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 MC1 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.”

SAIC Advances Scalable Open-Architecture Counter-UAS Systems

From left to right: the vehicles are the Polaris MRZR, Polaris DAGOR, and the EOS Defense HMMWV, all of which are enabled by SAIC's CUAS. (SAIC photo)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — SAIC's counter-unmanned aerial system (CUAS) concepts will be further tested in a June 2024 demonstration, a company official said. The company has two types of CUAS systems deployed and is in competition for two Department of

the Navy programs.

“We’re really excited about the [June] counter-swarm demo that we’ve been selected to participate in,” said Greg Fortier, SAIC’s senior vice president for Army aviation, fires, and C2 in the Army business group, in an interview with Seapower.

SAIC, which has been developing CUAS systems for more than a decade, already has two CUAS systems fielded with U.S. agencies.

The company’s Valkyrie CUAS System is “operational in a few parts of our country,” Fortier said, with “[O]perational forces in the U.S. Army right now on a pilot type of effort. The predecessor of our system [the Medusa] is also active across the CENTCOM AOR [U.S. Central Command area of responsibility] in certain capacities, and that’s mostly with the Department of the Air Force.”

Fortier said that SAIC has “continued to evolve our solutions, continued to understand the different requirements from all of the services – frankly all of the agencies in our nation – and then really have driven for the past couple of years into a modular, 100% open system that is a scalable approach to meeting all the different threats within counter-UAS. That’s not just in the all-domain warfighting imperative but it’s also things like the border of the future as well as the general overall citizen experience for our country.

“SAIC is pivoting on five national imperatives: all-domain warfighting, undersea dominance, citizen experience, border of the future, and next-gen space. CUAS applies to four of the five across multiple agencies,” he said. “The company has multiple lines of effort with these imperatives. We go at it in terms of four phases: detect, track, identify, and mitigate. There are multiple technologies that apply across the board—kinetic and non-kinetic solutions. Every customer, every requirement is a little bit different.”

“It’s all about our open architecture that allows us to integrate very quickly to any of the different modalities that support detect, identify, track, and mitigate,” said Jeremy Davidson, SAIC’s counter-UAS lead, also speaking during the interview. “Multi-functional capability within each of those mission domains from detect to mitigate – including all of your different non-kinetic and kinetic modalities as well, including lasers, but also traditional small arms, rockets, ATM [air traffic management], drone interceptors, things like that.

“We bring all of the sensors that feed into that, from radars, to RF [radio frequency], to EW [electronic warfare], and of course the last one is the eye, which is identify where you get into your EO/IR [electro-optical/infrared] sensors,” Davidson said.

“We are a tech-agnostic integrator,” Fortier said. “We feel like we are a world-wide leader in technology agnostic integration. That makes our systems more powerful in that we can take multiple technologies as we’ve already done in the past couple of years, integrate and learn, understand, and then pass that along [and] make that connection among the multiple agencies within the United States.”

He stresses that the company’s integration of technology is not just with hardware but also with software, and that cost reduction and operational effectiveness are achieved through open architecture.

“When you have an open system, and you have an obsolete part, you can pull that part off, and if the technology or the threat changes, you can plug and play new technology at pennies on the dollar because you’re not re-integrating or re-configurating an entire system,” Fortier said.

SAIC continues to participate in multiple demonstrations for the Joint Capabilities Office and for the Department of

Homeland Security on the border, he said.

“There are two offices right now in the Department of the Navy, both of which we are pursuing,” Fortier. “We were down-selected in one of those opportunities to continue in the competition, but that competition is still active.”

The two Department of the Navy competitions are the MADIS-CES (Marine Air Defense Integrated System-CUAS Engagement System) Lethality Upgrade and Marine Corps Installation CUAS.

SAIC has 25 partners and integrates more than 45 technologies. Most of its current integration work is performed in Huntsville, Alabama. The company has had discussions with foreign countries in Europe and elsewhere about its integration technology.

Navy’s Triton UAV to Provide Targeting for LRASM

MQ-4C Triton | Credit: Northrop Grumman
By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — An upgrade to the U.S. Navy's MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial vehicle will enable it to provide targeting for the AGM-158 Long-Range Anti-ship Missile (LRASM), senior Navy officials said.

In a May 1, 2024, Nickolas H. Guertin, assistant secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition; Vice Admiral James Pitts, deputy chief of naval operations for Warfighting Requirements and Capabilities; and Lieutenant General Karsten S.Heckl, deputy commandant for Combat Development and Integration and Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, testified before the Subcommittee on Seapower of the Senate Armed Services Committee. A written joint statement was submitted for the record and provided some detail on the planned MQ-4C upgrades.

"The MQ-4 program is meeting schedule objectives, completing

Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in July 2023 with its first orbit stand up in INDOPACOM [U.S. Indo-Pacific Command," the statement said. "The Program is currently in the process of standing up its remaining two operational orbits in EUCOM [U.S. European Command] and CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command], scheduled for Q2FY24 and Q1FY25 respectively."

The MQ-4C, built by Northrop Grumman, is now deployed to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam and Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. The site of the future CENTCOM deployment has not been announced.

"The MQ-4 will undergo continuous spiral upgrades throughout the next four years, to include Link-16 targeting with LRASM in 2024 culminating in Full Operational Capability in FY28 enabling near-24/7 ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] coverage in simultaneous theaters of operation," the statement said.

