

Expeditionary Fast Transport to Support SOUTHCOM's Continuing Promise Goodwill Deployment



SANTA MARTA, Colombia (Aug. 20, 2023) Expeditionary fast transport ship USNS Burlington (T-EFP 10) arrives in Santa Marta, Colombia, Aug. 20, 2023. Continuing Promise 2023 marks the 13th mission to the region since 2007 and the first involving USNS Burlington. The mission will also foster goodwill, strengthen existing partnerships with partner nations, and encourage the establishment of new partnerships among countries, non-government organizations, and international organizations. (U.S. Navy photo by Lt. j.g. Nicko West)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – A Spearhead-class expeditionary fast

transport, USNS Burlington (T-EPF 10), is scheduled to deploy next week on a voyage to five countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America to provide humanitarian and civic assistance to the population and to promote regional good will under the U.S. Southern Command's annual Continuing Promise mission.

Making its second such deployment, the Burlington will deploy with more than 100 Sailors, Soldiers, State Department personnel, and crew members to provide medical, veterinary, and construction services, subject-matter exchanges, and cultural exchanges. The ship is crewed by 26 Civil Mariners of the U.S. Military Sealift Command.

The Burlington, making the 14th annual deployment of Continuing Promise since 2007, will visit Jamaica, Costa Rica, Honduras, Columbia, and Panama during the two-month deployment. The countries visited differ from year to year.

"We really try to spread the opportunity around the Caribbean and even – based on resources – to some of the other countries in South America," said Rear Admiral Jim Aiken, commander, U.S. 4th Fleet and commander, Naval Forces, U.S. Southern Command, speaking to reporters during a June 28 phone conference. "We have a spreadsheet and spend a significant amount of time evaluating [and] assessing where we should go. So, we're going to a lot of different countries than we did previously. The only one is actually a repeat country from last year is Panama.

"So, going forward, we'll keep looking for different opportunities and different engagements," Aiken said. "This is based on a couple of things. First of all, there has to be a working relationship where there's a need and a desire. The second thing is that we look at it and we really want to try to be strategic where there's 'no kidding' need.

Aiken listed the mission sets of the deployment as medical and

veterinary assistance; humanitarian and disaster relief discussions; civil construction, bio-medical assistance, and the State Department's Women, Peace, and Security Program discussions.

He said the USNS Comfort is available for the Continuing Promise deployment "every two or three years," with the ship planned for next year.

While the Burlington, smaller than the Comfort, brings the assistance teams to port, the teams actually conduct their medical assistance in hospitals ashore side-by-side with local teams.

Aiken mentioned that the "Navy staff has decided to convert a number of EPFs into hospital-like assets that actually could support surgeries and care actually on board."

"Both numerically and qualitatively, Continuing Promise has been one of the most impactful humanitarian missions in the U.S. Navy's history," said Lieutenant Commander. Cmdr. Zachary Smith, the mission commander the operation. "The mission is a symbol of our long-standing commitment to the nations and people of Latin America and the Caribbean.

"We've delivered on our promises," Smith said. "Working hand-in-hand with our partners we delivered over the course of the history of the mission more than 600,000 medical treatments, over 7,000 surgeries, and countless constructions projects, ... and community relations events. Previous iterations of the mission have been extremely successful, and we anticipate making just as much of an impact this year."

According to a Navy release, "30 U.S. Navy medical professionals, including general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, radiologists, dentists, optometrists, and biomedical technicians from Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command (NMRTC Portsmouth, NMRTC Jacksonville, NMRTC Great Lakes, NMRTC Pensacola, NMRTC Camp Lejeune) and Naval

Medicine Readiness and Logistics Command bring their expertise to this year's iteration of Continuing Promise.

"The Continuing Promise team includes a U.S. Army veterinary team from the 248th Medical Detachment (Veterinary Service Support), which will collaborate with host nation colleagues to provide direct public health education and animal care at local veterinary organizations in-country," the release said. "U.S. Navy Seabees from Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 1 will assist in host nation led community engineering projects. U.S. Navy experts will host seminars and training exercises with host nation civilian officials and military professionals covering disaster preparedness and response. These exchanges aim to support host nation facilities, improve readiness, and empower local and national officials with the knowledge and experience to act with confidence during emergencies."

"This is a very special mission for me because I've seen it many times firsthand in my nearly three years in this assignment, Aiken said. "This is our shared neighborhood. We have friends and we have partners, and we enjoy the side-by-side that we have with each and every one of them. We learn from them, and they learn from us."

The admiral recalled a previous Continuing Promise deployment to Columbia and being approached by a citizen who had been assisted during a Continuing Promise four years prior by the medical team on board the hospital ship USNS Comfort. The person was given surgery on his palate. He approached, saying that the surgery "changed my life so much, and instead of me being ridiculed by my schoolmates I am now able to live a normal life. ... I just wanted to come back and say, Thank you.'"

