

SECDEF Tours Navy EOD to Assess Unmanned Capabilities



Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper visits Naval Base Point Loma for an unmanned underwater vehicle demonstration, Point Loma, California, Sept. 17, 2020. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE / Lisa Ferdinando

SAN DIEGO – Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper visited components of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group (EODGRU) 1 at Naval Base Point Loma, California, Sept. 17, to learn how Navy EOD is building a more lethal, agile and resilient force by augmenting human expertise and decision-making with autonomous unmanned systems (UMS) capabilities for the fleet and Joint Force.

While meeting with Esper, EODGRU-1 Commodore Capt. Oscar Rojas described how Navy EOD is an integral member of the UMS triad, which is composed of the surface, subsurface and expeditionary (EOD and Naval Special Warfare) communities.

The UMS triad enables strategic effects by leveraging cutting-edge technologies to pair real-time, relevant information with immediate tactical options to deter adversaries in the maritime environment.

“We are enhancing our human-machine teaming efforts to more efficiently illuminate and eliminate or neutralize surface and undersea threats,” said Rojas. “Our UMS systems development efforts are at the front of autonomous capabilities to recognize, analyze, communicate and take appropriate response to various threats. This could involve neutralizing the threat, alerting a human operator or networking with other UMS systems, all to offer commanders the most advantageous results at a specific time and place.”

Rojas also described how the Navy EOD Expeditionary Mine

Countermeasure (ExMCM) companies help maintain freedom of navigation in denied waterways, in war and in daily competition. Created to help address the long-standing challenge of clearing naval minefields and explosive threats, ExMCM companies are used by operational commanders to maintain the military advantage before and after a threat is placed in the water. Expanded and enhanced commander's awareness and layered options result from advancing the use of the unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) and remotely operated vehicles (ROV) embedded within the ExMCM company. Each company has 30 Sailors, tailorable to teams as small as two based on mission requirements.

"Our ExMCM companies are essential to supporting fleet and Joint Force objectives, across all environments. They are not constrained to a specific craft, allowing them to deploy from air, land and sea to neutralize surface and subsurface threats," said Rojas.

Lt. Nick Stoner briefed Esper on current and next-generation technologies in UUVs and ROVs, much of which Navy EOD is already using in operations.

"It was an honor to talk with Secretary Esper about how we are advancing artificial intelligence and human-machine teaming in our operations today," said Stoner, an EOD officer with EODGRU-1 who works on Navy EOD maritime and underwater capability development. "We are developing, implementing and rapidly adapting the vanguard of available technology for small and medium UUVs and ROVs to enhance our capability as a force and support the National Defense Strategy.

"A cornerstone of our success has been close relationships with our engineering teams. There is constant, two-way feedback between them and the users in the field, which allows for ongoing system updates and modifications to increase capabilities," said Stoner. "It has been, and continues to be, a team effort."

Developing future technology for Navy EOD also involves innovative acquisitions strategies, said Rojas. This includes collaborating with the Navy's Expeditionary Program Office and DOD's Defense Innovation Unit to capture current operational challenges and streamline the procurement process to rapidly address them.

"This allows Navy EOD to accelerate the adoption of emergent commercial technology so we can pace, and outperform, adversary threats to the fleet and Joint Force that threaten sea control and power projection," Rojas said.

The EOD operators in the field also play a critical role in refining Navy EOD technologies and systems, said Rojas.

"Our Sailors use these tools daily and understand the challenges. We empower them to give the design-to-employment team direct feedback to rapidly find solutions to any issues that might arise," Rojas said, adding that personnel conduct an in-depth, post-deployment analyses with Navy EOD leadership, as well as program management and engineering teams. This touch point drives down the time it takes to get new technology to the force and ensures prioritization of the most urgent fleet-driven requirements.

Operating from Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, California, EODGRU-1 oversees the manning training and equipping of EOD Mobile Units 1, 3, 5 and 11; Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 1; EOD Expeditionary Support Unit 1; and EOD Training and Evaluation Unit 1. EODGRU-1 is also capable of deploying as a battalion level staff to command task forces in theater.