The LRASM, built by Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control, is designed to be deployed on Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet strike fighters and P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, as well as Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers.

As noted in a May 1 Defense Department contract announcement, the Navy awarded Lockheed Martin a $288 million contract modification to support development of the AGM-158C-3, an extended-range version of the LRASM. The C-3 version would include "advanced communications and survivability capabilities while supporting maritime strike missions for the Navy," the announcement said.

BlueHalo to Test C-UAS System on Marine Corps JLTV

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – BlueHalo will be testing its LOCUST Laser Weapon System on a U.S. Marine Corps Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV), the company's chief executive officer (CEO) said.

BlueHalo' s primary focus is on defeating Group1, 2, and 3 unmanned aerial systems (UAS), as well as counter-rocket and counter-mortar systems, said Jonathan Moneymaker, CEO of Blue Halo, in an interview with *Seapower*.

"As the foundation of P-HEL, BlueHalo's LOCUST Laser Weapon System (LWS) combines precision optical and laser hardware with advanced software, artificial intelligence (AI), and processing to enable and enhance the directed energy "kill chain," the company said in a release. "LOCUST LWS addresses the inherent need for mobility and quick deployment—tracking, identifying, and engaging of a wide variety of targets with

its hard-kill high energy laser.

“We look at it from an integrated layered defense strategy,” Moneymaker said. “Five years ago, we saw the evolution of drone warfare, today one of the fastest-evolving threat vectors. We wanted to engage that from a variety of modalities. We offer solutions and products that range from passive detection in our Skyview product to RF detect-and-defeat in our Titan product, our LOCUST Laser Weapon System, expanding into more global C2 [command and control], and starting to expand into our next-gen kinetic interceptor.

As of April 2024, BlueHalo had delivered two P-HEL systems to the U.S. Army, which has deployed them to unspecified locations.

“It is most certainly [deployed] in areas of conflict,” Moneymaker said. “It’s real, it’s deployable, it’s reliable, and frankly needed to bring service members home.”

“We’re very proud to be the first operationally deployed [HEL] system,” Moneymaker said, noting that its system has surpassed operational 10,000 hours and that the customer having a system that “has finally reached a level of reliability that they’ve been looking for as they’ve been fielding these capabilities.”

He said that the next expansion would be a mobile high-energy laser weapon – on an infantry squad vehicle or a JLTV. The first mobile system was delivered in late March.

“The JLTV integration will be on the Marine Corps’ JLTV, so we’ve been working with all of the services as it relates to deployment of LOCUST,” he said. “We certainly have been having initial conversations with afloat Navy on how can we deploy these systems in the best configuration to counter some of the activity we’re seeing in the Red Sea.”

Moneymaker said he sees great potential in the “proven, ready

[P-HEL] system” for naval use with its roll-on/roll-off capability.

The work for the Marine JLTV is through the Department of the Navy’s Ground-Based Air Defense program, as well as through the Joint Capabilities Office and U.S. Army Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office (RCCTO).

Moneymaker said the LOCUST is very effective against a [drone] swarm, noting that the capability is part of the test criteria. The LOCUST uses Wizard artificial intelligence and machine learning for target identification and aimpoint recognition.

The P-HEL is powered by a generator or batteries, and the company is looking at how to tie the HEL into shipboard power.

The company’s HEL is built primarily at the BlueHalo campus in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with work expanding to Huntsville, Alabama, and Rockville, Maryland. BlueHalo, headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, employs 2,400 workers and is approaching revenue of $1 billion annually. The company has other facilities in Dayton, Ohio, and Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

USS George Washington Deploys to U.S. Southern Command, Eventually Headed to Japan

NORFOLK (April 25, 2024) The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS George Washington (CVN 73) departs Naval Station Norfolk, April 25, 2024, for a deployment to the U.S. Southern Command area of operations as part of Southern Seas 2024. (U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Maxwell Orlosky)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — A major homeport shift involving two Nimitz-class aircraft carriers is underway with the April 25, 2024, departure of USS George Washington (CVN 73) from Norfolk, Virginia, to the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility. The voyage will take the carrier to NAS North Island, California, where it will embark Carrier Air Wing Five (CVW-5) from USS Ronald Reagan and replace that carrier as the one forward-deployed to the U.S. Seventh Fleet in Yokosuka, Japan.

Embarked in the George Washington are the Carrier Strike Group 10 staff and aircraft and personnel of Carrier Air Wing Seven (CVW-7).

“USS George Washington (CVN 73), along with USS Porter (DDG 78) and USNS John Lenthall (T-AO 189), are scheduled to conduct passing exercises and operations at sea with partner nation maritime forces as the ships circumnavigate South America,” Commander, Naval Air Force Atlantic said in an April 24 Facebook post. “Engagements are planned with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay, with port visits planned for Brazil, Chile, and Peru.”

The George Washington was the forward-deployed carrier based in Japan from 2008 until 2015, when it was replaced in Japan by the Ronald Reagan. In 2017, the George Washington entered a Refueling and Complex Overhaul at the Huntington Ingalls Industries’ Newport News Shipbuilding yard in Virginia, an evolution that took six years, including the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The George Washington’s nuclear propulsion plant is fueled to run another 25 years.