"That's the reason why I still get excited about this and every time we do this," Aiken said.

Iron Mountain Anticipates Increase in Work for the Navy Under GPO Contract



ARLINGTON, Va. – An information technology company expects its business with the U.S Department of the Navy to increase as task orders come under a government contract from the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) for document scanning and conversion services.

In late April, the GPO awarded Iron Mountain a contract “to provide off-site document conversion and scanning services for the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA)” the GPO announcement said. “The contract covers a range of services including document preparation, scanning, optical character recognition (OCR), indexing, and output to various media. The estimated value of the contract is not specified, but it indicates 15-25 orders per year, with 5-10 being multi-year efforts, and scanning requirements ranging from 1,000 to 9,000,000 images per order.

The contract term is from April 26, 2024, through February 28, 2025, with up to four 12-month option periods.”

“Currently, with the Navy, we are kind of in our infancy in joining and partnering with them,” said Melissa Carson, general manager of Iron Mountain’s Government Solutions Group. “The thing we have with them is the traditional Iron Mountain business, records information management. We have a BPA [blanket purchase agreement] with them, a master agreement with them [the Navy’s records office], to help them with all their record storage needs across the whole naval installation.

Iron Mountain provides records management and storage services to federal, state, and local governments as well as public education institutions. The company, with corporate headquarters in Nashua, New Hampshire, maintains 1,400 sites across the world in 110 countries. The company’s Government Solutions Group is based in Herndon, Virginia.

Carson said the company also has partnered with some of the system integrators and has acquired some other companies.

“We actually have made a couple of acquisitions here in the last couple of years and really have a robust solution that takes all this e-waste within that ecosystem and not only just takes it off their hands securely,” she said. “We’ve got proprietary software that does the data erasure that meets DoD standards off of hard drives, but also with the recent acquisition of Regency, we actually now have a goal of recycling components. We take it down to bare metals and are able to actually only put 8% in the landfill.”

Iron Mountain digitized all of the Veterans Administration’s personnel files, part of which involved digitization of a million boxes of records.

Iron Mountain expects task orders from the Navy similar to its work for the Veterans Administration.

“Iron Mountain can do intelligent document processing with Insight AI [artificial intelligence], with one touch, create the image, classify it for records storage and retention, along with the metadata off of it,” Carson said, noting that her company can pass the data and images back to the agency—the usual scenario—or provide off-site storage.

“We now with this Insight tool, have used the power of AI and machine learning models with natural language models behind it,” she said. “We’re now able to do millions of documents a month with 30% less labor, equipment, and facilities. We’ve been able to absolutely increase that capability and throughput so that one is lower priced – because it was also [prohibitively] expensive for many of these agencies to even start with that – so it’s not only saved that but it’s also eight times faster. So that’s why we’re able to digitize millions [of records] in a month.”

Carson pointed to one example: “For a large financial agency in the government we were able to do a billion images in less than a year at 96% accuracy of pulling data off of these records. The old-fashioned way would have taken 30 years by 800 people.

“Many agencies are finally getting policy changes so that once it is digitized, they do not have to hold on to that paper record,” she said. “Iron Mountain is full-life cycle: “We take it and shred it and we put all of that paper back into the paper industry. We are one of their biggest suppliers to be able to trade with recycled paper.”

The tedious task of scanning documents has led to improvements in scanning technology.

“We’ve been very influential with the scanning equipment suppliers,” Carson said. “We’ve forced them to innovate, too, so there is a particular machine that we’re actually using for

the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. We are actually taking their paper tax returns – so about nine million people still file with paper – and they come in crumpled, with coffee stains and all that. With this new scanning technology, we don't need to do all of that repair anymore. Literally, it is sensitive enough that you scan it through even with a tear, even with coffee stains, even ruffled, and it looks like a perfectly good piece of paper.”

Iron Mountain even has infrared scanners for fragile old onion-skin paper that never touches the paper.

The company is working to make data storage technology more robust, and “future-proof,” to avoid obsolescence overtaking the technology and ensuring that digital records are accessible and readable. The company also maintains an inventory of obsolete technology in order to read older analog and digital records.

**Q&A: Ashley Johnson,
Technical Director, Naval
Surface Warfare Center,
Indian Head Division**



Ashley Johnson, technical director of Naval Surface Warfare Center Indian Head Division, briefs the center's modernization plan to members of the southern Maryland industrial community. *U.S. Navy | Matthew Poynor*

The Naval Surface Warfare Center Indian Head Division (NSWC IHD) is a working capital organization that develops and manufactures energetics for the Navy, Marine Corps and other services. The IHD is going through a \$1.9 billion upgrade called the Energetics Comprehensive Modernization Plan (ECMP) to improve its capabilities and infrastructure to meet the requirements of the future.

Ashley Johnson, a Senior Executive Service civilian, became the technical director of Naval Surface Warfare Center, Indian Head Division in 2014. He discussed the role of the Navy's own manufacturer of energetics with Senior Editor Richard R. Burgess. Excerpts follow.

