

SOUTHCOM leadership transits Panama Canal aboard USS Gridley



PANAMA CANAL – U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Francis L. Donovan, the commander of U.S. Southern Command, embarked aboard Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Gridley (DDG 101) as it traveled from the Caribbean Sea to the Eastern Pacific through the Panama Canal.

This marks Donovan's first visit to Panama, as he visits the coalition of U.S. and partner nation militaries training in exercise PANAMAX, a multinational exercise held in Panama.

The Panama Canal is a vital strategic pathway for the region, allowing naval vessels to rapidly shift between Atlantic and Pacific theaters, saving weeks of travel around South America. Navigating this critical maritime shortcut ensures the U.S.

military can maintain a flexible and responsive posture, while maintaining the ability to rapidly respond to crises anywhere in the Southern Command area of responsibility.

“The security of the Panama Canal is vital to the security and prosperity of our hemisphere,” said Donovan. “Protecting this critical waterway requires strong partnerships ready to respond when called upon. The service members aboard USS Gridley exemplify that readiness, and I thank them for their professionalism, dedication, and commitment to the mission.”

The Canal transit marks a key milestone in Gridley’s deployment as it moves from the Caribbean to the Pacific, supporting Joint Task Force Western Hemisphere (JTF-WHEM) operations. This repositioning underscores the Navy’s commitment to a persistent maritime presence that bolsters U.S. national security objectives, deters aggression, and safeguards the free flow of commerce.

Donovan toured Gridley alongside SOUTHCOM’s command senior enlisted leader, U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Rafael Rodrigues, and both commended the crew for their professionalism and resilience as they prepared to support JTF-WHEM operations from the Eastern Pacific, while also highlighting Panama’s contributions to regional security.

In coordination with SOUTHCOM and JTF-WHEM, USS Gridley remains dedicated to Department of War-directed operations and the president’s priorities to disrupt illicit trafficking, deter malign actors, and protect the homeland—demonstrating precision, professionalism, and the power of strong international partnerships.

Story by MC1 Amber Gibson