 95% at least partially vaccinated. Marine Corps Reserve components account for 81% fully vaccinated and 84% at least partially vaccinated. That was a big jump from Nov. 5, when Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger expressed concern that 56% of Marines in the Ready Reserve had not been vaccinated and faced a Dec. 28 deadline to do so. "We are one Marine Corps, active duty and Reserve, so it is important for them to get vaccinated as well," Berger said.

Both the Marine Corps and the Navy require active and reserve component service members to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, unless medically or administratively exempt. The Marines report there have been 1,007 approved exemptions.

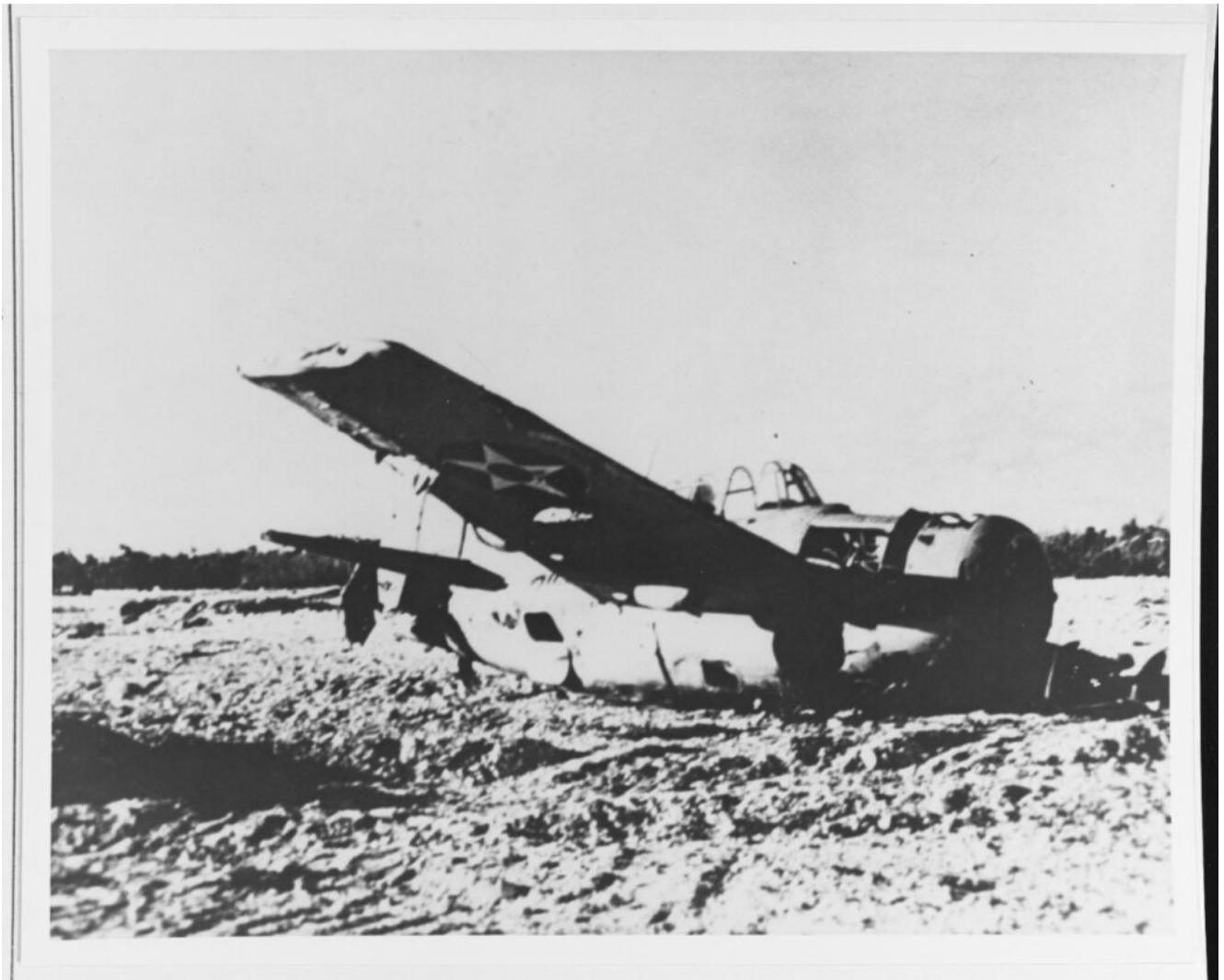
There have been 3,144 requests for religious accommodation to avoid the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. At this time, 2,863 have been processed and zero requests have been approved, according to Stenger.

