Marine Corps Deactivates Two Helo Squadrons, One Temporarily

U.S. Marines with 3D Radio Battalion prepare for transport by CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters assigned to HMH-463 at "LZ Kutree," Hawaii, Dec. 13, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Dalton J. Payne*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Marine Corps has deactivated two helicopter squadrons in its march toward Force Design 2030, but one of the squadrons will be reactivated later this year, the service said.

Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 (HMH-463) — a CH-53E Super Stallion squadron known as Pegasus — was deactivated on April 21 at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. The unit, which had been based in Hawaii since 1971, had been drawing down over the year and transferring its helicopters to other squadrons.

Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 (HMLA-367) — a

unit known as Scarface – had operated AH-1Z Viper and UH-1Y Venom helicopters from Kaneohe Bay since 2012. It was deactivated on April 22, also at Kaneohe Bay.

However, HMLA-367 will be reactivated later this year at Marine Corps Air Station Camp Pendleton, California, where four other HMLA squadrons are stationed with Marine Aircraft Group 39.

The two squadrons are the second and third to be deactivated as part of Force Design 2030, the Marine Corps concept to build a lighter, more agile force able to operate and survive inside an enemy's targeting zone. An MV-22B Osprey squadron, Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 166 (VMM-166), was deactivated late last year.

The Corps still maintains two MV-22B squadrons at Kaneohe Bay – VMM-268 and VMM-363 – with Marine Aircraft Group 24. The service plans to establish a new KC-130J Super Hercules squadron at Kaneohe Bay to support the mobility of Marine forces in the Pacific.

Marine Corps' King Stallion Ready to Run

U.S. Marines with Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 461 taxi in a CH-53K King Stallion after its first operational flight at Marine Corps Air Station New River, North Carolina, April 13. The flight signified the beginning of HMH-461's modernization from the CH-53E Super Stallion to the CH-53K King Stallion. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. Elias E. Pimentel III*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Marine Corps' new CH-53K King Stallion heavy-lift helicopter achieved initial operational capability on April 22, Deputy Commandant for Aviation Lt. Gen. Mark Wise said in an April 25 release.

The first fleet CH-53K squadron, HMH-461, now has at least four CH-53Ks, the minimum number needed to reach IOC and the number needed for a detachment to deploy with a Marine Expeditionary Unit.

"In addition to meeting IOC criteria, the CH-53K successfully completed a thorough initial operational test and evaluation period that resulted in over 3,000 mishap free hours flown in various challenging environments and terrain," the release

said.

“My full confidence in the CH-53K’s ability to execute the heavy lift mission is the result of successful developmental and operational testing conducted by Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (HX) 21 and Marine Operational Test and Evaluation Squadron (VMX) 1,” Wise said in the release.

The first deployment of the CH-53K is set for 2024. The Corps plans to field 5.25 fleet HMH squadrons with CH-53Ks. Col. Jack Perrin, the CH-53K program manager, told reporters earlier this month the “.25” is an extra four aircraft for one of the squadrons, with each of the other four squadrons to be equipped with 16 helicopters. Other CH-53Ks will be assigned to a fleet replacement squadron and test squadrons, while others will be in process through the maintenance pipeline.

The Marine Corps’ seven HMH squadrons equipped with the older CH-53E in recent years have operated with only 12 helicopters instead of 16 because of attrition over the years. One CH-53E squadron was deactivated last week and two more will be deactivated in the course of the commandant’s Force Design 2030 plan.

“The success to date of the CH-53K is a reflection of the hard work and effort by the Marines, Sailors and civilians at VMX-1, H-53 Program Office [PMA-261] and Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron [HMH] 461, and the support we have received over many years from across the Department of the Navy and our industry partners,” Wise said.

The CH-53K is capable of providing nearly three times the lift capability of the CH-53E.

“The most notable attribute of the King Stallion is its ability to maintain increased performance margins in a degraded aeronautical environment, for example at higher altitudes, hotter climates and carrying up to 27,000 [pounds] out to 110 nautical miles; whereas, the CH-53E would be

limited to a 9,628-pound external load in the same environment," the release said.

"The King Stallion boasts an engine that produces 57% more horsepower with 63% fewer parts relative to its predecessor, which translates to an expanded capability to deliver internal and external cargo loads, providing the commander a mobility and sustainment capability the MAGTF [Marine Air-Ground Task Force] has never had before."