What is the mission of the Indian Head Division?

JOHNSON: The short answer is full-spectrum energetic

materials, from cradle to grave. We do basic research, applied research, advanced technology demonstrations, manufacturing, logistics, engineering and fleet support. In the sense of energetic material systems, most people would immediately equate those two things like warheads, rocket motors, and bombs and so forth but it's really much more expansive than that because it can involve fuzes and handling equipment associated with the systems – such as the packaging, handling, shipping and transportation.

Now that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are over for the United States, and with the growing tensions of Russia and China, how is your work shifting?

JOHNSON: My previous job was the director of Marine Corps Science & Technology and deputy chief of Naval Research, Office of Naval Research for expeditionary warfare and combating terrorism. Our investment in the GWOT [the Global War on Terrorism] writ large was really about finding the enemy: It was a C4ISR, big data, intel, logistics kind of thing, because the assumption, deservedly so, was that we could defeat our enemy without any issue once we found them.

As a result, for that period of time, not a lot was done in the United States in the development of state-of-the-art and attention to detail on the munitions industrial base, commercial or organic. I say that not accusingly, just saying that as a matter of fact. Unfortunately for us, all of our potential adversaries or adversaries – Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea – did not take that vacation. We had a large comparative advantage in that ammunitions space – range, speed, terminal effects, signatures management, safety to some extent. They recognized they were behind, and they continued to invest in those areas, so, we have lost a fairly large comparative advantage as we focused on the necessities of GWOT.

We're approaching something that looks an awful lot like the

Cold War as it looked in the '70s and '80s with the Soviet Union, which had a large capability. The question is clearly not can we find them; the question is, can we defeat them because they have systems that can rival ours. The situation is driving us toward really looking at ourselves in the mirror and saying, what is our state-of-the-art? Is it representative of what we are really capable of or is it representative of what we're willing to continue to keep using? What is our industrial base and are we capable of manufacturing and providing at the point of use all of the things that we think we need in the context of something like we're seeing in Ukraine where Russia is coming to grips with that. You can use a tremendous amount of ordnance in these kinds of sustained conflicts. Do you have the industrial base with which to sustain that operation?

I was surprised to learn that Indian Head is not just an RDT&E activity but also a major manufacturing facility.

JOHNSON: Indian Head has been in energetics since 1890. Indian Head was established initially as a proving ground for Navy guns, and it literally was cut out of the woods in southern Maryland for that purpose. After its victory in the Battle of Manilla Bay, the Navy recognized that the only vulnerability in its crushing defeat of the Spanish Navy was the fact that the Spanish Navy used smokeless powder. Although it didn't really factor much into the outcome, it was recognized as a significant liability.

And so, the Navy wanted to pursue the manufacture or acquisition of [smokeless] powder. A commercial vendor was busy manufacturing propellant for European markets and did not have the capacity to produce it for the U.S. Navy. Very shortly after that, a bill was put through Congress and Indian Head was established as a naval powder factory. The Navy started to make its own propellant at Indian Head over a hundred years ago. Indian Head continues to be the source for a lot of unique munitions.

Of course, that's changed over the years. For example, a plant was built at Indian Head solely for manufacture of every pound of the propellant for the Polaris Missile System. It did the same thing for [the] Poseidon missile.

Interesting. Is there anything you're supplying to Ukraine with its war with Russia?

JOHNSON: I really cannot comment. I would just say we're relevant to that theater also and I'll leave it at that.

Indian Head has been involved at the ground floor of supplying munitions for the Navy for over a hundred years and that's kind of what we're just being asked to do again.

Specifically, what are we concerned about right now? Solid rocket motors. The Standard Missile figures prominently in this conversation, as do things like Tomahawk. There used to be 12 manufacturers in the United States for tactical rocket motors and now there are only two commercial vendors: Aerojet Rocketdyne in Arkansas and Northrop Grumman, which is using a Navy facility in Rocket Center, West Virginia. That's it. The largest capacity left in the United States to produce cast composite rocket motors is Indian Head. We have a very large latent capacity that isn't really being used yet which is why those partnerships are so exciting. Aerojet has partnered with the Navy, and we are going to make rocket motors here for our Standard missile to augment the commercial supply which is exactly where our mission is. We go into areas where we are needed, or we go into areas where no one can go.



Ashley Johnson speaks with scientists and engineers in one of the Mix, Cast, Cure plants, in front of a 420-gallon vertical mixer at NSWC IHD. *U.S. Army | Staff Sergeant Arthur Jones* Indian Head is viewed as part of the organic – government-owned – industrial base. There is no competition with commercial vendors going on right now. All of us in the munitions industrial base recognize it's an all-hands-on-deck situation. This is the only way that we're going to meet this need. It's kind of the way we've been doing business for over a hundred years anyway. It's just for the last 10 or 15, we sort of forgot about it.

