

U.S., Canadian Forces Wrap Up Vigilant Shield 19

OAK HARBOR, Wash. – As the sun crept over the Olympic Mountains Oct. 27, Sailors assigned to Explosive Ordnance Mobile Unit (EODMU) 1 assembled their gear on the shore. Their mission – find, render safe, and exploit inert training mines to protect the harbor during mine countermeasure operations during exercise Vigilant Shield 19.

“The purpose of this exercise is to implement our homeland defense strategy,” said Lt. j.g. James Knox, platoon leader from EODMU 1’s Platoon 122, according to a release from U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). “We are working together with other services and nations to mitigate the hazards of mines and/or improvised explosive devices.”

VS 19 is a binational exercise between the United States and Canada designed to assess and enhance the readiness of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), USNORTHCOM, Canadian Joint Operations Command, their components, and mission partners to defend the homelands from attack. This year marked the 13th iteration of the annual homeland defense exercise which ran from Oct. 24–28.

The maritime exercise, which was led by USNORTHCOM’s Navy component command, U.S. Navy North, deployed U.S. and Canadian maritime assets and personnel to Puget Sound for mine countermeasure operations. This exercise provided crucial training opportunities to improve interoperability and to demonstrate the U.S. and Canada’s ability to defend North America in a binational environment. Their mission set included the location and exploitation of simulated mines in domestic waterways.

“Maintaining open ports is vital to our national interests,”

said Rear Adm. Dave Welch, commander of Naval Surface and Mine Warfighting Development Center (SMWDC). "The maritime component of this exercise provided our teams the opportunity to work together to maintain and increase our capabilities."

Operationally, Welch leads SMWDC's Mine Warfare Division's Mine Warfare Battle Staff as the U.S. Navy's Theater Mine Warfare commander or Global Mine Warfare commander. In this role, he leads or supports mine warfare operations in every numbered fleet and combatant command area of responsibility.

The maritime environment is inherently complex and NORAD and USNORTHCOM leverage timely information sharing with an array of American, Canadian, allied and interagency partners to close gaps and seams in the maritime environment.

Back in Puget Sound, platoon leader Knox reflected on the importance of mine warfare domestically at the tactical level.

"In harbors like San Francisco, San Diego, and here in the Pacific Northwest, it is important that we [the military] and the merchant ships have freedom of movement," Knox said. "We need to make sure that commercial vessels don't have a reason to be afraid to deliver goods on a daily basis."

During the exercise, Knox and his team located inert, simulated mines and towed them to the beach via rigid-hull inflatable boat so the team could run various tests on the devices. While challenging, the various teams working together including elements of Mine Countermeasures Squadron 3 and Mine Countermeasures Division 31 were able to achieve their training objectives.

"The key challenge of these exercises is that we want to locate the mine and exploit it," said Senior Chief Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician Justin Lewis. "Practicing these skills in the cold waters of the Pacific Northwest ensures that we can respond to a threat anywhere, under any conditions."

Adding to the challenges provided by the weather conditions was the need to fully examine and exploit the inert training mine – not something that can be done where the mine lays in the water.

“We don’t want to neutralize the mine where it sits,” said Lewis. “We wanted to get it on land so we could run forensic tests to figure out what kind of mine it is. The scenario for this was that the Oak Harbor area was all mined, and in the unlikely event that this happened, we would be able to operate accordingly.”

According to Knox, teamwork and practice are integral to maintaining the skills necessary to keep waterways open and safe. Neutralizing and dispensing of any threat that is found quickly is a high priority as there are many people and wildlife that call this region home.

USNORTHCOM partners to conduct homeland defense, civil support and security cooperation to defend and secure the United States and its interests. USNORTHCOM’s area of responsibility includes air, land and sea approaches and encompasses the continental United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico and the surrounding water out to approximately 500 nautical miles.

NORAD is a bi-national command formed by a partnership between Canada and the United States. NORAD provides aerospace warning, aerospace control and maritime warning for North America. USNORTHCOM conducts homeland defense, civil support and security cooperation to defend and secure the U.S. and its interests. The two commands have complementary missions and are co-located together on Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado.