O-Level Reform: Lemoore Strike Fighter Squadrons Returning More Jets to Flight Line

F/A-18E Super Hornets from Strike Fighter Squadron 136 “Knighthawks” fly in formation during a photo exercise over the California coast. The Knighthawks are an operational U.S. Navy strike fighter squadron based at Naval Air Station Lemoore, California, and are attached to Carrier Air Wing One. U.S. Navy / Chief Mass Communication Specialist Shannon Renfroe

LEMOORE, Calif. – Two Navy Super Hornet squadrons at Naval Air Station (NAS) Lemoore, California, have reduced maintenance turnaround times and are boosting aircraft readiness as part of naval aviation’s maintenance reform initiatives under the Naval Sustainment System (NSS).

The NSS initiative leverages best practices from commercial industry to help reform aspects of naval aviation’s fleet readiness centers, organizational-level (O-level) maintenance, supply chain, engineering, and maintenance organizations and governance processes. Initially, the NSS is concentrating on getting the Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet fleet healthy before rolling out the approach to every Navy and Marine Corps aircraft.

Strike
Fighter Squadrons (VFA) 22 and 122 were the first to implement O-level
maintenance reforms following visits from commercial aviation consultants in
December and January.

Reforms
include assigning crew leads to manage the maintenance on each aircraft and
reorganizing hangar spaces, parts cages and tools.

Squadrons Empower Petty Officers

The most
significant change has been the delegation of ownership over each aircraft in
for repairs from the squadrons' maintenance material control officers, or
MMCOs, to individual crew leads comprised mostly of first-class petty officers.

Traditionally,
MMCOs must keep track of the status of each aircraft in for maintenance as well
as the Sailors working on them, and that's in addition to deciding what
maintenance actions are required for each jet and which aircraft are safe to
release for flight. Assigning junior-level crew leads to each jet removes some
of that burden from the MMCOs and has led to improved communication and
increased accountability.

"The crew
leads are not making the maintenance decisions; that's still done by the

maintenance controllers, but what it allows for is it sheds those maintenance control chiefs of having to know every status of every jet, of every person, all day long," said Lt. Cmdr. Brandon Michaelis, O-level reform champion for Commander, Naval Air Forces (CNAF). "So they can focus on releasing safe aircraft by empowering those first-class petty officers, who can now own that process and know where the people are, know the status of the parts, and brief that up the line."

For the petty officers accustomed to doing their job a certain way, reform did not come easy. But the benefits have been evident, said Aviation Electronics Technician 1st class Victor Perez, the leading petty officer for VFA-122's avionics shop and one of the squadron's selected crew leads.

"At first the changes didn't feel productive, because we didn't really understand it, but now that we've had some time with it, it's definitely helped improve our processes and communication," Perez said.

Used to focusing exclusively on avionics, Perez said serving as a crew lead has forced him to approach the maintenance of his assigned aircraft more holistically. The increased responsibility of bringing an entire jet back online ultimately leads to a greater sense of accomplishment, he said.

“You get kind of personal with an aircraft,” he added. “Some aircraft are easy, and some are a struggle to get through. Rather than working on a jet for a couple hours to complete the one thing assigned to your shop and then moving on to the next jet, this way you take more ownership toward completing the whole thing.”

In some cases, exceptional second-class petty officers have also been considered for crew lead, including Aviation Electrician’s Mate 2nd Class Michaela Zadra, a member of VFA-22’s quality assurance division. Having crew leads that can focus on individual jets – and communicate with the various maintenance shops – relieves maintenance control from having to keep near-constant track of as many as a dozen aircraft at a time, Zadra said.

“Crew leads have cut down on empty communication, so now I, as a maintainer who is not stuck behind a maintenance control desk, can walk around to each shop and talk to them personally,” she said. “There’s a lot more communication one-on-one, instead of one-to-one-to-one and then to maintenance control. It’s definitely helped with communication and productivity with the jets.”

In tandem with the crew lead concept has been the utilization of a whiteboard alongside

each aircraft that informs anyone passing by as to the jet's status.
Information on the boards includes the names of the crew chief and additional
personnel assigned to the aircraft, what maintenance is needed, and the
expected completion date.