Supporting the Corps' Force Design 2030, "the CH-53K will complement connectors that will enable littoral maneuver and provide logistical support to a widely disaggregated naval force."

The Marine Corps has a requirement for 200 CH-53Ks. Full-rate production is planned for 2023. Full operational capability is scheduled for 2029.

Navy Proposes Decommissioning 6th Fleet's Command Ship in 2026

The Egyptian navy frigate ENS Alexandria (F911) and the U.S. Navy amphibious command ship USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) operate in the Red Sea in support of the newly established Combined Task Force 153, April 20. *U.S. ARMY / Cpl. DeAndre Dawkins*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy has proposed in its 2023 budget to decommission the amphibious command ship USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) during fiscal 2026.

The Mount Whitney has served as the flagship of the U.S. 6th Fleet since 2005, when it replaced the USS LaSalle (AGF 3).

The Navy is proposing the retirement of the Mount Whitney because its retirement "is mitigated by staff operating ashore," the service said in its 2023 budget highlights book, citing a savings of $179.7 million over the Future Years Defense Plan.

The 6th Fleet staff normally is stationed ashore in Naples, Italy. The Mount Whitney is homeported in nearby Gaeta.

The Mount Whitney is a Blue Ridge-class amphibious command

ship. It was commissioned on Jan. 16, 1971, and served until 2005 as the flagship of the U.S. 2nd Fleet. It underwent conversion to a Military Sealift Command ship and is operated by a hybrid Navy/Civilian Mariner crew but remains a commissioned ship under the command of a Navy captain. If retired in 2026, the ship will have served 55 years.

Currently, the Mount Whitney is deployed to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden where it serves as the flagship of commander, Task Force 153, a new task force of the Combined Maritime Forces, an international coalition operating under commander, U.S. 5th Fleet/Naval Forces Central Command.

Marine Corps to Use Leased Ships to Test Light Amphibious Warfare Ship Concept

U.S. Military Sealift command's Spearhead-class expeditionary fast transport ship, City of Bismarck, floats while docked at the Commercial Seaport of Palau in Koror, Republic of Palau, Nov. 5, 2021. Spearhead-class ships may be used to test the concept for a light amphibious warfare ship. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Atticus Martinez*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Marine Corps plans to lease two commercial ships over the next two years to experiment with the light amphibious warfare ship concept, also now being classed as the landing ship-medium.

Brig. Gen. Mark Clingan, assistant deputy commandant for Combat Development and Integration and deputy commanding general of Marine Corps Combat Development Command, speaking April 21 in a webinar of the National Defense Industrial Association, said the Corps was planning to lease a commercial "stern[-ramp] landing vessel" by late summer or early fall [2022]" to use to test the LAW/LSM concept.

Clingan said a second vessel would be leased in fiscal 2023 for the same purpose.

The general said the Corps also was looking at using Spearhead-class expeditionary fast ships – which do not have beach landing ramps – and utility landing craft – which do – as part of the concept experimentation.

The LAW will be designed to carry 75 Marines of a Marine Littoral Regiment and land them on a shore in support of distributed maritime operations and expeditionary base operations. Clingan said the ships would be able to operate within the weapons engagement zone and be less attractive targets for enemy missiles than would a larger amphibious warfare ship.

Clingan said that with each Marine Littoral Regiment comprised of nine platoons or units of action – one on each light amphibious warfare ship – 27 LAWs would be needed to support the three MLRs. Counting extra MLRs in the maintenance pipeline, the Corps lists 35 LAWs as its probable requirement.

The Navy plans to procure the light amphibious warfare ship beginning in fiscal 2025.

Marine Corps May Keep More Tube Artillery, Osprey Squadrons in Force Design 2030

An MV-22 Osprey aircraft, assigned to Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 166 (Reinforced), departs the flight deck of amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 4) in 2016. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jose Jaen*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Marine Corps continues to tweak its Force Design 2030, adjusting the number of tube artillery batteries, the number of MV-22B squadrons, the operation of a Marine Littoral Regiment and the size of an infantry battalion.

Under Force Design 2030, the Marine Corps is divesting itself of some force structure and weapon systems and building others to reshape the Corps to be more capable of operating inside a threat zone in the current era of great power competition.

Brig. Gen. Mark Clingan, assistant deputy commandant for Combat Development and Integration and deputy commanding general of Marine Corps Combat Development Command, speaking April 21 in a webinar of the National Defense Industrial Association, said the Corps is looking at retaining more tube artillery batteries, choosing to retain seven batteries instead of five.

The tube artillery batteries operate M777 155mm howitzers.

Clingan also said the Corps will continue to field 16 Marine Medium Tilt-rotor Squadrons rather than reduce to 14 squadrons. However, the number of MV-22B Osprey aircraft in each squadron would decrease from 12 to 10 aircraft. One squadron, VMM-166, was deactivated last year.

He said the Corps' force design plans "probably weighted too much on the Marine Littoral Regiment and did not really acknowledge that to appropriately be able do the recon/counter-recon fight is going to require the full complement and scope of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force, and so MLRs are singular units but are still going to be very much a part of reaching back and employing the resources of the entire MAGTF.

Regarding the design of the MLR, Clingan said, "we probably focused too much on lethality without taking enough look or considering specifically the requirement to 'sense and make sense,' the mobility and maneuverability and also the need for deception. Now we're making refinements to that as well.

"Our initial thoughts were that MLR units would be sourced through UDP [the Unit Deployment Plan] rotation and now we're opening the aperture and think, maybe, some PCS [permanent change of station] personnel may be more suited to the terms of the units," he said.

The Corps has one MLR on strength, the 3rd MLR. Two more MLRs are planned in the future: the 12th and probably the 4th.

Regarding the size of an infantry battalion, "we initially thought we would be cutting that from about 896 [Marines and Sailors] down to 735," he said. Noting the need to make the battalions more "robust and capable," the number of personnel in a battalion "probably need to hover around numbers about 800-835 to have the capabilities it needs."

Navy Proposes to Cut Five EA-18G Growler Electronic Attack Squadrons

Sailors assigned to the “Lancers” of Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 131 recover an EA-18G Growler during night operations in 2020. Under Navy plans, the squadron is one of several that would be deactivated. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Benjamin Ringers*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy is proposing to deactivate five electronic attack squadrons, or VAQs, that operate the Boeing EA-18G Growler electronic attack jet, roughly a third of the Defense Department’s tactical jet electronic attack force.

As laid out in the recently released Department of the Navy’s fiscal 2023 budget highlights book, the Navy proposes to

deactivate its entire expeditionary VAQ force, which deploys to overseas bases to provide electronic attack capabilities to the joint force. The five expeditionary VAQ squadrons are separate from the Navy's VAQ squadrons that deploy on aircraft carriers.

The Navy is the only provider of expeditionary electronic attack jets to the joint force. The Air Force retired its last EF-111A Raven jets in 1998 and the Marine Corps retired its last EA-6B Prowler tactical jets in 2019. The expeditionary VAQ squadrons have deployed to Southwest Asia, Japan and Italy over the years in support of U.S. and coalition forces. Last month, one squadron, VAQ-134, was deployed to the European Command as part of the build-up of forces in support NATO's eastern flank after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The budget book says the five squadrons include a total of 25 EA-18Gs which would be placed in storage at the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group at Davis-Montham Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona, half in fiscal 2024 and half in fiscal 2025. The cuts also would free up approximately 1,020 officer and enlisted personnel. The Navy estimates the savings over the Future Years Defense Plan would be 807.8 million.

The Navy's five expeditionary VAQ squadrons are all based at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington: VAQs 131, 132, 134, 135, and 138. The Navy's only reserve VAQ squadron, VAQ-209, also has been used in an expeditionary role.

The carrier-deployable VAQ squadrons are VAQs 130, 133, 136, 137, 139, 140, 141, and 142, with another, VAQ-144, set for establishment in October. All are based at Whidbey Island, except for VAQ-141, which is based at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, as part of the forward-deployed Carrier Air Wing Five for USS Ronald Reagan.

The expeditionary VAQ squadrons are considered high-demand/high-value assets by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The

assessments of the various regional combatant commanders may be instrumental in reversing or mitigating the Navy's proposal.

