

2024 Hybrid Fleet Campaign Event Tests Technology for Future Operations



Key West, FL (September 23, 2024) Naval Information Warfare Center (NIWC) Atlantic participated in U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet's annual Hybrid Fleet Campaign (HFC) event in Key West Harbor from Sept. 19 to 26. During the experiment that involved two dozen unmanned air/surface/underwater vehicles, NIWC Atlantic assessed how emerging communications capabilities integrated with unmanned systems both ashore and aboard the expeditionary fast transport USNS Burlington (T-EPF-10). (U.S. Navy photo by Joe Bullinger)

By U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet Public Affairs

Sept. 27, 2024

KEY WEST, Fla. – U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet demonstrated unmanned air, surface and undersea capabilities from the expeditionary fast transport ship USNS Burlington during the command's annual Hybrid Fleet Campaign Event in Key West from Sept. 19-26, 2024.

The event focused on evaluating attritable unmanned kill chains, assuring command and control, and leveraging non-traditional small business innovations. It served as both a proving ground for emerging technologies and an opportunity for partner nations and industry leaders to witness capabilities that could support the hybrid fleet.

"We are excited about again collaborating with the Office of Naval Research, other Navy commands, and our academic and industry partners to conduct multiple experiments in the Key West Operating Area," said Dr. Chris Heagney, Naval Air

Systems Command (NAVAIR) Fleet/Force Advisor, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet. "We consider our Fleet as the test bed for experimentation and innovation, and the Fleet experiments we will conduct will hopefully lead to future victories on the battlefield."

U.S. 4th Fleet is operationalizing robotic autonomous systems with many partners including Navy Small Business Innovation Research Experimentation Cell and Naval Information Warfare Center Atlantic in support of Chief of Naval Operations objectives outlined in Project 33 of the 2024 Navigation Plan.

Experiments were conducted using unmanned aircraft systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned underwater vehicles to focus on Maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Targeting, Assured Command and Control, and Small Business Innovative Research. A key tenant of operationalizing these systems is to push technologies to their limits, embrace risk, and ensure lessons learned.

"These experiments are not about reaching 100% of our objectives," said Cmdr. David Edwards, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet N9 Technology and Innovation Director. "The goal of the campaign is to push these technologies to their limits and learn from the exercises no matter the outcome."

The campaign aimed to combine manned and unmanned systems to allow U.S. 4th Fleet to deploy and integrate unmanned systems and AI tools to bolster maritime domain awareness, counter narcotics and counter illegal unreported and unregulated fishing efforts throughout the area of operations while learning how other fleets across the world could use robotic systems to support their objectives.

In addition to demonstrating unmanned capabilities for partner

nations in attendance like Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, STEM subject matter experts from various Department of the Navy laboratories participated in the Scientists-to-Sea program during the event as observers aboard USNS Burlington in the Atlantic Ocean.

While weather did impact the end of the event, crews demonstrated remarkable flexibility in adapting to schedule changes. Their efforts allowed for all predetermined objectives to be met, despite the challenges.

“Overall, it was a great event that wouldn’t have been possible without support from the 37 participating DoD commands, our 31 industry partners, 4 universities, and our NAS Key West hosts,” said Cmdr. Jason Queen, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet N9 Technology and Innovation Deputy Director. “We had 4 vessels, including Burlington, showcasing cutting-edge technologies that will inform and help shape the Hybrid Fleet of the future. This collaborative effort truly exemplifies the power of partnership in advancing naval capabilities.”

U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet provides the Navy a permissive theater to operate unmanned systems, develop tactics, techniques, and procedures against near-peer competitors, refine manned-unmanned command and control infrastructure, and inform the Navy’s hybrid fleet of the 2030’s.