"If you
physically walk through one of our hangars today, you can tell which ones have
been reformed and which ones haven't," said Vice Adm. DeWolfe H. Miller III,
CNAF. "You know the exact status of that airplane, you know who's working on
that airplane and when they expect that airplane to be up. There's going to be
a crew lead who has that ownership."

In
addition, the two squadrons have begun treating the spaces around each Super
Hornet in their hangars as dedicated workspaces, with all necessary tools and
parts kept beside the aircraft rather than back in one of the various
maintenance shops.

"We're now
treating the airplane a little more, as an analogy, like a patient getting
surgery," Miller said. "I am the doctor as the maintainer, and I said,
'scalpel,' and my tool is right there. What we're seeing with that sort of
approach, having our tools next to the airplane, having our status board next
to the airplane, everything is going to the point of action

being around that airframe, and we’re seeing a really significant improvement in our mission capable rates.”

Both squadrons have also begun keeping larger parts in a centralized “parts cage” in the hangar, dramatically reducing the amount of time Sailors spend traversing the hangar in search of equipment rather than with their hands on an aircraft.

“It may be five minutes here or five minutes there, but over the course of a day across all those technicians, that’s a lot of time saved by having those parts close to where the job is being done,” Michaelis said.

The 84-Day Corrosion Inspection

Together, the changes have helped the squadrons achieve one of the first goals of O-level reform – reducing the turnaround time for routine 84-day corrosion inspections down from 10-14 days to three days.

The 84-day inspection, so called because Super Hornets receive one every 84 days, is one of the most common checks conducted on the jet and is officially supposed to take three days.

“Our average is about 10 to 14 days,” Miller said. “It’s really important for us to

put some discipline into achieving these checks on a predictable three-day
pattern.”

After
meeting with consultants, VFA-22 was the first squadron to pilot reforms aimed
at reducing the 84-day inspection time.

“They were
able to do it in two-and-a-half shifts, and as we’ve been going through the
process with other squadrons, we realize that yes, three days in itself is
sufficient, once we weed out the inefficiencies,” said Lt. Hasely Clarke,
assistant maintenance officer for Strike Fighter Wing Pacific.

Clarke
said many of those inefficiencies arose from work centers waiting on one
another to be finished with an aircraft before beginning their own tasks.
“There was a lot of waiting time in between,” he said.

Time
management, communication and multitasking between shops have all improved
following the O-level reform, Zadra said, noting shops were encouraged to
identify which of their tasks could be performed alongside another’s
simultaneously. For instance, Zadra said she can check the lights in the
cockpit from the side of the jet while someone from the avionics shop inspects
instrumentation inside the cockpit.

“It cuts down a lot on worker hours, so we can minimize the time on the inspection,” she said.

Initial Skepticism

A former MMCO, Michaelis said he was skeptical of the O-level reforms when they were initially proposed, but has come around after seeing how VFA-22 and VFA-122 have put the reforms into practice.

“It’s been a tough pill to swallow, to see how inefficient even when I was in that position, even though I thought we were on point every single time,” he said. “To now look back and go, ‘Wow, there were a lot of places where I could have improved.’ So, that’s what’s made me a believer, is being able to look in hindsight and realize there’s tons of this stuff that I wish I had when I was an MMCO.”

Michaelis said the plan is to take the reforms to VFA squadrons at NAS Oceana, Virginia, before rolling them out across the Super Hornet community and, ultimately, to other platforms.

“As we migrate this and expand it across all type-model-series, I’m excited about what this is going to do for our future,” Miller said.

Further evidence of the reform's efficacy will come when squadrons can keep their Sailors on normal work schedules while preparing for deployments, Michaelis said.

"Before we go on detachments or on deployment, we often work Sailors 12 [hours] on, 12 off, sometimes seven days a week," he said. "The proof is when, on a Thursday, we can let our people out for a three-day weekend because our jets are up and ready to go, and we saw that recently in one of our transformed squadrons."

Schiebel Wins Norway's Tender for UAS Deployment in the Arctic

Schiebel's Camposter S-100 will start tests with the Norwegian Coast Guard in fall 2019. Schiebel

VIENNA, Austria – Norway's Andøya Test Center selected Schiebel's market-leading Camcopter S-100 vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned air system (UAS) for extensive search-and-rescue trials as part of the Arctic 2030 project, the company said in a May 2 release.