Navy's LCS Decommissioning Proposals Would Bring Major Changes for Retained Ships

The Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Jackson (LCS 6) pierside in Guam during routine operations in 2021. Under new Navy plans, it would be operated by a single crew in 2023 and decommissioned in 2024. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Andrew Langholf*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy's 2023 budget proposal — including the Future Years Defense Plan — would result in

profound changes to the missions, organization, force structure, training and crews of the Navy's littoral combat ships in addition to the force reduction by decommissioning of many of the ships.

The LCS remaining in service would see a second order of effects that would further show a force dramatically changed from the original vision for the ships. The surface warfare mission and the mine countermeasures mission will be divided by coast instead of mixed on both.

The Freedom-class LCS would be most the most affected by the proposed budget. Including earlier decisions, the Navy would, because of fiscal constraints, decommission LCS 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, and 19 across the FYDP. (LCS 1 was decommissioned in 2021.) Six Freedom-class ships (LCS 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, and 31) would be retained, having been or will be completed with the combining gear improvement installed.

The Independence-class LCS will not be unscathed. The Navy proposes to reduce LCS 6 and 8 to single crews (from dual Blue-Gold crews) in 2023, and then decommission the two ships in 2024. (LCS 2 was decommissioned in 2021, and LCS 4 is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2022.) A total of 15 Independence-class ships would be retained in the fleet.

All LCS assigned the surface warfare mission would be assigned single crews only. Such crews would see their manpower increased by approximately 25 Sailors each to help sustain readiness levels that a second off-hull provided.

Since the antisubmarine warfare mission package is being divested, all LCSs marked for the ASW mission will be shifted to the surface warfare or mine countermeasures mission. Because of the substantial reduction in the number of LCS planned, the ASW mission in small surface combatants will reside solely in the future Constellation-class guided-missile frigate (FFG 62), which the Navy says is a "foundational

mission set for the FFG 62 program, which is a more suitable platform and Variable Depth Sonar [VDS] capability will be added to the fleet through the FFG 62 class."

The Navy is proposing the East Coast littoral combat ships – which are of the Freedom class – be assigned only the surface warfare mission and the West Coast LCS – planned to be only Independence-class ships – be assigned only the mine countermeasure mission. As a result, there would be changes in the LCS command and support organization structure.

Accordingly, the LCS antisubmarine warfare divisions on both coasts would be disestablished in 2023 with the divestiture of the ASW mission. MCM Division 22 on the East Coast and SUW Division 11 on the West Coast also would be disestablished in 2023.

With the overall reduction in LCS ships and their crews, and a force of just 21 LCS planned (15 MCM ships and 6 SUW ships), the training infrastructure required for training would be reduced. The proposal calls for the disestablishment of LCS Training Facility Atlantic, consolidating all LCS training at LCS Training Facility Pacific.

All of these proposals will receive the scrutiny of the congressional armed services and appropriations committees.

If the total LCS changes were to be approved, the Navy estimates the savings to be $391.4 million for fiscal 2023, totaling $2.46 billion over the FYDP.

Navy Proposes Elimination of Snakehead LDUUV program

Cheryl Mierzwa, Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Newport's technical program manager for the Snakehead Large Displacement Unmanned Undersea Vehicle, christens the underwater vehicle at the Narragansett Bay Test Facility in Newport, Rhode Island, on Feb. 2. *U.S. NAVY*

ARLINGTON, Va. — Even as the U.S. Navy was christening the first prototype of the Snakehead large-diameter unmanned underwater vehicle (LDUUV) in February, planning was underway to cancel the program.

The Navy is proposing in its 2023 budget to eliminate the Snakehead program, according to the Navy Department's recently released Fiscal 2023 budget highlights book.

The Snakehead is intended to be a major advance in UUVs and designed to be the largest UUV to be deployed on the interfaces of the Navy's attack submarines. It is designed to

be autonomous, modular and reconfigurable, equipped with a government-owned architecture. It features innovative hull materials and certified lithium-ion batteries. It is designed to be deployed from a modernized dry-deck shelter.

According to the budget highlights book, the major problem in the program was "Misalignment of Snakehead LDUUV design and procurement efforts with submarine hosting interfaces result[ing] in limited availability of host platforms to conduct Snakehead operations."

The book also said that "cost and schedule delays associated with LDUUV development and Virginia Class SSN [attack submarine] integration prohibited further investment."

