Exercise Digital Talon Advances Unmanned Lethality at Sea



ARABIAN GULF (Oct. 26, 2023) A MARTAC T-38 Devil Ray unmanned surface vehicle, equipped with a Lethal Miniature Aerial Missile System, operates in the Arabian Gulf, Oct. 26. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command recently completed Exercise Digital Talon, demonstrating the ability of unmanned platforms to pair with traditionally crewed ships in "manned-unmanned teaming" to identify and target hostile forces at sea. Then, using munitions launched from another unmanned platform, engaged and destroyed those targets. **(Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jacob Vernier)**
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MANAMA, Bahrain – U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) is advancing lethality and the combat capabilities of unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) during live weapons firing exercises in the international waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula, Oct. 23.

The firing exercises were conducted as part of Exercise Digital Talon and constituted the first use of lethal munitions from USVs in the Middle East region.

During the exercise, NAVCENT's Task Force 59, the Navy's first Unmanned and Artificial Intelligence Task Force, demonstrated the ability of unmanned platforms to pair with traditionally crewed ships in "manned-unmanned teaming" to identify and target simulated hostile forces at sea. The hostile forces were represented through the use of a target boat. Then, using live munitions launched from another unmanned platform, NAVCENT forces engaged and destroyed the targets.

During multiple firing events, a MARTAC T38 Devil Ray USV, equipped with a Lethal Miniature Aerial Missile System, successfully scored direct hits each time. A human operator ashore at Task Force 59's Robotics Operations Center made the engagement decisions.

Digital Talon was coordinated with and supported by Commander, Special Operations Forces Central Command.

This exercise is the second time in as many months the U.S. Navy has successfully demonstrated advanced unmanned capabilities in the region, according to Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, NAVCENT commander. In September, unmanned underwater surface and aerial vehicles were able to track Iranian Navy and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy ships and small boats over several days during routine patrols in and around the Strait of Hormuz.

"We are focused on the operational application of new, cutting-edge unmanned systems and artificial intelligence technologies. Last month, we integrated 12 different unmanned platforms with manned ships for 'manned-unmanned teaming' operations to conduct enhanced maritime security operations in the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula," he said. "During Digital Talon, we took a significant step forward and advanced our capability to the 'next level' beyond just maritime domain awareness, which has been a traditional focus with Task Force 59. We have proven these unmanned platforms can enhance fleet lethality. In doing so, we are strengthening regional maritime security and enhancing deterrence against malign activity."

Looking ahead, Cooper said, he expects to see the progress expand in scale and impact, including future exercises expanding the arsenal of combat-capable unmanned systems.

"I'm excited about the direction we're headed," he said.

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet's area of

operations encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. This expanse, comprising 21 nations, includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab al Mandeb.