In a typical configuration, the Camcopter S-100 operates six hours

continuously and is able to simultaneously carry multiple payloads, offering significant payload flexibility to the user. Therefore, the S-100’s missions deliver aerial views that reach considerably farther than manned helicopters.

The S-100 also offers a number of key advantages for naval operations in the Arctic. As a VTOL platform, the Camcopter does not require any additional start or recovery equipment and its minimal footprint is perfect for offshore patrol vessels with small deck sizes. The S-100 also distinguishes itself through its ability to perform in the harshest weather conditions, flying at temperatures down to -40°C. This has been proven in a series of intensive trials, such as the Canadian icebreaker operations. In this particular case, the Camcopter S-100 was deployed 60 nautical miles north of Fogo Island, offshore Canada, providing a wide-view image of the ice structure as well as identifying the boundaries between flat and rough ice.

The goal of the Andøy Municipality project is a demonstration of VTOL UAS use in the Arctic region in an effort to increase maritime safety. For this purpose, the Camcopter S-100 will be equipped with an electro-optical/infrared camera gimbal, an Overwatch Imaging PT-8 Oceanwatch payload, an automatic identification system

receiver and a maritime broadband radio by Radionor. Such a combination of payloads is intended to strengthen emergency preparedness in the region and provide search and rescue mission support.

Tests are scheduled to commence in the fall of 2019 with the UAS being deployed from Norwegian Coast Guard vessels in Andfjorden, Northern Norway. More operations are planned in Spitsbergen in the spring of 2020.

“This is clearly an important milestone in the project,” said Gunnar Jan Olsen, general manager of the Andøya Test Center. “We have already gained some experience with the Schiebel Camcopter S-100 UAS during an impressive demonstration in 2017. We believe that these current, more extensive S-100 trials will demonstrate that maritime safety in the Arctic can effectively be increased with the help of VTOL UAS.”

Coast Guard Commissions Newest FRC in San Diego

Adm. Charles Ray, the U.S. Coast Guard vice commandant, delivers his remarks during the commissioning ceremony for the Coast Guard Cutter Benjamin Bottoms at Coast Guard Sector San

Diego, May 1. The Benjamin Bottoms will operate throughout the 11th Coast Guard District which includes all of California and international waters off of Mexico and Central America. U.S. Coast Guard / Petty Officer 1st Class Patrick Kelley

SAN DIEGO –

The Coast Guard commissioned the newest California-based 154-foot Fast Response

Cutter in San Diego, May 1, the Coast Guard 11th District said in a

release of the same date.

The Benjamin

Bottoms is the fourth Sentinel-Class Fast Response Cutter (FRC) to be

homeported at Base Los Angeles-Long Beach.

While these

ships will be based in San Pedro, they will operate throughout the 11th Coast

Guard District, which includes all of California and international waters off

of Mexico and Central America.

“Radioman

First Class Benjamin Bottoms is a Coast Guard hero,” said Adm. Charles

Ray, the Coast Guard vice commandant. “He was the embodiment of honor,

commitment and sacrifice – the motto of this new cutter.”

FRC’s are

154-foot multimission ships designed to conduct drug and migrant interdictions;

ports, waterways and coastal security operations; fisheries and environmental

protection patrols; national defense missions; and search and rescue.

To date, the Coast Guard has accepted delivery of more than 30 FRCs. Each ship is designed for a crew of 24, has a range of 2,500 miles and is equipped for patrols up to five days. The FRCs are part of the Coast Guard's overall fleet modernization initiative.

FRCs feature advanced command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance equipment as well as over-the-horizon response boat deployment capability and improved habitability for the crew. The ships can reach speeds of 28 knots and are equipped to coordinate operations with partner agencies and long-range Coast Guard assets such as the Coast Guard's National Security Cutters.

FRCs are named in honor of Coast Guard enlisted leaders, trailblazers and heroes. The four California-based FRCs are:

Forrest Rednour (WPC-1129): Rednour aided in the rescue of 133 people during the sinking of the U.S.A.T. Dorchester, Feb. 3, 1943. He was awarded the Purple Heart and Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his actions. Rednour lost his life in the sinking of the Coast Guard Cutter Escanaba in June 1943.

Robert Ward (WPC-1130): Ward operated beach-landing boats during the Normandy invasion. He landed his craft on the

Cotentin Peninsula and
rescued two stranded boat crews in the face of a heavily fortified enemy
assault.

Terrell Horne III (WPC-1131): Horne was murdered by suspected drug
smugglers who intentionally rammed the boat he and fellow Coast Guardsmen were
aboard during law enforcement operations near Santa Cruz Island off the
Southern California coast in December 2012. Horne pushed one of his shipmates
out of the way of the oncoming vessel attack and sustained fatal injuries.

Benjamin Bottoms (WPC-1132): Bottoms was part the Coast Guard aircrew that rescued an Army aircrew from a downed B-17 off the east coast of Greenland
in 1942. Bottoms and the pilot conducted the first landing of a cutter plane on
an icecap and commenced a two-day rescue over a rugged arctic terrain that
required multiple flights. During the second day of rescue operations, radio
contact with Bottoms' plane was lost and he was declared missing in
action.

HII Delivers Eighth National

Security Cutter Midgett to U.S. Coast Guard

With the signing of ceremonial documents, custody of the National Security Cutter Midgett is officially transferred to the U.S. Coast Guard. Left to right: Cmdr. Brian Smicklas, Midgett's executive officer; Capt. Travis Carter, commanding officer, Project Resident Office Gulf Coast; and Derek Murphy, HII's NSC program manager, perform the ceremony. Derek Fountain/Huntington Ingalls Industries

PASCAGOULA, Mississippi – Huntington Ingalls Industries' Ingalls Shipbuilding division delivered the National Security Cutter Midgett (WMSL 757) to the U.S. Coast Guard on May 1, the company said in a release. Midgett is scheduled to sail away in June and will be commissioned later this year.

"We have a mission statement in the NSC program that says during the construction of each NSC we will provide the men and women of the United States Coast Guard with the finest ship in their fleet," said Derek Murphy, NSC program manager. "This excellence will be provided by our shipbuilders through working safely, attention to detail and ownership of work. Since the beginning of construction on NSC 8, we've seen an amazing transformation, made possible by the thousands of people who poured their heart and soul into this ship."

> *"From a homeland security and defense perspective, this ship provides unmatched command and control."*
>
> *Cmdr. Brian Smicklas, Midgett's executive officer, acting*

commanding officer

Ingalls has now delivered eight Legend-class NSCs and has one more under construction and two more under contract. Stone (WMSL 758) is scheduled for delivery in 2020. In December of 2018, Ingalls received two fixed-price incentive contracts with a combined value of $931 million to build NSCs 10 and 11.

“From a homeland security and defense perspective, this ship provides unmatched command and control,” said Cmdr. Brian Smicklas, Midgett’s executive officer and acting commanding officer.

Midgett navigates the Gulf of Mexico during her builder’s trials on Jan. 22. Video by Derek Fountain/Huntington Ingalls Industries

“We’ve reached a number of accomplishments and milestones up to this point. However, there’s more work to do on the water. We have record drug flows in the eastern Pacific, and there are traditional Western Hemisphere missions that our Coast Guard brothers and sisters are conducting on the water every day. We also see a large increase in demand for the geographic combatant commanders for this specific National Security Cutter capability, and we’re excited to fill that and be a part of the national fleet.”

NSC 8 is named to honor the hundreds of members of the Midgett family who have served in the U.S. Coast Guard and its predecessor services. At least 10 members of the family earned high honors from the Coast Guard for their heroic lifesaving deeds. Seven Midgett family members were awarded the Gold Lifesaving Medal, the Coast Guard’s highest award for saving a life, and three were awarded the Silver Lifesaving Medal.

Navy Leaders to Meet May 16 to Assess Sub Construction Delays, Columbia Class Schedule, Secretary Tells House Panel

An artist rendering of the future Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine. U.S. Navy leaders will meet with industry officials in May to examine how they can add more space in the tight schedule to build the first of the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer said. U.S. Navy illustration.

U.S. Navy leaders will meet with industry officials in May to examine how they can improve the increasingly challenged submarine

production program and try adding more space in the tight schedule to build the first of the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer said April 30.

The Navy would like to increase the production of its Virginia-class attack submarines from two a year to three to stop the decline in the already inadequate number of attack boats. But that pace is hampered by the fact that the two shipyards building those boats also are responsible for getting the Columbia class into service by 2031, when the Navy's Ohio-class boomers will be unable to continue their crucial strategic deterrence patrols, Spencer said.

