

Austin: New Officers Ready to Lead in Complex World



May 24, 2024 | By Jim Garamone, DOD News

Even as new Navy ensigns and Marine Corps second lieutenants were being commissioned at the U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Central Command issued a release on the latest threat to mariners in the Red Sea.

“At approximately 7:26 a.m. on May 23, Iranian-backed Houthis launched two antiship, ballistic missiles into the Red Sea,” the Centcom release said. “There were no injuries or damage reported by U.S., coalition or commercial ships. This continued malign and reckless behavior by the Iranian-backed Houthis threatens regional stability and endangers the lives of mariners across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.”

This is just one of the threats that the new officers will confront as they begin their military careers. It’s an example of the challenges these young officers must face as they join the ranks.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III told the graduating service members in Annapolis, Maryland, that their experiences at the Naval Academy have made them ready to confront the challenges of the future.

“I hope that you will see your years here as a long lesson in grit, adaptability and discipline,” the secretary said. “You put in the ‘reps and sets’ to succeed as a team and grow as teammates. And that’s what we’ll continue to expect of you – today and every day.

“The United States has the most capable Navy and Marine Corps in the world. ... And make no mistake, we’re going to keep it

that way. And you're going to keep it that way."

The graduating class arrived at the academy at the height of the COVID-19 epidemic. They had to adapt to a new learning situation and new procedures in order to graduate. "You have lived by your class motto: *'From Adversity, Victory'*," Austin said. "And during a once-in-a-generation pandemic, that's exactly what you showed."

This is the second year in a row that Austin, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, has officiated at the Naval Academy's graduation. "Last year, I told the class of 2023 that they would learn that the lifeblood of the rules-based international order is actually seawater," he said. "And over the past year, we've seen how important your mission is. Sea power is a beacon projecting American power and American principles to the world. Our allies and partners depend on it, and our foes and rivals envy it."

The Navy and Marine Corps are upholding U.S. principles from the South China Sea to the Red Sea. Austin said the United States is seeing new challenges to the open world of rules, rights and responsibilities built with U.S. leadership after World War II. "In times like these, freedom of navigation rides on the bow waves of U.S. Navy ships," he said. "As officers, you will help us increase American security and model American values worldwide. Our sailors and Marines let the U.S. military project power anywhere on Earth."

The new ensigns and second lieutenants will join the services working to "secure the world's sea lanes for the free flow of ships, commerce and ideas," Austin said. "We're depending on you to sail, fly and operate wherever international law allows. We're depending on you to deepen old alliances and forge new friendships. And we're depending on you to deter conflict and to keep the peace."

Yes, the new officers must be prepared for war, but they must do more. Austin quoted Navy Adm. Arleigh Burke, who in 1961 said that Navy officers must “understand not only how to fight a war, but how to use the tremendous power which they operate to sustain a world of liberty and justice.”

“And you will be tested. Just ask last year’s graduates,” the secretary said.

The secretary spoke with ensigns of the class of 2023 who are aboard the USS Carney. “They helped defend freedom of navigation in the Red Sea,” he said. “They helped those in distress at sea. They helped degrade the capabilities of the Iranian-backed Houthi militia. And they helped shoot down missiles and UAVs . In fact, the Carney conducted 51 engagements in six months, which is the most direct Navy engagement with a foe since [World War II](#).”

“And the message of those ensigns on the Carney to the class of 2024 is this: You are ready.”

The secretary said they will lead sailors and Marines through tension and uncertainty.