Office of Special Projects: Protecting the Navy's Nuclear Superiority from Spies

Tugboats guide USS Minnesota (SSN783) to the pier as the Virginia-class nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine returns to Naval Submarine Base New London in Gorton, Connecticut, following a regularly scheduled deployment in November 2021. From U.S. Fleet Forces Command

WASHINGTON – When it comes to protecting the Department of the Navy's secrets, no one is better equipped than the NCIS Office of Special Projects (OSP), the Navy's elite counterespionage unit.

Comprised of Special Agents, intelligence professionals, technical and financial experts, and the NCIS Special Surveillance Team, OSP can respond globally to threats targeting Navy and Marine Corps information, personnel, and installations.

Leveraging cutting-edge investigative techniques and strong intelligence cooperation—underpinned by the Navy's growing prosecutorial strength in national security matters—OSP rapidly converts information into action, minimizing losses and mitigating risks to the Navy's superiority. These advanced capabilities, combined with NCIS's unique counterintelligence and law enforcement authority, make OSP the Department of War's preeminent weapon against adversarial intelligence services and insider threats.

OSP's strong partnerships with federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, also serve as an investigative force multiplier for cases involving civilian subjects outside the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

One such case—the investigation of Jonathan and Dianna Toebbe—illustrates the power of this collaboration.

In 2021, Jonathan Toebbe, aided by his wife, Dianna, attempted to sell highly sensitive information on the U.S. Navy's nuclear propulsion program. As a civilian nuclear engineer for the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, Jonathan had access to restricted data detailing military-sensitive design elements, operating parameters, and performance characteristics of reactors for nuclear-powered warships.

NCIS and the FBI launched a counterintelligence investigation after Jonathan sent a package containing restricted data and instructions for establishing a covert relationship—along with an offer to provide more information in exchange for cryptocurrency—to an individual whom he believed represented a foreign government. He later attempted to contact the perceived foreign representative using encrypted email. In reality, he was communicating with an undercover agent.

Over several months, Jonathan exchanged messages with the undercover agent and agreed to provide additional restricted

data in return for thousands of dollars in cryptocurrency.

Between June and August 2021, he completed two “dead drops,” delivering encrypted SD cards and receiving $100,000 in cryptocurrency. A review of the cards confirmed they contained restricted data related to Navy submarine reactors. Both Jonathan and Dianna were arrested on Oct. 9, 2021, while attempting to deliver a third SD card.

On Nov. 9, 2022, Jonathan was sentenced to more than 19 years in prison. Dianna received a sentence of more than 21 years.

“The Office of Special Projects continues to innovate to rapidly and aggressively meet adversarial threats to the Department of the Navy,” said OSP Special Agent in Charge James Allen. “Through the development and enhancement of organic capabilities, and by strategically leveraging unique partnerships, OSP remains committed to preserving warfighting superiority and enhancing the lethality of the Department of War.”

OSP specializes in conducting national security and counterintelligence investigations on behalf of the Department of the Navy. Working alongside federal partners as force multipliers, OSP identifies and disrupts threats to critical DON personnel, programs, and technologies.

GA-ASI Achieves New Milestone

with Semi-Autonomous CCA Flight

YFQ-42A Uncrewed Fighter Jet Executes Mission Autonomy Test

From General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc.

SAN DIEGO – 12 February 2026 – General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI) passed a new milestone this month, successfully integrating 3rd-party mission autonomy into the YFQ-42A Collaborative Combat Aircraft to conduct its first semi-autonomous airborne mission.

For this test, GA-ASI used mission autonomy software supplied by Collins Aerospace, an RTX business, to fly the new YFQ-42A CCA, designed and developed by GA-ASI for the U.S. Air Force. The Sidekick Collaborative Mission Autonomy software was seamlessly integrated with the YFQ-42A's flight control system, utilizing the Autonomy Government Reference Architecture (A-GRA). The integration enabled robust and reliable data exchange between the autonomy software and the aircraft's mission systems, ensuring precise execution of mission autonomy commands.