"We do have concerns," Spencer told the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee. To address those issues, the Navy will sit down with industry leaders May 16 to assess the sub construction yards and the supply chain and seek to "build in margin where we can" for the Columbia-class schedule.

"If we do not, it will run off the rails," Spencer said in response to questions from the panel responsible for providing the money the Navy Department will need for all its programs.

In addition to the questions the appropriators had about the Columbia class, the Navy's self-declared No. 1 procurement priority, the subcommittee's chairman, Rep. Pete Visclosky (D-Indiana), hounded the Navy

leaders on the chronic problems in submarine maintenance and acceptance of new warships with multiple material problems.

Visclosky pointed out that three of the older Los Angeles class attack submarines – Boise, Columbus and Hartford – are no longer certified to submerge because they have not received maintenance that is overdue. He emphasized that Boise was scheduled to go into the repair yard in 2013 but still is waiting for an opening.

And Visclosky was particularly troubled by the Navy failing to request funds to repair the three inoperable submarines in its regular fiscal 2020 budget request but added them to the unfunded requirements list.

Spencer and Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John M. Richardson conceded they were having trouble getting submarines into required maintenance, which was aggravating the inability to meet combatant commanders' requests for the attack boats, with some reports putting the shortfall as high as 50 percent.

The two Navy leaders argued that the submarine maintenance problem stemmed from the sharp reduction in funding during the years when the Budget Control Act forced sequestration.

But Visclosky replied that "sequestration happened some time ago" and Congress "provided a lot of money" the last two years.

Spencer said the shipyards cut their skilled work force during the lean years and are now working to replace those

workers and improve their aged facilities. He and Richardson emphasized the Navy's program to modernize the government-owned shipyards and to incentivize the private yards to also update and expand.

Visclosky also demanded the Navy provide details on the problem highlighted in a recent Government Accountability Office report showing a long list of new ships the Navy has accepted from the builders with a range of deficiencies. He stressed the aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78), the first in its class of aircraft carriers, is not expected to be operational until 2023, nearly five years later than expected because of numerous construction deficiencies.

The chairman wanted to know how the cost of correcting those flaws was divided between the Navy and its contractors, noting that GAO indicated the government has been paying 96 percent. Spencer promised to provide the data.

Boeing's MQ-25 Prototype Will Save the Navy 18 Months of

Development

ARLINGTON, Virginia – The existence of a working prototype of the Navy's MQ-25A Stingray carrier-based aerial refueling UAV will save 18 months of development time and could be a factor if the Navy decides to move up the date of the aircraft's Initial Operational Capability (IOC), currently planned for 2024.

"Eighteen months of early learning is the biggest step" to pushing up IOC, said Dave Bujold, Boeing's MQ-25 program director, speaking to reporters April 29 at Boeing's facility in Arlington.

Boeing built its company-owned prototype, called T-1, for the canceled UCLASS (Unmanned Carrier-Launched Aerial Surveillance and Strike) UAV program and, unlike its competitors, had the prototype on hand for the MQ-25 competition. T1 has not yet flown but has participated in taxi tests and overnight on April 28 was transported from the St. Louis, Missouri, plant to Mid-America airport in southern Illinois for additional ground tests and eventually its first flight.

Boeing expects to fly T-1 later in 2019.

Bujold said that T-1 is a "very strong representation of the EMD [engineering and manufacturing development] aircraft" and that waiting for the first EMD aircraft to emerge from the factory would add 18 months to the program.

At Mid-America, T-1 will receive the aerial refueling system of the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet strike fighter and the Joint Precision Aircraft Landing System. The plan includes, in addition to more ground testing, a "couple hundred flight hours," Bujold said.

Eventually, T-1 will be transported to participate in risk-reduction deck handling trials on board an East Coast aircraft

carrier.

Testing is planned to continue through fiscal 2021, the year the first EMD MQ-25A is completed. Bujold said the design will be frozen sometime in 2020.

He said that a factor that could help speed up development is the fact that Navy program officials are embedded with Boeing officials in a common government maritime acceleration team. Rather than having to communicate with stacks of documents, Boeing and Navy officials operate through a shared network drive, a method that, he said, “speeds up acquisition,” using “rolling [program] reviews.”

Australia to Purchase Second Triton UAV

CANBERRA, Australia –The Australian government has agreed to purchase a second MQ-4C Triton, Northrop Grumman Corp., manufacturer of the aircraft, said in a release.

Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper identified the requirement for seven high-altitude, long-endurance Triton unmanned aircraft. Northrop Grumman will deliver the Triton through a cooperative program with the U.S. Navy.

“Northrop Grumman is excited to develop this unrivaled capability for the Royal Australian Air Force,” said Doug Shaffer, vice president and program manager for the Triton at the company. “Triton will provide the Australian Defence Force a high-altitude, long-endurance system for intelligence, reconnaissance and broad-area surveillance missions to enhance

the security of Australia's borders."

Defence Minister Christopher Pyne identified "people smuggling and the exploitation of our natural resources" as threats that Triton's capabilities can help to address.

Minister for Defence Industry Linda Reynolds identified the opportunities this program will create for Australian industry and said that "there will be significant opportunity for Australian industry to share in billions of dollars of system maintenance and network management functions."

Northrop Grumman is committed to developing a sovereign defense capability for Australia through industrial partnership and participation, direct investment and technology transfer, the company said.

CNO Warns Forum of Challenges of 'Great Power Competition'

With the return of the "Great Power Competition," the U.S. Navy's top officer on April 29 emphasized the need to strengthen ties with allies and partner nations and to condition commanders to avoid turning at-sea incidents into major battles while giving them training that prepares them to fight those battles if necessary.

The Navy also must ensure it acquires new technologies that will win a future war, rather than preserving current capabilities, and that it conducts futuristic training to build a flexible and resilient force that can cope with the unexpected challenges of the future, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John M. Richardson told the Future Security Forum in

Washington, D.C.

“One thing that characterizes our view of success is how we move forward,” Richardson said. The worst thing the Navy could do is remain static, he said.

“What is more relevant for the future? Is it the Harry S. Truman or something else,” he said, noting that revolutionary technologies “are just around the corner.”

The CNO was responding to a question about the Navy’s fiscal 2020 proposal to retire the aircraft carrier Truman at midlife – rather than refueling her – to free up funds to develop the future technologies. That proposal is opposed by key leaders in Congress.

Asked how the Navy was preparing for the return of the “Great Power Competition” with an increasingly antagonistic Russia and rapidly modernizing China, Richardson said it was important to think of tensions in the Black Sea and the western Pacific as regional, not bilateral issues and to help “make all our allies and partners more resilient to this. … How do we reply as an alliance, a team.”

He also stressed the need to be able to respond faster to the competitors’ actions and “to anticipate what the adversary is going to do, and not be reactive.”

Richardson said the Navy also spends a lot of time focusing on things that can happen at sea and doing everything it can “to mitigate the risk” of those contacts with Russian or Chinese ship escalating into a clash. That includes the protocols they have with China “on what to do when we meet at sea,” to communicate and not overreact.

He said he makes that point in his frequent contacts with his peers in the Chinese navy.

“If we don’t consider each other as enemies, don’t act as

enemies” when meeting at sea, he said.

Asked if he was concerned that the Navy has not had to fight a major blue water battle since World War II, Richardson said “it’s a real challenge.” He said that he had a discussion of that issue during a recent visit to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and during a dinner with a group of future ship commanders.

“It’s about training. How to make it as challenging, as demanding as possible,” and addressing the challenge of training commanders “to exercise the full scope of their authority.”

He also emphasized the need to use simulation and virtual reality to make training more realistic and to better train Sailors to prepare for the challenges of the future.

Sailors, Marines Head to Australia for 6 Months of Intense Training, Exercises With Pacific-Area Allies, Partner Nations

U.S. Marines with Mike Battery, 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, fire an M777 Howitzer at known targets during training last August at Mount Bundey Training Area, Northern Territory, Australia, during MRF-D 2018. Credit: MARINE CORPS / Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Wetzel

A combined-arms task force of about 1,700 U.S. Marines and

Sailors have deployed into Australia for six months of intensive training and an array of exercises that will involve contact with perhaps a dozen allies and friendly nations in strategically vital Southeast Asia and the southern Pacific.

The deployment, called Marine Rotation Force-Darwin (MRF-D) 2019, will provide the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) a smorgasbord of training – some in jungle and mountain terrain – practicing amphibious and humanitarian-assistance, disaster-relief operations and combined-arms, live-fire drills in a training area the size of Connecticut, said Marine Col. Charles A. Western, the liaison officer to Australian Defense Forces for Marine Forces Pacific.