Why is the Energetics Comprehensive Modernization Plan (EMCP) needed?

JOHNSON: We are a very expensive facility. The net replacement value for Indian Head is between \$5 [billion] and \$6 billion. You'd be hard-pressed to recoup that or duplicate it if I gave you that much money just because of how difficult it is to build facilities like Indian Head. If you have a facility with that kind of unique capacity and capabilities,

it takes a lot of money to take care of it.

If you go through a period of time – 10, 15, 20 years – when you use munitions essentially as a bill payer for other requirements, you don't generate the resources you need to take care of facilities like Indian Head. When you have to exercise it again, you've got a "big principal" that you've got to pay down. ECMP involves the restoration and sustainment of weight and capacity that the Navy owns. We can do things, but we're a little out of shape, and so, it's a readiness issue.

The other part of ECMP is about modernization and increasing capacity. Our commercial partners – Aerojet Rocketdyne and Northrop Grumman – are well over 90% and probably closer to 95% in the utilization rate of whatever capacities they have. There is a need for the industrial base of the United States, commercial as well as organic, to grow to meet the demand signal that we're seeing for munitions and so forth. Ultimately, we're getting to 11 times our current capacity to meet the demand signals that we see from all of our customers as well as our commercial partners. That second piece of ECMP really helps build out the capacity to meet the demand.

The third and probably the most interesting, at least for me, element of ECMP is about hybridizing our business and investment model. In the past, we had to operate like a business since we're a working capital fund activity as opposed to a general funded activity. That creates problems in periods of a bear market because, if I'm asked to recoup all my cost from just my customers, when people aren't buying things, it becomes hard to amortize the costs. That's when things don't get done. That's when maintenance becomes an issue because you have to start making choices. And so, what we're doing with ECMP is trying to establish more of an ownership and responsibility at the Navy level off the top so that those things get paid for first and then we enter into more of a time and materials conversation with our customers.

So, it's the hybridization of the business and investment model of Indian Head so that there is an appropriated line of accounting that gets put into this equation in addition to a working capital.

What are some of the major projects or improvements that are involved?

JOHNSON: Some of the initial stuff is really quite simple: fixing loading docks that have cracks in them; fixing secondary roads that have large potholes that I'd rather not drive nitroglycerine over; general improvements to the roads, lighting or other utilities. We may need a half a million dollars to unlock the latent capacity that's there. I just can't get at it because I've got these secondary and tertiary issues which are preventing me from using it.

With modernization, we're talking about very specific improvements like casting and curing [of rocket propellant and warheads]. A major part of being able to make rocket motors is being able to mix the composite propellant. It needs very specialized vertical mixers. We have them in all sizes, but we need more of them. A major project improvement would be a second cast composite plant where we would increase the capacity of a lot of those unit operations, but also, do it in sort of a state-of-the-art. Indian Head's cast composite plant was built 35 to 40 years ago. You wouldn't do that now the same way, so we're going to take advantage of efficiencies in industrial engineering and state-of-the-art equipment to basically double down or triple down on the capacities that we currently have.

So, really, the focus that is most meaningful is our cast composite manufacturing and that addresses modern rocket motors as well as warheads.

By cast composite, you mean mixing the chemicals and then molding them for a rocket motor?

JOHNSON: Yes. The process is very similar to making a cake batter. The very first thing that we do is get all the ingredients, then we put them in a mixer that looks an awful lot like a KitchenAid mixer. It's obviously a little more involved than that but effectively does the same thing. We blend the ingredients, then once we get them out, we cure the mixture and it hardens in the places we want it [rocket motor or warhead body]. And then it gets assembled into an all-up round. That entire process involves mixing, casting and curing and the transportation of those assets.

What categories of engineers do you need?

JOHNSON: Engineers of just about every flavor, right now primarily mechanical and chemical. Actually, mechanical dominates but we need both. But I need industrial engineers, I need electrical engineers, so just about every type and flavor. I also need the hard scientists, too: physicists and chemists.

We have another mission that has to do with chem/bio which I won't get into right now, but it's a big part of what we do, so we have biologists. We have life scientists here as well. We've got maybe about a thousand technical people all the way through Ph.D., close to a hundred Ph.D.s here in the hard sciences. But I have a need for program managers, comptrollers and business folks. Now with this huge modernization effort I need guys who actually need to be able to do construction and construction management whether it be contracting or building management.

What is Indian Head's place in the local economy?

JOHNSON: We've got about 2,500 government civilians and about 500 contractors. I might have to add 500 to 700 individuals just in our manufacturing operations alone to meet the demand signal. They're going to government civilians, contractors, and partners like Aerojet people who are going to be working

here side-by-side with our guys. It's a big shot in the arm or opportunity for the state and for the local communities because we're just going to get bigger. Indian Head is already, on any given day, the largest employer in the county.

How do you plan to attract extra employees?