During the recent testing, autonomy mode was activated via the Ground Station Console (GSC). Once enabled, a human autonomy operator on the ground transmitted various commands directly to the YFQ-42A, which executed the instructions with high accuracy for more than four hours. This test highlights the effectiveness of Sidekick’s advanced mission autonomy capabilities and the flexibility of the A-GRA standard in supporting complex operational requirements.

“We are excited to collaborate with Collins to deliver enhanced autonomous mission solutions,” said David R. Alexander, president of GA-ASI. “The integration of Sidekick with our YFQ-42A demonstrates our commitment to innovation and operational excellence in unmanned aircraft technology.”

This achievement underscores GA-ASI’s dedication to advancing autonomous systems for defense applications. The combination of Sidekick autonomy software and YFQ-42A mission systems, connected through A-GRA, sets new benchmarks for combat autonomy, mission flexibility, operator control, and system reliability.

“The autonomy capabilities showcased in this flight highlight our dedicated investment to advance collaborative mission autonomy,” said Ryan Bunge, vice president and general manager for Strategic Defense Solutions, Collins Aerospace, an RTX business. “The rapid integration of Sidekick onto this General Atomics platform and its immediate ability to support a broad spectrum of combat-relevant behaviors underscores the strength and flexibility of our open systems approach.”

This first mission autonomy flight continues a robust YFQ-42A development schedule for GA-ASI that began in August 2025 with initial flights of YFQ-42A Tail One. In less than six months, GA-ASI has built and flown multiple YFQ-42A aircraft, including push-button autonomous takeoffs and landings.

GA-ASI has been building and flying uncrewed jets for nearly two decades, beginning with the company-funded, weaponized MQ-20 Avenger® in 2008. Ongoing company investment in Avenger continues to yield results, as the aircraft routinely serves as a CCA surrogate for advanced autonomy development and testing in both government programs and company-funded research and development.

As a family-owned, privately held defense company for more than 30 years, GA-ASI is known as one of the original disruptors in the U.S defense industry, pioneering and inventing many of the technologies now considered ubiquitous in uncrewed aircraft operations around the world. The company re-invests more than 35 percent of annual revenue into internal research and design projects, building ahead of need and designing capabilities ahead of requirements.

In 2025, for example, an internally funded Avenger demo featured both GA-ASI's TacACE autonomy software and Shield AI's Hivemind software on the same flight, with the MQ-20 seamlessly switching between AI pilots while still airborne. Later in the year, GA-ASI teamed with Lockheed Martin and L3 Harris for another Avenger flight demo, connecting the MQ-20 with an F-22 Raptor for an advanced manned-unmanned teaming mission that allowed the human fighter pilot to command the Avenger as an autonomous CCA surrogate via tablet control from the cockpit.

In 2024, GA-ASI first flew its XQ-67A Off-Board Sensing Station (OBSS) jet, developed in collaboration with Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL). This early CCA prototype validated the "genus/species" concept pioneered with AFRL as part of the Low-Cost Attritable Aircraft Platform Sharing (LCAAPS) program, focused on building several aircraft variants from a common core chassis.

GA-ASI's Gambit Series envisions multiple missionized variants from this common core concept, with XQ-67A

already showcasing airborne sensing and YFQ-42A illustrating air-to-air combat. Using this novel manufacturing approach to drive overall customer value, GA-ASI can quickly pivot to diverse missions with less time and cost investment than building a clean-sheet aircraft.

HII Places Second Nikon SLM Solutions NXG 600E Order

Long Beach, CA, USA – Nikon SLM Solutions, a unit of Nikon Advanced Manufacturing and global leader in laser powder bed fusion (L-PBF) metal additive manufacturing, today announced that HII's (NYSE: HII) Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS)

division has placed a second NXG 600E order, further strengthening its advanced manufacturing capabilities in support of U.S. Navy shipbuilding and the Maritime Industrial Base (MIB).