Asked the value of the Darwin rotations, Western emphasized "readiness."

Noting that he had made three deployments to Okinawa with an infantry battalion, he said, "When you go to Okinawa, you are at the top of your readiness spectrum when get there," having conducted all the extensive pre-deployment training, including live-fire drills.

But in Okinawa "some of the training is circumscribed by what you can fire, by how big the training areas are," Western said.

What Darwin and the Northern Territory of Australia provides "is the ability to maintain that level of training when deployed, if not increase it. … When they deploy here, along with the Australians, they focused on their training and their readiness. So, it's really a great opportunity for them to come out here," he added.

"Speaking from a tactical level, this is me with my Marine infantry hat on, the biggest reason for us to come to Australia is this big, huge training area – the Bradshaw Field Training Area."

The MAGTF also will participate in numerous multilateral exercises along the northern and eastern coast of Australia and as far away as Thailand, building relations with close allies and partner nations, Western said.

“That’s one of the pillars of MRF-D, the multilateral engagement. We are arm-in-arm with the Australians in everything we do. And there are 10 or 11 multilateral events that we participate in while we’re here.”

The MRF-D deployments have gradually increased in size since the first Marine Rotation Force-Darwin in 2012, taking advantage of the extensive open area and established Australian bases in the sparsely populated Northern Territory and building on a century of close relations with the Australian military.

“Last year, 2018, was designated the Year of Mateship,” Western said, a play on the Australian habit of calling friends “mates.” Last year marked 100 years since U.S. troops fought alongside the Australian Army in World War I in Europe. “We’ve been shoulder-to-shoulder everywhere since.”

U.S. and Australian forces also fought together extensively in the southern Pacific during World War II and again in Korea, Vietnam and some of the 21st-century fights against violent extremists.

MRF-D 2019 involves a MAGTF that consists of an aviation combat element (ACE), Medium Tilt-Rotor Squadron 363 from Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii; a ground combat element (GCE), 1st Battalion, 1st Marines; a logistical combat element (LCE); and a command element from Camp Pendleton, California, Western said.

VMM-363, a MV-22B squadron with 10 tilt-rotor Ospreys, will be augmented by four AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters and three UH-1Y Venom utility choppers.

The force of 1,705 Marines and Navy support personnel, such as doctors, nurses, medical corpsmen and chaplains, may be augmented by additional Marines for Exercise Koolendong, the capstone event at the end of the rotation, he said.

U.S. forces began arriving in April and will depart in October.

Capt. Benjamin J. O'Donnell, an infantry officer with 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, views targets while providing indirect fire support from M777 artillery, 81 mm mortars and close air support during training last year at Mount Bundey Training Area, Northern Territory, Australia, during Marine Rotation Force Darwin 2018. Credit: MARINE CORPS / Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Wetzel

The GCE and LCE will be based initially at Robertson Barracks in Darwin and the ACE at Royal Australian Air Force Base Darwin. During the rotation, the Marines will conduct training and exercises at the Bradshaw and Mount Bundy training areas in Northern Territory, a jungle training area on the east coast, and at multiple other locations along the east coast for Talisman Saber 19 and other bilateral and multilateral events, Western said.

Talisman Saber is a U.S. Pacific Command exercise, held every two years, that will involve U.S. Navy ships, the MRF-D Marines, Australian, Japanese and Canadian forces and "a bunch of other nations participating," Western explained.

"A big chuck of Talisman Saber is really about sea power, with the Marines and Australians and the Japanese Army amphibious forces." U.S. Marines will embark on U.S. or Australian amphibious ships and conduct combined amphibious operations with the Australian landing forces.

"All the [U.S.] services are involved. It's a joint and combined exercise with the Australians," Western said. "So, the U.S. Air Force is coming down.

“The MRF-D is really just a small part of that,” he said, providing forces to the Okinawa-based III Marine Expeditionary Force, which will command the combined landing force.

MRF-D also will participate in exercise Southern Jackeroon, which will be conducted in the Australian training area, with Australian, Japanese and U.S. Army elements, Western said. They also will provide some subject matter expertise in engineering to the Australians, “a train-the-trainer kind of thing. And we are participating aboard the HMAS Canberra, one of their LHDs [amphibious assault ships] in an exercise in Thailand.