JOHNSON: That's the easy part. It's not hard to get people excited about being a patriot. It's not hard to get people excited about coming to do what we at Indian Head. Energetics work is pretty exciting. You make things that go boom and whoosh, and it's also exciting science. So, attracting talent is easy; it's the retention of the talent that's harder. Can you compete for people's attention in terms of how the environment looks around? Is it a nice place to live? Are there things to do? We're working with the state and the county on that because where we are located it's kind of out of the way and that might be for obvious reasons, but it's still an issue with regard to being able to retain people. We've got to try to make that ecosystem around us as inviting as possible.

The other piece is really about people who are drawn to this work like to do stuff and, like over the last 10 or 15 years, you can't retain talent when people aren't doing anything. And so, a lot of people have left the market or, if they've got into it, they got bored because we really weren't buying a lot in the area of munitions and/or similar systems, and so, they've left. I think the demand signal will take care of that. But it's important to commit to this, because, after these surges are over, we need to maintain our focus on this area.

Q&A: Kelly Robertson-Slagle, Director of Development, Charles County, Maryland



The \$1.1 billion build-up of the Naval Surface Warfare Center Indian Head Division (NSWC IHD) will affect not just the facility but also the surrounding community. Kelly Robertson-Slagle is the Director of Economic Development for Charles County, Maryland, home of NSWC IHD. She works closely with the NSWC IHD to coordinate county development and support its infrastructure improvements and personnel growth.

How will the Navy's planned investment at Indian Head affect Charles County's economy?

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: First and foremost, there will be new

business opportunities for our existing county businesses. By that, I mean the Navy's \$1.1 billion investment will be spread across 500 infrastructure projects over the next 10 years. This investment will open up opportunities for our local businesses to potentially bid on these projects. Having that type of investment here in Charles County will be extremely impactful.

Second, new commercial development and redevelopment opportunities translate into additional commercial tax revenue. Right now, there are about 2,700 people located behind the gate of the base, and manufacturing is on a nine-to-five schedule. Within the next five years, manufacturing on the base will occur 24/7, which means more foot traffic. We expect an increase in commercial enterprises setting up on the western side of Indian Head, attracted by the growing population. We hope to welcome various businesses, from retail stores and restaurants to service providers, to address the current scarcity in these sectors.

Equally important are the new job opportunities and workforce training opportunities that will be created. As the base's manufacturing facilities upgrade to meet modern "smart arsenal" standards, there will be a substantial need for a knowledgeable, 21st-century "smart workforce." We are collaborating with NSWC-IHD and various strategic partners, including the Charles County Public School System, the College of Southern Maryland, the Energetics Technology Center and other private energetics industry partners, to develop advanced workforce programs.

These initiatives will train individuals in the specialized skills necessary for operating energetics manufacturing effectively, and we want to ensure that we're developing the appropriate level of apprenticeships. Our aim is to provide residents with experience at NSWC IHD with full-time employment opportunities locally. We are actively seeking these opportunities and are also focused on sparking interest

in younger generations to sustain local workforce engagement. We must be able to expand our workforce pipeline in Charles County.

We're also engaging with our K-12 system to provide students with opportunities to interact with the base, experience the technology and gain an understanding of the energetics fields. Our goal is that whether they pursue vocational training, higher education or construction-related courses, their experiences will encourage them to return to Indian Head. We hope they know they will have a job to return to with excellent pay, a good quality of life, and a place where they will want to set up shop and raise their families.

What is the estimate of Indian Head's annual contribution to the county's economy in terms of dollars?

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: In FY 2022, the total payroll for Indian Head in Maryland was \$346 million, with an additional \$44.6 million generated through Maryland-based contracts. Of those dollars (between payroll and Maryland contracts), 68% went to employees or businesses in Charles County.

Beyond their annual tax contributions, the county benefits from NSWC IHD's presence. Charles County Public Schools and the College of Southern Maryland gain in-kind mentorship opportunities, such as sponsoring science fairs, providing internships, and funding robotics programs and research initiatives. They've been fantastic community partners to us for many years, and we don't see that slowing down at all. If anything, we see that ramping up a bit.

What type of infrastructure do you have to consider with the expansion?

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: The base borders the town of Indian Head, which is its own municipality (one of three in Charles County). From a county perspective, we continue to work hand-in-hand with the Town of Indian Head to help address

infrastructure improvements that must occur with the increase of employees and traffic. One of our monitoring priorities is Maryland Highway 210, from the county line all the way to the base gate. In collaboration with the Town of Indian Head, we are addressing traffic flow, safety, and walkability within the town.

Additionally, broadband infrastructure is always a top priority, not just for the western side and the base but across the entire county. We are particularly proud of a recent project, completed in partnership with the state and the town, which extended high-end fiber optics to the base. This project, which was one of the 500, has enabled the base to implement a closed-loop fiber infrastructure behind the gate.

The base recently signed an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with our local electric co-op, Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative, to take over management and upgrades of the electrical infrastructure behind the gate. The county is certainly committed to supporting those efforts as well.



Kelly Robertson-Slagle, left, speaking during the Charles County Economic Development Department's 2023 fall meeting. *Charles County government*

Does Charles County have the workforce it needs, or do you expect a large influx of new residents?

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: It's a combination. Historically, Southern Maryland has largely been a bedroom community for federal government employees. Currently, we have slightly more than 5,000 Department of Defense [DoD] civilian employees residing in Charles County. To us, that's a serious selling point! We already have a very strong DoD civilian workforce here. Regionally, up to 500,000 professionals could potentially be part of this hiring pool. We are robust in this regard. Valid DoD or contractor opportunities at the base could attract federal employees who currently commute outside of Charles County to consider employment closer to home so that they can work and live within the same community.

The base has also been working on what they call "CITE" agreements – public-private partnership agreements where

private defense businesses specializing in the development of energetics can partner with the base, bringing a portion of their workforce to enhance the manufacturing capabilities on site.

With these CITE agreements, we also expect to attract an additional workforce. There's potential for individuals to move to Charles County or the broader Southern Maryland area in pursuit of these job opportunities.

That reminds me of when Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) moved from Arlington, Virginia, to Patuxent River, Maryland, and defense contractors sprang up like mushrooms along Highway 235.

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: Yes, NAVAIR transformed that whole corridor; they're still doing fantastic things down there. We expect a similar turnout along [Highway] 210, in what we call our "Western Charles County Technology Corridor." We are already receiving phone calls from contractors and interested parties who are aware of the business opportunities at the site. They are exploring real estate and potential redevelopment opportunities, preparing for when those contracts are awarded. It's an extremely exciting time for us.

Why is Charles County such a prime location for defense installations?

ROBERTSON-SLAGLE: Charles County is within a 40-minute drive of several key federal labs and military installations. We also offer easy access to major cities like Baltimore, Richmond, and Washington D.C., which includes proximity to government agencies, customers, and suppliers, and keeps defense and federal contracting firms on the cutting edge. We're sitting in what I call a "sweet spot." We developed a map that shows Charles County's proximity to Joint Base Andrews, Naval Air Systems Command in Pax River, Navy Support Facility Dahlgren [Virginia], and Indian Head, as well as

Washington, D.C. Charles County also maintains one of the highest percentages of engineers and doctoral scientists in Maryland and one of the highest percentages of engineers and doctoral scientists in the country.

Upskilling is essential for local companies to stay ahead of the marketplace. Our partnership with the College of Southern Maryland and its cutting-edge upskilling capabilities is invaluable. If a company needs to upskill its workforce to implement new technologies, it can tap into a resource pool like never before to develop custom curricula focused on skill enhancement. Every industry faces challenges with an aging workforce, and upskilling is crucial. With the pace of technology, we can't be competitive without it.

The College of Southern Maryland, a two-year community college, was formed almost 20 years ago by three individual colleges in Charles, Calvert and St. Mary's counties. This merger, aided by the three boards of county commissioners in Southern Maryland, was an extremely smart move, creating cutting-edge opportunities, better use of budget and opportunities to grow.

The college's Velocity Center, located just outside the base gate, partners with NSWC IHD. It provides a space where base officials can conduct training and host various events outside the gate, including machine shops, training classes, STEM events and diverse community activities in collaboration with the base. This setup allows personnel from Indian Head access to share industry best practices without jumping through a thousand hoops [the security protocols] to enter the base. That facility has turned out to be a fantastic asset for us, not just in Charles County but definitely for the base itself.

We also have great partnerships with the University of Maryland College Park, The Higher Education Center and many more. When it comes to the College of Southern Maryland, however, located right here in Charles County, you can't beat

the flexibility and the caliber of programs we can implement together.

On average, lease rates in Charles County offer companies about a 34% savings compared to other areas in the D.C. Metro area. We have affordable utilities, clean energy options and incentives to provide to industries considering Charles County. When we are approached by businesses interested in our county, our team can show them turnkey properties, although they must still navigate the regulatory review process for new construction. We are committed to keeping this inventory active and available for commercial businesses and industries looking to establish themselves here.

Winds Damage Navy TH-73 Training Helicopters at Whiting Field



By Richard Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – A strong wind that swept through Naval Air Station Whiting Field caused damage more than three dozen new TH-73 Thrasher training helicopters earlier this month, according to a Navy spokesman.

The following statement was issued by the Commander, Naval Air Training Command (CNATRA):

“On May 13, at approximately 10:35 a.m. CST, a significant weather event involving high winds up to 71 knots (gusting) caused damage to 41 TH-73 Thrasher helicopters assigned to Training Air Wing (TAW) 5. No injury to personnel occurred during the incident and there has been no reported damage to any TH-57 Sea Ranger or T-6 Texan II aircraft positioned on the flight line. All aircraft were parked aboard Naval Air Station Whiting Field during the incident. The full extent of the resources needed to restore the fleet has not yet been finalized, however, repairs are not expected to exceed a month. No operational impact to the CNATRA mission is expected

due to the availability of CNATRA's fleet of TH-57 Sea Ranger helicopters that remain undamaged."