The order builds on a previously announced NXG 600E acquisition and reflects HII's continued investment in large-format metal additive manufacturing to enable production of large, complex components and replacement of legacy castings for critical naval applications.

Through close collaboration with HII, Nikon SLM Solutions will lead parameter development and process maturation for L-PBF production of NiAlBr components, expanding material capability for additive manufacturing within U.S. Navy supply chains and supporting long-term maritime readiness.

"This second NXG 600E order reflects HII's leadership and long-term commitment to advancing the maritime industrial base through additive manufacturing," said Hamid Zarringhalam, CEO of Nikon Advanced Manufacturing and Chairman of the Board, Nikon SLM Solutions. "Expanding critical materials capabilities such as Nickel Aluminum Bronze is a foundational part of Nikon Advanced Manufacturing's holistic approach, combining scalable platforms, material and process development, and

U.S.-based production and support. Together with HII, we are enabling additive manufacturing to move from isolated applications to a repeatable, industrial capability that supports U.S. Navy shipbuilding at scale."

Keel Laid for Future USNS Ruth Bader Ginsburg

From Team Ships, Feb. 13, 2026

SAN DIEGO - The keel for the future USNS Ruth Bader Ginsburg (T-AO 212) was authenticated at the General Dynamics NASSCO shipyard on Feb. 13. The event marked a major construction milestone for the John Lewis-class replenishment oiler.

The ship’s namesake, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, was an advocate for

justice who served on the U.S. Supreme Court for 27 years.

Keel laying authentication ceremonies are a centuries-old tradition marking a significant construction milestone where a ship transitions from design to reality. The keel was authenticated when the ship's sponsor, Jane Ginsburg, daughter of the late Justice, welded her initials onto a steel plate. This plate will be permanently affixed to the ship's hull, remaining with the vessel throughout its entire service life as a symbol of its beginning.

"This keel laying marks the first of many significant milestones for this ship and we are excited to bring this vessel to the Fleet," said John Lighthammer, program manager, Auxiliary and Special Mission Shipbuilding Program Office.

John Lewis-class replenishment oilers are a critical component of the Navy's Combat Logistics Force and are a cornerstone of the Navy's fuel delivery capability. These 746-foot vessels are engineered to provide robust support, with the capacity to carry up to 162,000 barrels of diesel ship fuel, jet fuel, and other cargo.

Operated by the Military Sealift Command, these ships enable the Navy's warships to remain at sea for extended periods, providing the fuel, supplies, and provisions necessary to sustain global missions.

As a Department of War's acquisition organization, PEO Ships is responsible for executing the development and procurement of all destroyers, amphibious ships and craft, and auxiliary ships, including special mission ships, sealift ships and support ships.

UTIC Highlights Investments, Collaboration, and Workforce Development

From The Undersea Technology Innovation Consortium, Feb. 12, 2026

MIDDLETOWN, R.I. – The Undersea Technology Innovation Consortium (UTIC) had a significant year of growth in 2025, expanding its membership and accelerating innovation in

undersea and maritime technologies.

In 2025, UTIC marked the 100th prototype project award, representing $1.5 billion in total prototype project funding to UTIC members to advance critical innovation for the U.S. Navy across the undersea tech domain. The consortium also continued its commitment to workforce development, surpassing $100,000 in awarded STEM scholarships to help build the next generation of maritime and undersea tech talent.

UTIC's membership, representing 300 organizations across over 40 states, highlights increasing national engagement from industry and academic partners. In addition, UTIC convened more than 200 undersea tech industry leaders through two Industry Days, an AUKUS Forum, and a Defense Investment Forum, creating opportunities for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and partnership.

In 2025, UTIC entered into a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA) with Naval Undersea Warfare Center (NUWC) Division Newport, strengthening collaboration to advance innovative technologies that support the U.S. Navy's most critical missions.

These milestones underscore UTIC's growing role as a national leader for collaboration, innovation, and investment in undersea and maritime technologies.

"UTIC is committed to propelling undersea tech advancement. The ongoing success of our partnership with the Navy, combined with our strong commitment to workforce development and collaboration, fosters innovation across the undersea and maritime domains," said Molly Donohue Magee, UTIC CEO.

The 2025 Annual Report is **available here**.

Military Sealift Command Delivers Needed Cargo to Antarctica

Feb. 12, 2026 | By Sarah Cannon, Military Sealift Command Pacific

The Military Sealift Command chartered heavy lift ship Plantijngracht is conducting cargo offload operations at McMurdo Station, Antarctica, as part of MSC's ongoing support of the annual Antarctic resupply mission: Operation Deep Freeze 2026.

The Plantijngracht arrived in Winter Bay, Antarctica, Feb. 4, where its crew offloaded a 65-ton floating modular causeway

system. Sections of the system were assembled on the ship's deck before being offloaded, connected and floated into place by the Army's 7th Transportation Battalion. The causeway is being used instead of the traditional ice pier this year due to the size and weight of the ship's cargo.

While the focus of the mission is on cargo delivery, the causeway system came with its own unique set of challenges that planners had to anticipate and account for to ensure a smooth operation.

"The [causeway system] adds to the overall timeline of the cargo offload. It takes approximately three to four days to build at the start of the operation and the same amount of time to break down at the end," said Marie Morrow, the ship's liaison to the Joint Task Force Support Forces Antarctica staff. "Weather starts to deteriorate quickly in the second half of February, as the summer season comes to a close, so those extra six to eight days can increase the likelihood of weather challenges."

Once the system was in place and secure, the ship was met by members of Navy Cargo Handling Battalion 1 and cargo offloading operations began. The ship is delivering 372 pieces of cargo, consisting of containers filled with dry goods and supplies needed for survival at the remote Antarctic outpost.

Logistical moves are nothing new for Military Sealift Command; in fact, around the world, they are almost a daily occurrence. However, moving cargo in the harshest environment on Earth is a mission unto itself. Antarctica is known for its bitterly cold temperatures, harsh winds, ice conditions and weather that can change in a matter of minutes. All factors that need to be considered as operations unfold.

"The austere environment adds a lot of challenges to the operation. Unpredictable weather conditions, freezing cargo gear and high winds are common hurdles faced in the

cargo operation. Ice conditions vary from year to year and bring different problems," Morrow said.

The presence of thick ice can slow down the ship's arrival at the station. Little to no ice or open water conditions can cause shoreside erosion at the wharf.

"To handle all of the challenges, we control what we can within the operation," she said. "We use past lessons learned to handle challenges that come up."

Following the offload, the ship will be loaded with containers of retrograde cargo for transportation off the continent. This includes trash and recyclable materials for disposal and equipment no longer required at the station, as well as the causeway system.

Before departing McMurdo Station, the crew will also load ice-core samples that will be stored on the ship in a subzero freezer. The samples will be delivered to the U.S. for scientific study.

"The cargo delivery from California to Antarctica is one of the longest supply chains in the world. The ship plays a huge role in delivering cargo that supplies and sustains multiple stations on the continent," Morrow said. "The crews are always quite enthusiastic to be a part of such a unique and remote operation. For most, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

US Navy transfers 10 TH-57

helicopters to Sri Lanka Air Force

Ten U.S. Navy TH-57 Sea Ranger helicopters, like the ones pictured here, are being donated to Sri Lanka under the U.S. Excess Defense Articles Program, strengthening the defense cooperation between the United States and Sri Lanka.
From Naval Air Systems Command, Feb. 12, 2026

NAS Patuxent River, Md. – The United States Navy recently transferred 10 TH-57 Sea Ranger helicopters to the Sri Lanka Air Force, strengthening the defense cooperation between the United States and Sri Lanka.

