Navy to Consolidate Fire Scout UAVs on West Coast

Aviation Electronics Technician 1st Class Nathan Thomas and Aviation Electrician's Mate 2nd Class Tristan Persky, assigned to the "Sea Knights" of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) 22, Detachment 5, prepare an MQ-8C Fire Scout for takeoff on the flight deck of the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Milwaukee (LCS 5) Jan. 29, 2021. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Danielle Baker*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy plans to consolidate operations of its Fire Scout unmanned helicopters to the West Coast in 2023, a Navy spokesman said.

The MQ-8 Fire Scouts have been by detachments of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 22 (HSC-22) on the East Coast and by HSC-21 and HSC-23 on the West Coast. The squadrons operated Fire Scouts alongside their MH-60S Seahawk helicopters.

"The Navy plans to pivot all MQ-8 operations to the West Coast in [fiscal 2023] with HSC-21 transitioning from the MQ-8B to the more capable MQ-8C. HSC-23 already operates the MQ-8C," said Cmdr. Zach Harrell, spokesperson for Commander, Naval Air Forces, in an email to Seapower.

According to a Sept. 27 Navy directive, the East Coast squadron, HSC-22, will be de-activated effective June 30, 2023.

"Currently, there are no plans to expand Fire Scout operations to other helicopter sea combat (HSC) squadrons," Harrell said.

USS Jackson Deployment Used Manned/Unmanned Teaming with Fire Scout, Seahawk

An MH-60S Sea Hawk and MQ-8C Fire Scout unmanned aerial vehicle, assigned to Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) 23, conduct concurrent flight operations as a manned-unmanned team (MUM-T) while embarked on the Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Jackson (LCS 6). *U.S. NAVY / Lt. j.g. Alexandra Green*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The recently concluded Western Pacific of the Independence-class littoral combat ship USS Jackson (LCS 6) saw extensive use of the newest version of the Fire Scout unmanned helicopter, with the operations including manned/unmanned teaming (MUM-T) with an MH-60S Seahawk helicopter.

The USS Jackson, based in San Diego, deployed on July 11, 2021, to the Western Pacific for 15 months in support of the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI). Both the ship's Blue and Gold crews each participated in two on-hull patrols during the deployment, which took the LCS to the South China Sea and Oceania. The Jackson, with a Coast Guard law-enforcement detachment embarked, operated with the armed forces of Brunei, France, Germany, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan, and made port calls to several island nations including Palau, Tahiti and Fiji. The ship returned to its homeport on Oct. 15, 2022.

The Jackson was armed with surface warfare mission modules, including the Naval Strike Missile, an MQ-8C Fire Scout and an MH-60S Seahawk. The aircraft were operated alternatively by detachments of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 23. This marked the first Pacific deployment of the MQ-8C version of the Fire Scout.

“Jackson conducted multi-domain operations with our Fire Scout unmanned aerial vehicle and manned MH-60S Seahawk,” said Cmdr. Michael Winslow, commanding officer of the ship’s Gold Crew, during an Oct. 19 media roundtable. “We had a lot of success with the Fire Scout. We conducted about 20 hours of flight operations pushing out to distances in excess of 100 miles. Next year we have some NAVAIR operations scheduled to look at expanding the wind, pitch and roll restrictions that are currently on the Fire Scout. Absolutely a force multiplier in theater.”

Cmdr. Nick Van Wagoner, executive officer of the Jackson’s Blue Crew, said the Jackson “set the standard in 7th Fleet and really define what persistent operations with the MQ-8C looks like. As a result of that, I think our operational commanders are seeking new ways to employ that sensor alongside other manned and unmanned aircraft and surface vehicles.”

We did employ the manned/unmanned teaming tactic and concept with our aviation detachment from Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 23 Detachment 6. We executed that approximately one dozen times and we saw over 100 hours of MQ-8C operations while deployed to the 7th Fleet area. While conducting those manned/unmanned teaming operations what we found was that having an unmanned aircraft that had many capable sensor payloads was really a force multiplier that we could use to develop our recognized air and maritime picture beyond the horizon while using the MH-60S to conduct positive identification of things that we detected with the MQ-8C.

The MQ-8C is equipped with the ZPY-8 search radar, the Brite Star II electro-optical/infrared sensor and the Automatic Information System.

CNO Holds Fast on Ship Decommissionings, Fleet Readiness

Sailors assigned to the USS Monterey (CG 61) man the rails during its decommissioning ceremony. Monterey was commissioned on June 16, 1990, and was a U.S. Navy warship for 32 years. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Rodrigo Caldas*

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy's top officer held fast when discussing the controversial subject of decommissioning older ships in order to sustain a ready, relevant fleet in a discussion at an event in Washington.

"For our last four budget cycles, readiness has been our number one priority, followed by modernization of the fleet that we have today – 70% of which we'll have a decade from now – and, finally, capacity at an affordable rate," said Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Michael Gilday, speaking Oct. 19 at the Atlantic Council. "My approach has been, commensurate with my responsibilities, to field the most lethal force we can now and into the future."

Gilday said that fielding a lethal force involves maintaining ships; "not taking maintenance holidays – as sometimes we we've been prone to do in the past, when we made capacity king; to ensure that our supply storerooms are filled with the proper parts so that our ships are self-sustaining at sea; to ensure that our magazines are actually filled with weapons."

