Mission in Gulf of Guinea a ‘Learning Experience’ for American Personnel, Navy Officer Says



The Spearhead-class expeditionary fast transport ship USNS Carson City (T-EPF 7) arrives in Sekondi, Ghana, in support of its Africa Partnership Station deployment on July 21. Carson City is deployed to the Gulf of Guinea to demonstrate progress through partnerships and U.S. commitment to West African countries. U.S. Navy/John McAninley

The U.S. military training engagements with less-developed militaries, such as the ongoing African Partnership Station mission in the Gulf of Guinea, are also a learning experience for the American personnel because it can expose them to the level of military technology they could encounter in counter-insurgency missions, a senior Navy officer said.

“We are blessed with the resources we have. But we do understand that a lot of these nations … are still developing those capabilities,” Capt. Frank Okata, commander Task Force 63 in the U.S. Navy Europe-Africa Command, said Aug. 7. “We do feel it is important that we demonstrate and train at their level.”

“It also helps us, too. It helps our [civilian] mariners, our Sailors, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines with greater mental agility and flexibility when we deploy to an unanticipated place, because we’ve been

exposed, over the length of our careers, been exposed to the very high-end
machinery of warfare to the very low end," Okata said in a telephone briefing
from Naples.

U.S. Sailors, Coast Guardsmen and Portuguese marines observe as Ivorian sailors conduct visit, board, search and seizure exercises while the USNS Carson City was in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, on July 17. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ford Williams

"As we see in the continuing instability in the world that gravitates
to the lower end of warfare, …

it is important that we also know how to operate at the
level of our partners," he said.

Okata was briefing a few reporters in the Pentagon on the current partnership engagement mission of the USNS Carson City to half a dozen
nations along the Gulf of Guinea. The expeditionary fast transport ship with a
civilian master and crew was reinforced by a military detachment of U.S. Sailors,
a Coast Guard law enforcement team, medical and religious personnel, plus
Portuguese, Spanish and Italian sailors.

"This kind of engagement is instrumental in improving
maritime security along the African coast line, territorial seas and exclusive
economic zones, so that our African partners can be successful and prosperous,
securing their waterways and maintaining surveillance," Okata said.

Cmdr. Tyrone Bruce, commander of the military detachment on

Carson City, said the Sailors have repaired small boats, conducted routine maintenance and “worked side by side with our partners, sharing best practices, tactics, techniques and procedures.” And, Bruce said, “we’ve learned ourselves.” They also had a medical detachment that provided a variety of medical care and training, several chaplains who interacted with local religious leaders and an eight-piece band that performed at every stop.

Asked if the partnership mission was an effort to counter the extensive activities in Africa by China, Okata said, “We are keenly aware that the People’s Republic of China is also trying to make in-roads in West Africa,” including “some significant investments in infrastructure construction that could be used for different purposes than what we are trying to do. With Carson City, we are trying to share skill sets, to help these countries so they can surveil their economic zones.”

“We’re not there to build infrastructure, not there to build an enduring presence,” he added.