The TH-73A, built by Leonardo's AgustaWestland Philadelphia Corp., is a military version of the Leonardo TH-119. The TH-73A was procured by the Navy to replace the Bell TH-57 Sea Ranger with the role of training rotary-wing and tilt-rotor pilots for the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The TH-73A was first delivered to TAW-5 in August 2021 and began training pilots in September 2022.

The Navy has ordered a total of 130 TH-73As. The Thrasher fleet is expected to complete replacement of the TH-57B/C during fiscal 2025 and serve through 2050, according to the Navy.

F-35B Crashes in New Mexico En Route Test Assignment



ATLANTIC OCEAN (Oct. 18, 2023) U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Alex Horne, assigned to Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 23, conducts flight operations from the Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales (R09) in the Atlantic Ocean, Oct. 18, 2023. (U.S. Navy photo by Kyra Helwick)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – An F-35B Lightning II strike fighter crashed shortly after takeoff from Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, on May 28. The pilot ejected and was hospitalized with serious injuries.

The Marine Corps F-35B was en route to deliver to Edwards Air Force Base, California, for assignment to test duties. The aircraft was flying from the Lockheed Martin factory in Fort Worth, Texas, for delivery to Edwards.

According to press reports, the pilot was an Air Force officer assigned to the Defense Contract Management Agency's Fort Worth office.

Marine Operational Test and Evaluation Squadron One,

headquartered at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, has a detachment at Edwards Air Force Base for F-35 test and evaluation.

Rep. Rob Wittman, chairman of the Tactical Air and Land Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee issued a statement on the mishap:

“I am incredibly grateful to the first responders who promptly aided the pilot after this crash and relieved to hear the pilot is in stable condition. I am praying for the pilot and their family as they undergo treatment for serious injuries.

“Any crash of our military aircraft is of utmost concern. While we know that expanding F-35 test capacity is the first step to fundamental F-35 transformation, this incident exacerbates the already urgent need to expand it. That’s why I authored an amendment in this year’s National Defense Authorization Act to increase F-35 test capacity by 50%, ensuring that the U.S. military can accelerate tests associated with our nation’s largest defense acquisition program.

“This incident will undoubtedly cause a technical setback for F-35 modernization and warrants an extensive and thorough investigation to determine the exact cause of this crash.”

Navy Orders Two More Constellation Frigates



By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy has ordered the next two Constellation-class guided-missile frigates (FFGs) from Fincantieri's Marinette Marine, the Defense Department said.

The Naval Sea Systems Command awarded Marinette Marine Corp., of Marinette, Wisconsin, a \$1.04 billion fixed-price incentive (firm-target) modification to previously awarded contract "to exercise options for detail design and construction of two Constellation-class guided-missile frigates, FFG 66 and FFG 67," the May 23 contract announcement said.

The order brings to six the number of Constellation-class FFGs on order. This order is funded by the fiscal 2024 defense budget. The contract allows options for four more frigates. The Navy has a stated requirement for 20 frigates.

The Navy has selected a name for FFG 66, the future USS Hamilton, as announced May 23 by Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro, in honor of Alexander Hamilton, a hero of the

American Revolution and the nation's first secretary of the Treasury.

Navy Admiral Selects Three Littoral Combat Ships for 2025 Basing with 5th Fleet



An unmanned surface vehicle is craned aboard the Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Canberra (LCS 30), as a part of the first embarkation of the Mine Countermeasures (MCM) mission package, April 23. The MCM mission package is an integrated suite of unmanned maritime systems and sensors which locates, identifies, and destroys mines in the littorals while increasing the ship's standoff distance from the threat area. Littoral Combat Ships are fast, optimally-manned,

mission-tailored surface combatants that operate in near-shore and open-ocean environments, winning against 21st-century coastal threats. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Vance Hand)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The admiral in charge of U. S. Navy surface forces has named the three Independence-class littoral combat ships (LCS) slated to be forward-deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet to replace the Avenger-class mine-countermeasures ships (MCMs).

“MCMs are reaching their end-of-service-lives, and we have to replace them, as great as they are,” said Vice Admiral Brendan McLane, commander, U.S. Naval Surface Forces, speaking May 23 at the International Mine Warfare Technology Symposium in San Diego. “Secretary of the Navy [Carlos] Del Toro has approved the strategic laydown which confirmed the deployment of LCS 2 variants – including [USS] Tulsa [LCS 16], Santa Barbara [LCS 32], and Canberra [LCS 30] – to deploy to Bahrain in 2025, and four more to Sasebo [Japan] in 2027.