“We are providing some Marines to PacFleet for one of their CARAT exercises, which goes throughout the Pacific area,” he added.

CARAT, or Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, is an annual series of bilateral exercises conducted by the Pacific Fleet with countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand have participated in previous CARATs.

Other multilateral exercises the Marines will participate in include Exercise Carabaroo, with the Philippines and Australia; Southern Jackeroo, with Japan and Australia; and Indo-Pacific Endeavor, Western said. Carabaroo, which combines the names of the Philippine carabao and the Australian kangaroo, is an urban warfare training exercise conducted in Australia.

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller said in a March 18 memo to Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer that the unbudgeted assignment of Marines to the Mexican border, the unfunded Pentagon-directed force increase for MRF-D, the need to repair more than $1.7 billion in damage to two East Coast Marine bases and other unexpected activities are “imposing

unacceptable risks to Marine Corps combat readiness and solvency."

The unexpected diversion of personnel and funds could force him to reduce support for Talisman Saber and cancel several planned international exercises, including two with Indonesia, Neller said in the March 18 memo.

Western said he is "tracking the possible impact of budget shortfalls. They will not affect the bulk of MRF-D that begins flowing in next month, just the possible Force Enhancement deployment of the Hawaii-based infantry battalion later in the summer."

Some of the MRF-D Marines will take advantage of their deployment to conduct training at the Australian jungle training center, experience that could be increasingly important given the growing focus on Asia.

"Koolendong is really our capstone exercise, a combined force exercise with the Australians," Western said. It comes at the end of the deployment, so they can demonstrate the skills built up during the six months in Australia, he said.

"We bring all elements of the MAGTF together to conduct a live-fire exercise" in the vast Australian training area. "It's an opportunity to do a MAGTF-level live-fire event," something that is difficult to achieve in other training ranges.

Although Koolendong is conducted primarily with the Australians, French troops also will be involved, Western said. "They send a platoon out every year" from their base in New Caledonia, he said.

The level of international engagements by MRF-D is increased because Australia makes a point of inviting the militaries from nations in the region to participate in or observe their exercises with the U.S. forces, Western said.

“It’s their country, and we are more than willing to work with the Australians in their efforts to invite multiple countries to come down and participate. Every year, they have an international observers program in which they bring senior international military officers from the region down to Darwin to see what the Marine Corps and the Australians are doing. It is a bit of outreach,” he said.“Regional engagement is one of our pillars for the MRF-D program.” ■

USS America, USS New Orleans to Forward Deploy to Japan; USS Stethem, USS Wasp to Return to U.S.

PEARL HARBOR (Jan. 23, 2018) The amphibious assault ship USS America (LHA 6) and its amphibious ready group (ARG) are moored at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam.

SASEBO, Japan – The Navy announced that the amphibious assault ship USS America (LHA 6) and landing platform dock USS New Orleans (LPD 18) will become part of the U.S. 7th Fleet forward-deployed forces in Sasebo, Japan, the commander, Naval Forces Japan Public Affairs, said in a release.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Stethem (DDG 63) will shift its homeport to San Diego for its midlife modernization and the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp (LHD 1) will shift its homeport to Norfolk, Virginia, to undergo scheduled maintenance.

America is capable of supporting the F-35B Lightning II, the

Marine Corps vertical-lift variant of the Joint Strike Fighter, as part of an embarked U.S. Marine Corps Air Combat Element.

The United States values Japan’s contributions to the peace, security and stability of the Indo-Pacific and its long-term commitment and hospitality in hosting U.S. forces forward deployed there. These forces, along with their counterparts in the Japan Self-Defense Forces, make up the core capabilities needed by the alliance to meet our common strategic objectives.

The security environment in the Indo-Pacific requires that the Navy station the most capable ships forward. This posture allows the most rapid response times possible for maritime and joint forces and brings our most capable ships with the greatest amount of striking power and operational capability to bear in the timeliest manner.

Maintaining a forward-deployed force capability supports the U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan and the security and stability of the vital Indo-Pacific region.

America will provide the Marine Corps with a means of combat operations utilizing the F-35B fighter. New Orleans is capable of ship-to-shore movement by tilt-rotor and helicopter. In addition to combat operations, both ships can conduct humanitarian-assistance operations.