“The transfer of excess helicopters reflects the United States Navy’s commitment to international partnership,” said Naval Undergraduate Flight Training Systems Program Office (PMA-273) program manager Capt. Duane Whitmer. “By providing platforms that still have significant operational value, we aim to support the Sri Lanka Air Force’s ability to respond to

humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and training needs while strengthening the long-standing relationship between our two nations."

The U.S. donated the TH-57s to Sri Lanka in early January at no cost for the aircraft under the U.S. Excess Defense Articles (EDA) Program. The helicopters will be used for Sri Lanka's Air Force pilot training, in its operational fleet, and for disaster response and humanitarian assistance.

"Defense cooperation is an important pillar of international relations and initiatives like the transfer of excess helicopters help build trust, interoperability and mutual understanding between partner nations," said Douglas Mankin, Naval Air Systems Command's Security Cooperation Office foreign military sales lead for the Adversary and Specialized Aircraft Program Office (PMA-226). "The United States values its relationship with Sri Lanka and remains committed to working together to promote regional stability and shared security interests."

The United States Navy used the TH-57 Sea Ranger – a military derivative of the commercial Bell Jet Ranger 206 – for pilot training since it became operational in 1968 and recently replaced the aircraft with the TH-73 Thrasher.

This initiative underscores the United States' continued commitment to supporting Sri Lanka's defense readiness, humanitarian assistance efforts and long-term regional stability. The first batch of aircraft is scheduled to arrive in Sri Lanka as early as February, with additional deliveries to follow.

PMA-273 at Naval Air Station Patuxent River oversees the TH-57 and TH-73 programs. PMA-273 develops and oversees diverse and carrier-capable naval flight training systems where student pilots and undergraduate military flight officers acquire mission-critical aviation skills necessary to

carry out current and future missions of the U.S. Navy.

PMA-226 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, is responsible for 20 Type/Model/Series aircraft and airworthiness for upwards of 50 contractor aircraft. While the headquarters remains at Cherry Point, there are teams of acquisition professionals across the country managing the diverse portfolios of platforms and services.

SNC Signs Charter with Northrop Grumman and GA-ASI to Deliver Freedom Trainer for UJTS

From SNC, Feb. 11, 2026

SNC signed an Executive Charter with Northrop Grumman and GA-ASI to define an industry teaming in pursuit of the U.S. Navy's UJTS program.

Team Freedom reinforces SNC’s commitment to delivering a clean-sheet, purpose-built, high-performance trainer for the U.S. Navy with low-life-cycle cost.

This collaboration supports American manufacturing that strengthens the U.S. Defense Industrial Base and opens new opportunities for Foreign Military Sales in countries including Japan, UK, Canada, Australia and others.

SPARKS, Nev. (Feb. 11, 2026) – SNC, a global leader in aerospace and national security, today announced it signed an Executive Charter with Northrop Grumman (NYSE: NOC) and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI) to define and execute production and manufacturing teaming relationships for its Freedom Trainer™. This strategic collaboration would combine SNC’s clean-sheet design with the expertise of Northrop Grumman and GA-ASI, to deliver a zero-compromise training solution for the U.S. Navy’s Undergraduate Jet Training System (UJTS) program.

Part of SNC’s Freedom Family of Training Systems (FoTS), the Freedom Trainer is a digitally designed clean-sheet aircraft laser focused on the Naval Training mission. At its core, the Freedom Trainer is a high performance and low-life-cycle-cost design with an Open System Architecture. Digitally integrated with a comprehensive Ground-Based Training System and Integrated Logistic System, Freedom offers the Navy a modern training system-of-systems that will meet Naval Aviation training needs for generations.

The Freedom Trainer is the only UJTS entrant specifically designed to meet Naval Aviation's demanding training needs, including Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP) through touchdown. This ensures early and repetitive exposure to the Navy's unique no-flare landing technique – a crucial skill for all combat-focused naval aviators – and reduces the need for more costly basic training later in the pipeline utilizing operational, carrier-based aircraft like the F/A-18, F-35 and F/A-XX.