The Navy has granted seven permanent medical exemptions, 296 temporary medical exemptions, 216 administrative exemptions and zero religious accommodation requests for vaccine exemptions. None of the 2,751 active-duty requests for a religious accommodation from COVID immunization have been granted.

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## **Berger: Pacific Stand-In**

# Forces Will Rely on Allies, Joint Force Sensors to Avoid Another Wake Island



Wreckage of a U.S. Marine Corps F4F-3, Photographed on Wake following its capture by the Japanese on Dec. 23, 1941.  
*NATIONAL ARCHIVES*

ARLINGTON, Va. — Marine Corps Stand-In Forces are needed in the contested sea lanes and littorals of the Western Pacific as the leading edge of a maritime defense-in-depth that can disrupt the plans of potential adversaries, according to the Corps' commandant.

The Marine Corps recently released A Concept for Stand-in Forces, which maintains that small but lethal, resilient,

forward-postured forces, operating in contested areas – capable of transitioning rapidly from competition to crisis to conflict and back again – can extend the reach of the fleet and joint force.

Depending solely on a stand-off force of large vessels 1,000 miles away from China “works right into their strategy,” Gen. David Berger told a Dec. 14 virtual “fireside chat” with the Center for New American Security, a Washington think tank. “They’ll be exactly where they want to be five years from now.”

The People’s Liberation Army Navy likes to build a bubble or shield within a contested area, Berger said, and “push it way, way out and then operate without being seen. That’s perfect for them. That’s what happened in the South China Sea.”

That’s why a stand-in force of small, highly mobile Marine expeditionary units, dispersed in contested areas by numerous smaller, cheaper, low signature surface vessels is necessary, Berger said. “How are you going to sense what’s in front of us every day? How are we going to assure our partners and allies? We have to be there, up close and forward”. The concept paper said Stand-In Forces would be supplied by expeditionary advanced bases.

Berger was asked how such forward-deployed units, even armed with long-range precision fires, could avoid a fate like the advanced naval and air base at Wake Island, which fell to the Japanese 80 years ago.

“Wake Island only happened because we couldn’t see it coming early enough. We have to be forward as a Stand-In Force. We have to be the eyes and ears of the joint force,” Berger said.

Wake Island, an uninhabited atoll in the Central Pacific, more than 2,000 miles west of Hawaii, was home to a half completed aircraft and submarine base in early December 1941, as war with Japan threatened. Wake was defended by an understrength



battalion of 449 Marines, a handful of Navy and Army personnel and a dozen Marine Corps Grumman F4F Wildcats, all but four of them destroyed in a Japanese air raid just hours after Pearl Harbor was attacked. The base had no radar equipment.

Marine shore batteries and the remaining Wildcats repulsed a Japanese naval assault on Dec. 11. Two Japanese destroyers and a submarine were sunk, 21 aircraft shot down and several other Japanese vessels were damaged. However, Wake Island's defenders were overrun by a second naval assault and surrendered on Dec. 23, 1941. Before the surrender, a Navy task force sent as relief mission to Wake was recalled under still controversial circumstances.

"The chance of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Wake Island goes up if we do not have the ability to do sensing forward, the ability to strip away an adversary's eyes and ears," Berger said, calling for reconnaissance measures that would also counter Chinese surveillance efforts. "The balance of sensors has to be from the satellite all the way down to terrestrial. All of it, so that nothing happens in front of us without us knowing it, without us understanding it."

"The Stand-In Force that we're working on isn't just Marines," the commandant said. It could also include the Coast Guard and Special Operations, he said. "It could be the subsurface fleet, allies and partners – all of them forward – and Wake Island doesn't happen."