The only alternative launch and recover interface for the Snakehead is the Modernized Dry Deck Shelter. The U.S. Special Operations Command in conjunction with the Navy is modernizing three Dry Deck Shelters between 2022 and 2026. They are scheduled to become available for use in 2022, 2023, and 2026, respectively.

Under Phase One of the Snakehead program, only one vehicle was built.

The Navy estimates the cancellation of Phase Two of the program and future Snakehead procurement will save the Navy $185.9 million in fiscal 2023, resulting in a total savings of $516.8 million over the Future Years Defense Plan.

The Snakehead Phase One prototype was christened on Feb. 2 at the Narragansett Bay Test Facility in Newport, Rhode Island, by a team from the Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Newport and the Program Executive Office for Unmanned and Small Combatants.

Q&A: Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener, Commander, Naval Surface Forces, Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet

Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener, Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, speaks with Hospitalman Shakeelah Jordan aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile-destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill (DDG 81) during a ship visit. Kitchener visited Hampton Roads commands and ships in June 2021 and hosted a commander's call with waterfront leadership. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jacob Milham*

Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener assumed command of Naval Surface

Forces and Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet in August 2020, and as a type commander he has guided the forces as he continues to man, train and equip the forces for duty in the fleet and service to the U.S. combatant commands. A native of Trumbull, Connecticut, and a 1984 graduate of Unity College with a Bachelor of Arts in political science, he attended the Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, and received his commission in 1985. He also attended the Naval Post Graduate School where he specialized in Western Hemisphere studies and earned a Master of Arts in national security affairs.

As a surface warfare officer, he deployed around the world and commanded destroyers, cruisers and an expeditionary strike group. At sea he served as a division officer aboard USS Dewey (DDG 45); operations and training officer for Special Boat Unit 26, Republic of Panama; combat systems and weapons officer aboard USS San Jacinto (CG 56); executive officer aboard USS Cowpens (CG 63); and operations officer and chief of staff for Commander, Carrier Strike Group 11. He commanded USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53) and USS Higgins (DDG 76) during the Navy's Sea Swap Initiative, and also commanded USS Princeton (CG59) and Expeditionary Strike Group 2.

Ashore, Kitchener served as the Surface Warfare Directorate's Naval Surface Fire Support program officer on the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations; combat systems instructor at Surface Warfare Officers School; ballistic missile defense operations chief at the Cheyenne Mountain directorate at Commander, U.S. Northern Command; and vice commander of Naval Mine and Anti-Submarine Warfare Command. He served as the chief of staff at numerous commands, to include commander, U.S. 3rd Fleet; commander, Naval Surface Forces; commander, Naval Striking and Support Forces North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); and U.S. deputy military representative to the NATO Military Committee. Most recently, he was commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet.

Kit*chener responded to questions about the surface Navy fleet from Senior Editor Richard R. Burgess.*

The surface Navy is better armed today than it was decades ago, when it was primarily an anti-air and antisubmarine escort force. How has that improvement affected the morale and professionalism of surface warriors?

KITCHENER: No doubt, we have seen tremendous improvements in our network and sensors that give our ever-improving weapons better speed, range and precision. However, I would propose it is our training investments that have had the most impact on the professionalism of the force. The surface force develops leaders, warriors, mariners and managers, and each of these roles requires training, education and mentoring. A well-trained Sailor is a confident Sailor. That is why we have dedicated more than $5 billion to the Surface Training Advanced Virtual Environment for Surface Force training. Approximately 200 STAVE projects are supporting training in all areas of individual and waterfront training, including navigation and seamanship, engineering, damage control and combat systems. Furthermore, nearly 66% of all afloat billets benefit from STAVE. This training and the human factor programs that we have in place directly contribute to improving our Sailors' professionalism and morale.

The surface Navy has had few combat actions at sea since World War II. How confident are you that today's surface warriors are trained and conditioned to maneuver and fight as well as execute damage control should they fight a peer competitor?

KITCHENER: We are highly confident in the training and professionalism of our surface force. As previously stated, we have dedicated a significant amount of resources to ensure our force is trained and ready to meet today's operational challenges. In addition to investing in STAVE, we are also building the physical and digital infrastructure to support this vast amount of training we are providing to our force.