Northrop Grumman's extensive experience in aircraft production and investment in capacity ensures the Freedom Trainer is built with speed and to the most exacting standards. GA-ASI brings a proven track record in advanced manufacturing and cutting-edge technologies, ensuring precision and reliability at every step of the production process. Their robust capabilities complement SNC's innovative design and elite systems integration, creating a training solution that is unmatched in its performance, durability and cost efficiency.

"We are committed to bringing together a world class team to deliver the Freedom Trainer as the complete solution to prepare our naval aviators with the skills and instincts they need from the start," said Fatih Ozmen, CEO of SNC. "We look forward to welcoming Northrop Grumman and GA-ASI to Team Freedom. Together, we will shape the future of Naval Aviation training."

"For decades Northrop Grumman has been a trusted partner in producing next gen aircraft across a spectrum of capability and mission sets, with speed and at scale," said Tom Jones, president, Northrop Grumman Aeronautics Systems. "Leveraging

our experience and our investment in capacity in support of this SNC-led team, and delivering this highly capable and efficient training system to the U.S. Navy, is an opportunity we're excited to be exploring."

"GA-ASI is excited to join this industry team focused on training solutions for the U.S. Navy," said GA-ASI CEO Linden Blue. "I expect our advanced manufacturing capabilities to be an important component of Team Freedom."

The Freedom Trainer offers significant cost savings, with engine-related lifecycle costs 40 percent lower than the current T-45 platform. With 30-40% longer sortie durations than competing platforms, the Freedom Trainer maximizes instructor and student training efficiency. Digital Training System Infrastructure ensures seamless integration across all training devices, from simulators to live aircraft, while the digital data package guarantees flexibility to adapt to future mission needs. With a 16,000-hour airframe lifespan, and industry leading lifecycle cost efficiency, the Freedom Trainer is purpose-built to deliver uncompromised Naval Aviator training performance.

The Freedom Trainer replaces end-of-life U.S. Navy and International training aircraft at significantly lower O&M with a high-performance trainer aircraft that enables the U.S. Navy and Partner Nation FMS customers to meet or exceed 4th, 5th and 6th Generation aircrew training needs. Freedom is a natural FMS mechanism to build partnership capacity and further reduce Navy life-cycle costs.

The Freedom Family of Training Systems is supported by a respected team of industry leaders committed to delivering the most advanced aviation and training capabilities. SNC’s Team Freedom includes CAE-USA, Cubic, Red 6, Martin Baker and Williams International.

Team Freedom redefines the aerospace industrial base through disruptive innovation and speed combined with an open architecture approach to deliver the training capabilities the Navy wants at a lifecycle cost the Navy needs. Combining high performance and cost-efficiency in a comprehensive training package, the Freedom FoTS is setting a new benchmark for Naval Aviation training.

NAVIFOR Showcases Information Warfare Dominance at WEST 2026

Vice Adm. Mike Vernazza, Commander, Naval Information Forces, addresses a crowd industry leaders, service members and media personnel during the Armed Forces Communications & Electronics Association International. The premier naval conference and exposition on the West coast, West is now in its 36th year of bringing military and industry leaders together. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ray McCann)

by Joshua Rodriguez, NAVIFOR Public Affairs Office

11 February 2026

San Diego – SAN DIEGO – Naval Information Forces (NAVIFOR) had a significant presence at the West 2026 conference this week at the San Diego Convention Center. As a leader in the Information Warfare (IW) community, NAVIFOR highlighted its latest advancements and strategic initiatives aimed at ensuring the Navy's competitive edge in sustaining maritime dominance.

This year marked the 11th year for the Navy Information Warfare Pavilion, which featured displays, technology demonstrations,

and direct engagement with IW subject matter experts and Sailors. The pavilion served as a central hub for collaboration between the military, industry, and academia.