“The platforms will have the MCM mission package and will replace our legacy MCMs,” McLane said. “But even with these mission packages, we’ll have to incorporate them into a team to be able to combat enemy mining operations. Joining the LCS will be a theater expeditionary MCM team {than] will deploy a combination of unmanned systems, divers, and sensors teamed together to defeat enemy mining. We’re already doing some of that teamwork.”

Two LCS have been deployed to the 5th Fleet area of responsibility so far: Freedom-class LCS USS Sioux City (LCS 11) in 2022 and USS Indianapolis (LCS 17) in 2023, the latter still deployed there.

“The Sioux City teamed with CTF-52’s MCM expeditionary capability and embarked Helicopter Sea Combat 22 detachment to augment MCM capabilities in 5th Fleet,” McLane said. “Sioux

City paved the way for future LCS operations within 5th Fleet and showed what a valuable contributor and teammate the LCS platform can be. The full LCS with mission packages will bring even more capability to the 5th Fleet team.”

McLane said he is “tremendously excited for the long-term viability of LCS as our enduring mine warfare platform due to their modularity and the ability to quickly design, develop, and deploy new subsystems within the MCM mission package will give the Navy persistent competitive advantage as mine warfare continues to evolve.”

HASC TACAIR Mark-Up Would Assign Newest Super Hornets to Navy Reserve



PACIFIC OCEAN (May 19, 2024) An F/A-18E Super Hornet, assigned to Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 151, takes off from the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72). (U.S. Navy photo by MCI Kevin J. Steinberg)
By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The mark-up of the House Armed Services Committee’s TACAIR and Land Forces subcommittee for the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act would assign the newest F/A-18E/F Super Hornet strike fighters to the Navy Reserve.

The mark-up would “require the Secretary of the Navy to assign only to the Navy Reserve all F/A-18E/F Super Hornet aircraft procured using funds appropriated for the Navy for fiscal year 2022 or fiscal year 2023,” the text of the mark-up said.

“The Secretary of the Navy shall ensure that all covered [F/A-18] aircraft are (1) provided only to the Navy Reserve; and (2) used only to recapitalize and maintain, within the Navy Reserve (A) a deployable tactical strike-fighter capability; and (B) a threat representative adversary support

capability that may be used in support of training activities of the Department of Defense,” the document said.

The Super Hornets would be Block III versions. The only Navy Reserve squadron currently equipped with Super Hornets – Fighter Composite Squadron 12 – operates older versions of the F/A-18E.

The subcommittee’s mark-up also approved multiyear procurement authority beginning in 2025 for Marine Corps’ CH-53K King Stallion heavy lift helicopters and the T408 engines that power them.

SECNAV: Frigate Delay Due to ‘Atrocious’ Shipyard Worker Retention



Artist rendering of the future frigate USS Constellation
By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The delay in the program to build the Constellation-class guided-missile frigate (FFG) has been caused by a labor shortage brought on by poor shipyard worker retention, the secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) told a Senate committee, noting that the Navy is trying to rectify the problem by funding retention bonuses for shipyard workers.

Fincantieri's Marinette Marine shipyard in Marinette, Wisconsin, has a contract to build up to 10 FFGs for the U.S. Navy. Delivery of the first FFG, Constellation, originally was scheduled for 2026, with operational availability in 2029.

With Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Lisa M. Franchetti testifying May 16 before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the ranking member, Roger Wicker, R-Mississippi, delivered in his opening statement a criticism of the Navy's shipbuilding delays noted in the service's 45-day shipbuilding review.

“For example, the Constellation-class frigate will be three years late and will take nearly 10 years to deliver the lead ship,” Wicker said. “This is largely because the Navy cannot keep requirements steady. Almost 70 percent of the requirements have changed since the Navy signed a contract, so the outcome we see today is no surprise. This is not an example of the industry underperforming. This is senior officials unable to manage a program. This is acquisition malpractice, and a terrible waste of time and resources.”

Del Toro countered that in the case of the frigate program, the delay was the result of a “recruiting and retention problem in Wisconsin.”

The SECNAV said that Fincantieri’s “retention rate actually last year was atrocious. That is part of the reason why we have actually established up to a three-year delay in the delivery of the Constellation-class frigate. What we’re actually trying to do is put positive efforts in place to help Fincantieri get to a better place.”

Del Toro said that the Navy was investing \$750 million in the surface industrial base over the Future Years Defense Plan, including funds for Fincantieri.

“In Fincantieri alone we’ve provided \$100 million in resources to the shipyard so they could provide \$5,000 bonuses to the shipyard workers for the first year if they stayed in place throughout construction of the ship itself,” he said.

Franchetti as well said the Navy is committed to helping Fincantieri deliver on the frigate program.

“I just had the opportunity with the secretary [Del Toro] to go up to Marinette and talk with the folks there and [we’re] really committed to supporting them and addressing the workforce challenges that they have,” she said. “The frigate is an absolutely critical ship for our Navy.”