Most notably, the Mayport [Florida] and Sasebo [Japan] Shiphandling Trainers opened for business in 2021, bringing the number of learning sites to 10 overall and ensuring a site in nearly every fleet concentration area. The Mariner Skills Training Centers in San Diego and Norfolk began hosting a two-phase Officer of the Deck [OOD] course, which shifted from a JOOD [Junior OOD] course to a two-phase OOD curriculum. The change freed up the Advanced Division Officer Course to expand its focus on maritime warfare. ADOC is now providing junior officers with three weeks of maritime warfare training instead of one, allowing us to lay the warfighting foundation earlier in an officer's career.

Regarding specific warfighting training, we are installing virtual operator trainers, or VOTs, in all homeports to provide Sailors with training for the AV-15 sonar system and Aegis Baselines 9 and above. In Yokosuka, Pearl Harbor and San Diego, the sonar trainers are up and running and the Aegis VOTs in Yokosuka and Pascagoula are soon to follow.

Finally, we have worked with the numbered fleet commanders to retool and enhance the high end, at-sea training ships receive prior to deploying to ensure they are ready to defeat current day threats. Never before has our force possessed this quality of warfighting training systems in our homeports, and they are available to commanding officers to build their teams' skills.

Has the seamanship of the force been improving to meet your expectations in the five years since the McCain and Fitzgerald incidents?

KITCHENER: Yes. We have made significant investments to increase the amount and depth of training that junior surface warfare officers receive before they report to their ship.

We introduced and implemented a revised SWO training and assessment continuum that employs navigation, seamanship and ship handling assessments across all career milestones.

We also implemented NSS/go/no-go assessments with four no-go criteria established for a SWO career path, which means that no one gets a pass simply due to experience. We assessed all officers at every level, from brand new ensign to major commander. Those who do not pass their proficiency tests do not assume command of ships at sea. Our standard: To be a professional mariner is more rigorous now than ever.

For our younger officers, the two-phased OOD course provides advanced practical instruction in navigation, seamanship, and ship handling in high-end simulators, emphasizing rules of the road, high-density shipping, in-extremis maneuvering and watch team management.

How are simulators making better surface warriors?

KITCHENER: With the number and complexity of systems and platforms planned to join the fleet in the next decade, the requirement for clear and innovative operational concepts is critical. Simulators provide our surface warriors with a controlled environment to develop and refine their mariner skills. By perfecting these skills in a teachable setting, Sailors can enter the fleet with the most advanced knowledge.

Sonar Technician (Surface) 1st Class Kendall Cochran, assigned to the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship (PCU) Minneapolis-Saint Paul (LCS 21), trains using computer-generated simulations during Surface Training Advanced Virtual Environment scenarios at Surface Combat Systems Training Command Detachment Southeast, LCS Training Facility, Nov. 9, 2021. *U.S. NAVY / Chief Mass Communication Specialist David Holmes*

What are the chief challenges to improving force readiness?

KITCHENER: The completion of depot level maintenance on time continues to be a significant challenge. We have invested in analytics to help us improve in this area.

As I said at SNA [Surface Navy Association convention] earlier this year, we have seen improvements in two key metrics that we are using to gauge our progress: days of maintenance delay and on-time completion rates. Since 2019, we have reduced our days of maintenance delay by 41%. Our on-time completion is steadily increasing, from 34% in fiscal year 2019 to a projected 59% for all 2021 avails, including those ongoing that began in fiscal year 2021. We still have more to do, but

it has been satisfying to see that the process is working.

Overcoming this challenge is even more important as we deliver modernization upgrades to the fleet, capability that is essential to maintaining our warfighting advantage. The SPY-6 radar and AN/SLQ-32(V)7 electronic warfare suite are a couple of examples of the extensive modernization programs that we will introduce to the fleet. The effective and timely execution of our maintenance and modernization packages during depot avails will be even more important to force readiness as we install this vital capability.

You have spoken about reimagining fleet introduction. What do you mean by that?

KITCHENER: Historically, NAVSEA's [Naval Sea Systems Command's] fleet introduction team provided oversight on the acquisition process and integrated the various program offices in the delivery of a new ship. Independently, the type commander's fleet introduction team would be responsible for actually integrating the ship into the fleet. We feel that a good look at this process will provide us a better process. Reimagining means thinking differently about this process so that the type commander is more engaged in the acquisition process overall, and that the program offices can deliver new ships and capabilities that integrate with the fleet more effectively and efficiently. We anticipate that this review should have significant positive impact and therefore I've asked Rear Adm. Brendan McLane at CNSP [commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet] to take on this task.