Further showcasing NAVIFOR's leadership, Vice Adm. Mike Vernazza, commander of Naval Information Forces, the Navy's "IBoss" participated in two key panel discussions: "What is Required to Achieve 80 percent Surge Readiness?" and "From Learning to Lethality: Accelerating Technological Leadership Through Warfighter Education."

"Our participation in these panels was a tremendous opportunity to underscore a fundamental truth: readiness and lethality are forged by our Information Warfare Sailors," said Vernazza.

"Ultimately, our goal is to provide a worldclass professional IW force, trained, equipped and certified to conduct what our Nation may ask, manned with confident, resilient Sailors who are masters of their craft."

Vernazza, also spoke at the Navy's IW pavilion, and his remarks emphasized the critical evolution of information warfare. "IW is no longer just a supporting element; we are a primary warfighting function delivering decision advantage and lethality to the fleet, from seabed to space," stated the IBoss.

His addresses underscored the command's focus on its people, readiness, and the operationalization of IW. "It cannot be understated that our people have always been and remain our greatest advantage," Vernazza emphasized. He highlighted several key initiatives driving the community forward, including:

Initiated the stand-up of Information Warfare Squadrons

(IWRONs) to place IW Commanders in command earlier, modeling the structure after Air Wings and Destroyer Squadrons. This includes the ongoing 48-month pilot program for IWRON Two on the East Coast and the upcoming IWRON on the West Coast.

Graduated the first Navy officers from the Space Force Weapons Instructor Course, integrating space knowledge directly into the Fleet and partnering with the Space Force.

Collaborated on an AI Master's Degree program with the Naval Post Graduate School, with NAVIFOR sponsoring the first cohort.

Supported the United Kingdom's 2025 deployment of the Prince of Wales with an embedded IW officer, enhancing combined capabilities.

Partnered with the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) to launch a practical, applied AI Master's Degree program for both IW and URL officers. Also, invested IW talent in the NPS AI Task Force.

Instituted "Tech Times" for IW rates around the world to provide dedicated time for Sailors to deepen their technical expertise with senior mentorship.

Launched the second round of the "Big Ideas Challenge" to crowd-source innovation from Sailors.

Shifted IW's role to a recognized Certifying Authority for the Basic Phase of training for ships, with a dramatic increase in rigor and quantifiable results. This was marked by the first-ever IW Battle "E" awards.

Solidified the concept of the Maritime Operations Centers (MOCs) as a warfighting platform, standardizing systems, updating guidance and driving toward full certification of every Fleet MOC by 2027.

Launching a pilot program, in collaboration with the surface

warfare community, to place more experienced O-4 level IW Department Heads directly onto Destroyers, pairing them with advanced IW equipment to increase capability and lethality. Vernazza's message was one of proactive innovation and an unrelenting commitment to maintaining dominance in a rapidly changing battlespace. "To get outcomes we have never had, we must do things we have never done. That is the journey we are on," he asserted, pointing to a future where IW readiness is paramount.

NAVIFOR's participation in West 2026 provided a key opportunity to demonstrate how the command is preparing for the future fight. As Vice Adm. Vernazza concluded, "The future of warfare will be won by those who can out-think, out-maneuver, and out-innovate the adversary. Naval Information Forces is ready for that challenge."

NAVIFOR's mission is to generate, directly and through our leadership of the IW Enterprise, agile and technically superior manned, trained, equipped, and certified combat-ready IW forces to ensure our Navy will decisively DETER, COMPETE, and WIN.

For more information on NAVIFOR, visit the command Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/NavalInformationForces/ or the public web page at https://www.navifor.usff.navy.mil.

Cutlass Express 2026: Innovation to Drive the Fight

Against Trafficking And Illegal Fishing

Partner nations work together using a sea vision tool called SMARTMast, during Cutlass Express 2026 (CE 26). CE 26 is one of three regional Express series exercises sponsored by U.S. Africa Command and enabled by U.S. 6th Fleet as part of a comprehensive strategy to provide collaborative opportunities amongst African forces and international partners in order to address maritime security concerns.

