SMWDC Hosts Former Commanders, including VCNO for Annual Huddle

SAN DIEGO – Rear Adm. T.J. Zerr, commander, Naval Surface and Mine Warfighting Development Center (SMWDC), hosted former SMWDC commanders, including Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jim Kilby, for the annual commanders huddle at SMWDC headquarters in San Diego Aug. 31. Established in June 2015 under Kilby's inaugural leadership, SMWDC has evolved into a fully operational warfighting development center supporting the Surface Force.

During the meeting, Zerr provided a year-in-review update highlighting SMWDC's efforts to increase fleet tactical proficiency and lethality, including the recent graduation of Warfare Tactics Instructor (WTI) Class 26020. Program metrics reflect SMWDC's expanding reach: after patching just 84 WTIs in 2015 and now expecting to graduate approximately 145 in 2026.

"WTIs are shaping that fight right now, from tactical action officers in combat information centers to advisors on watchfloors at U.S. Naval Forces Central Command," Zerr said. "While our team is driving significant operational impact today, we must remain focused on future strategic challenges. Our forces must observe, orient, decide, act, assess and adapt faster than any adversary. Being deployed forward and deterring threats in ways that present constant dilemmas to our adversaries is the Surface Force's true strength."

The leaders discussed SMWDC's sixth line of operation, the Surface Warfare Combat Training Continuum, designed to codify training standards for tactical watchstanders and capture

performance data at the unit, team, and individual levels. They also reviewed the rapid operational integration of unmanned systems and mine countermeasures.

“The Surface Warfare Combat Training Continuum gives us a way to connect training standards, operational experience and proficiency across the force,” Zerr said. “By understanding performance at every level, we can identify gaps earlier, learn faster and build a more capable Surface Force.” Command leadership emphasized that rapidly adapting tactics remains essential as operational environments grow more complex.

“In the past three years, our surface ships and Sailors have operated under sustained threat, defended forces at sea and ashore, and employed weapons at a pace we have not experienced in decades,” said Kilby. “SMWDC has changed the way we trained, equipped, and employed our ships. I’m impressed by the Surface Navy’s performance taking lessons learned from combat and rapidly incorporating them into doctrine, training, system development, and Fleet execution.”

Kilby was SMWDC’s first commander, serving from June 2015 to August 2016. He was followed by Vice Adm. John F. Wade, Rear Adm. David Welch, Rear Adm. Scott F. Robertson, Rear Adm. Christopher Alexander, Rear Adm. D. Wilson Marks and Zerr, who assumed command in April 2025.

The commanders huddle provided an opportunity for current and former SMWDC commanders to draw on their collective experience and discuss priorities for the future of surface warfare. As the Navy faces increasingly contested and complex operating environments, SMWDC will continue to develop integrated warfare training and innovative solutions to help ensure the Surface Force remains ready to fight and win.

SMWDC is the Navy’s warfighting development center for surface warfare and mine warfare. Its mission is to increase the lethality and tactical proficiency of the Surface Fleet across

all domains by providing tactical expertise and innovative solutions through the development and assessment of warfighting doctrine, concepts, and tactics, techniques and procedures.

Naval Surface and Mine Warfighting Development Center, Aug. 31, 2026