We are introducing at least 10 new or modernized platforms to the force in the next decade, and believe that effective fleet introduction is critical to maintaining a competitive advantage.

What is the role of Task Force LCS that stood up last spring?

KITCHENER: We stood up Task Force LCS to consolidate efforts

and drive actions across the LCS [littoral combat ship] program. Experts across the Navy are working together to analyze, develop and rapidly implement improvements to LCS platform reliability, sustainability, lethality and operational employment. The task force, led by Rear Adm. Robert Nowakowski, continues to provide databased recommendations and solutions to improve the reliability and sustainability of the LCS program.

What will be the role of the unmanned surface vessel division standing up this summer? How has Surface Development Squadron One been pushing the envelope in unmanned systems?

KITCHENER: This summer, USV Division One will stand up and grow to 103 Sailors in 2022 to provide dedicated support to USV operations. The command will be led by an O5 SWO commander and will report to SURFDEVRON [Surface Development Squadron] One and operate out of Port Hueneme, California. USVDIV 1 will be focused exclusively on USV experimentation and fleet advocacy with our program offices. The division will be a cornerstone in building the foundational knowledge required for Sailors to operate and maintain the USV fleet and spearhead the development of the processes required for USV operations and sustainment.

With the Zumwalt class to be armed for hypersonic weapons, do you expect them to deploy before their conversion? When do you expect the first conversion to start and what is the planned IOC year for them with conventional prompt strike?

KITCHENER: The Navy’s Conventional Prompt Strike Program is developing a non-nuclear hypersonic weapons system that will enable precise and timely strike capability in contested environments. Fielding hypersonic weapons is a top technical research and engineering priority and the Navy continues to accelerate the development of hypersonic capabilities. The Navy is on track to field the CPS on Zumwalt-class destroyers in fiscal 2025.

In support of the Zumwalt class, being the first platform to deliver CPS capability, the Navy commenced engineering design planning that will allow for integration of CPS during a planned fiscal 2024 dry-docking selected restricted availability. The ship’s relatively large volume and timing of her already scheduled dry docking availability are key enablers to rapidly field CPS capability in USS Zumwalt.

Looking on the success of the DDG 51 class, what capabilities do you want to see in DDG(X)?

KITCHENER: The DDG(X) class will capitalize on the success of the DDG 51 class by improving an already exceptional craft. DDG(X) will utilize a variant of the DDG-51 FLT III combat system integrated into a new hull form with flexibility for upgrades, an efficient integrated power system and greater endurance, reducing the fleet logistics burden.

State Dept. Approves Possible Sale of AH-1Z Helicopters to Nigeria

Airman Kory Vogel signals an AH-1Z Viper on the flight deck of amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island (LHD 8), April 13. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Nadia Lund*

WASHINGTON – The U.S. State Department has approved a possible Foreign Military Sale to Nigeria of 12 Bell AH-1Z attack helicopters and related equipment for an estimated cost of $997 million, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in an April 14 release.

The sale would make Nigeria the third foreign nation to order the AH-1Z, the others being Bahrain and the Czech Republic. The main operator of the AH-1Z is the U.S. Marine Corps.

Nigeria has requested to buy 12 AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters as well as associated avionics, sensor systems, and spare engines and parts. The deal also includes 2,000 Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS) guidance sections for 2.75-inch rockets.

The announcement said the possible sale also would include

“tools and test equipment; technical data and publications; personnel training and training equipment; mission planning system; U.S. government and contractor engineering; technical, and logistics support services; U.S. government and contractor assistance and oversight of facilities construction to include the provisioning of plans, drawings and specifications.”

“The proposed sale will better equip Nigeria to contribute to shared security objectives, promote regional stability and build interoperability with the U.S. and other Western partners,” the announcement said. “This sale will be a major contribution to U.S. and Nigerian security goals. Nigeria will have no difficulty absorbing the equipment and services into its armed forces.”

The principal contractors will be Bell Helicopter, Textron, of Fort Worth, Texas, and General Electric Co., of Lynn, Massachusetts.