By U.S. Sixth Fleet Public Affairs, Feb. 11, 2026

PORT LOUIS, Mauritius – Cutlass Express 2026 (CE26) arrives at a decisive moment for maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean, where drug trafficking, human smuggling, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing continue to threaten coastal economies and regional stability. More than half of African regional economic activity relies on safe and

lawful use of the maritime environment.

Illicit maritime activity thrives in vast, lightly monitored waters, placing significant pressure on African nations charged with protecting their maritime domains. CE26 focuses on strengthening maritime governance, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and improving coordinated regional responses—core elements needed to counter these persistent threats.

“Exercises like Cutlass Express are no longer just about interoperability; they are about how fast we introduce and integrate cuttingedge technology to address realworld threats,” said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jared Bindl, Chief of Science, Technology, and Innovation at U.S. Africa Command.

STRENGTHENING MARITIME GOVERNANCE TO COUNTER TRAFFICKING AND IUU FISHING

Nations participating in CE26 train together to sharpen their ability to disrupt maritime trafficking networks and illegal fishing operations, both of which directly undermine regional prosperity. CE26 focuses on improving maritime domain awareness, building tactical interdiction skills, and enhancing informationsharing in the Maritime Operations Centers (MOCs). These capabilities are foundational to deterring illicit actors who rely on unmonitored waters to move narcotics, smuggle people, or exploit fisheries.

Protecting Africa’s maritime environment is a shared strategic priority for U.S. Africa Command and its African partners. By strengthening maritime institutions and improving coordination at sea, African partner nations are better able to safeguard coastal resources and reinforce ruleoflaw across the region.

INNOVATION AT SEA: EXPANDING PARTNERS’ ABILITY TO DETECT AND DISRUPT ILLICIT ACTIVITY

A central theme of CE26 is the adoption of practical, adaptable technologies that enhance awareness in large or remote maritime regions. SmartMast, SeaVision, and Lightfish are examples of systems that give operators a clearer picture of their waters by detecting vessel movement, highlighting nighttime anomalies and feeding realtime information into regional commandandcontrol centers. These tools enable small patrol craft to detect and report potential illicit maritime activity, including signs of illegal fishing or trafficking, and rapidly pass that information to national and regional maritime operations centers that coordinate responses

By expanding maritime awareness and improving how information moves between ships and operations centers, U.S. Africa Command and its African partners are strengthening their ability to protect coastal waters, counter illicit activity, and respond more effectively to emerging maritime threats.

BUILDING AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL RESPONSE AGAINST ILLICIT MARITIME NETWORKS

CE26 includes advanced visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) drills, commandpost exercises and informationsharing scenarios that replicate realworld interdiction operations. These events challenge partner nations to coordinate investigations, track suspicious vessels and execute controlled boardings—skills essential for counternarcotics and counterIUU fishing missions across the Western Indian Ocean.

The exercise also reinforces the importance of synchronized, multinational action. U.S. Africa Command highlights that maritime cooperation enables partners to protect territorial waters, respond to crises, and counter illegal activity that transcends national boundaries. Improving interoperability across navies and coast guards strengthens deterrence and supports regional governance efforts.

CE26 demonstrates what is possible when innovation and partnership converge. Emerging technologies, from SmartMast to unmanned vessels like Lightfish, are helping partner nations build the situational awareness needed to identify traffickers, disrupt illicit networks and prevent illegal fishing across vast maritime zones. These advances directly support the longterm stability and economic resilience of East African coastal nations.

As Lt. Col. Bindl noted, deploying new sensor technologies across the exercise “is fundamentally enhancing our collective ability to secure the seas and counter illicit maritime activities.” The result is a stronger, more integrated maritime security environment—one where partner nations have the tools, training and shared operational picture needed to defend their waters and protect the region’s future.