New facility at San Nicolas Island doubles target launch capacity



A GQM-163 target launches from San Nicolas Island as part of a quad-launch.
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SAN NICOLAS ISLAND, Calif.—Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division leaders, joined by Naval Surface Warfare Center – Port Hueneme Division, Naval Facilities Command, and Naval Base Ventura County leaders, cut the ribbon Aug. 20 on a new facility at San Nicolas Island that doubles the command's capacity for launching supersonic targets on the Point Mugu Sea Range.

The ground-launched GQM-163A Supersonic Sea Skimming Target is capable of maneuvering to simulate current threats facing the fleet and is a critical test and training asset for the Navy. NAWCWD's Threat/Target Systems Department operates two launchers on SNI that together can launch four targets

simultaneously, allowing sailors to train and qualify against multiple incoming threats – a more realistic scenario than single launches.

That more complex training is especially critical given the escalating tensions abroad.

“The threat environment is changing every day, and we must change and grow with it,” said Rear Adm. Keith Hash, NAWCWD commander. “Being able to present multiple, realistic threats is critical to ensure we deliver our warfighters a decisive advantage so they can deter aggression and, if necessary, win in conflict and return home safely.”

“For the past two years, our surface Navy has been taking the fight, taking the shots, on the other side of the world,” said Capt. Anthony Holmes, commanding officer for NSWC-PHD. “Our warfighters are being asked to fight and use their ships and weapons in ways they never thought they would.”

The new facility, a high explosive magazine, paired with a recently completed missile assembly building, allows NAWCWD to build and store eight GQM-163 targets every eight weeks, doubling the previous capacity of four targets. The Coyote, as the target is called, is nearly 20 feet in length, 30 with its booster attached. That extended size necessitated a much larger storage facility than previously existed at SNI.

“We started this project in 2016 when PEO (IWS) came to us looking to do 30-plus launches a year. At the time, our assembly buildings could only build two each – so a maximum of four,” said Kevin Gross, TTSD director. “We began what became known as MILCON P-586 for both facilities, but due to funding it was split into two phases. The increase in capacity and capability with this project was only possible because of the funding and support from OPNAV N94.”

The first facility completed was a Missile Assembly Building in December 2022. That allowed more targets to be assembled on

site, but storing so many targets was still an issue until the HEM was completed in June 2025 and obtained its final explosives safety certification Aug. 13.

The HEM’s ability to store up to 10 assembled targets and boosters significantly reduces the timeline for conducting final tests and acceptance prior to launches. The team can conduct two quad launches in a 24-hour period with two back-up targets ready to launch into the Point Mugu Sea Range, the Department of Defense’s largest and most extensively instrumented overwater test range.

“The Range is so valuable to the Surface Navy and the Navy writ large. Threats are getting more complex, and the expanded capabilities this new facility brings are critical to ensuring our Sailors are ready to face them” said Capt. Anthony Holmes, NSWC-PHD commanding officer.

Naval Base Ventura County, which encompasses Point Mugu, Port Hueneme, and SNI, also hosts three warfare centers including NAWCWD and NSWC-PHD. The partnerships between the warfare centers, particularly on the Range, are critical to ensuring effective, efficient weapons testing and surface fleet training.

“The unique capabilities here at NBVC are force multipliers that ensure our Navy’s research and development, test and training, and deployable forces are equipped to meet today’s needs and tomorrow’s challenges,” said Capt. Daniel Brown, NBVC commanding officer.

The HEM is already in use, just in time for fleet training this fall.