Referring to the issue of capacity, Gilday said that "when we make decisions on which ships we're going to decommission, the entering argument is the size of the fleet that we can afford."

Citing the current high monetary inflation, the CNO noted that 60% of the Navy's budget rises at a rate above inflation and has to be taken into account.

"Maintaining the fleet we have is extremely expensive," he said.

Gilday said the Navy looks at stratifying lethality across its platforms, ranking those platforms from 1 to 20, helping to inform decisions about which ships to decommission.

"It gets back to what we can afford," he said.

The CNO noted that some ships "haven't seen a dry dock since 2000" and that some ships have 125 departures from specifications.

One example he cited was an engineering directive not to put a tugboat against one side of the ship because it could result in a hole puncture in the ship because the steel hull is too thin.

The CNO said that some Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruisers are three years behind in completing maintenance at costs of $80 million or more, and with a weapon system that is not going to be upgraded in time "to face the threat that the Chinese pose."

Gilday said that "when it comes down to making hard decisions on where to put your next dollar, those are decisions that need to be made and debated within the Pentagon."

The CNO pointed out that a few ships account for most of the delay days in maintenance.

The Navy has reduced maintenance delay days from 7,700 as of January down to a little over 3,000 today. Between 40% and 50% of the delay days can be attributed to six or seven ships that the Navy would like to decommission.

“They are old and not fit to fight against the current threat,” he said. “They were designed in the 1970s for a fight of a bygone age, but we’re still holding onto them.”

Vice Adm. Thomas: Triton UAV’s ‘Tremendous Endurance’ Benefits Fleet

A U.S. Navy MQ-4C Triton assigned to Unmanned Patrol Squadron (VUP) 19 prepares to take off from the flightline at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Iwakuni, Japan, Oct. 5, 2022. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Lance Cpl. David Getz*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The commander of the Navy’s largest forward-deployed numbered fleet said the MQ-4C Triton high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle currently deployed in the Western Pacific is proving to be a benefitting to his fleet’s operations.

“Any sensor is goodness in my fleet,” said Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, speaking Oct. 14 at the U.S. Naval Institute in Annapolis, Maryland, in a Maritime Security Dialogue, a series conducted by the U.S. Naval Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies and sponsored by HII. “It’s a huge AOR [area of responsibility] and to have something that has that kind of legs [range] and that persistence really helps.”

“We’ve obviously been operating in theater with Triton for quite some time,” Thomas said. “We’re getting close to the IOC [Initial Operational Capability] level with Triton.

“We’re going to use Triton as a replacement for some of our surveillance aircraft,” he said. “So, the biggest benefit it brings clearly is its tremendous endurance. We’ve operated it out of Guam routinely. We’ve started to operate it out of various places in Japan, trying to not only make sure we have numerous places to take-off and land.”

The admiral said the fleet is working to build up an orbit “to learn our way through some of the capabilities that an EP-3 [Aries II Orion electronic reconnaissance aircraft] might bring back. It will be a different way of processing the information than we do with our EP-3s, so we’re working as a Navy to see how we seamlessly transition.”

Navy Transferred Remaining RQ-4A BAMS-D UAVs to NASA

The RQ-4A Broad Area Maritime Surveillance Demonstrator returned from 5th Fleet to Patuxent River, Maryland, last summer after accruing more than 42,500 flight hours and over 2,000 oversea missions during a 13-year deployment. *NORTHROP GRUMMAN*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Navy has transferred its three remaining RQ-4A BAMS-D high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

“All three currently reside at NASA’s Armstrong Flight Research Center and will be operated by NASA for the DoD Test Resource Management Center (TRMC, the new aircraft custodian),” said Jamie Cosgrove, a spokeswoman for the Navy’s Program Executive Office — Strike and Unmanned Aviation and

Strike Weapons. “The remaining ground control equipment for the system, as well as all the RQ-4A non-payload spares, have likewise been transferred to TRMC.”

The last of the three RQ-4As had returned to its home base, Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Maryland, last summer from deployment to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility, culminating a 13-year span of operations that began as a six-month experiment.

The Navy had deployed the RQ-4A to Southwest Asia since 2009 as a component of the BAMS-D program. Five Block 10 RQ-4As were acquired from the U.S. Air Force and were based at Patuxent River and operated in sequence over the years by detachments of Patrol Reconnaissance Wings 5, 2 and 11. The detachment kept at least one RQ-4A in the rotation to a base in the Persian Gulf region. One was lost in a mishap in Maryland in June 2012. Another was shot down June 19, 2019, in an unprovoked attack in international airspace over the Strait of Hormuz by an Iranian surface-to-air missile.

BAMS-D provided more than 50% of maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in theater accruing over 42,500 flight hours in 2,069 overseas missions, the Navy said.

In the Navy’s 2022 budget request, divestment of the RQ-4A Global Hawk Broad-Area Maritime Surveillance-Demonstrator UAV had been planned for acceleration from 2023 to 2022, with the savings invested in higher priorities.

The BAMS-D is being replaced by a Global Hawk derivative, the MQ-4C Triton, which has been deployed to the Western Pacific in an Early Operational Capability deployment. The Triton with an upgraded sensor capability will be deployed in 2023.

Navy EA-18G Squadron Home from Emergency EUCOM Deployment

A U.S. Navy EA-18G Growlers assigned to the “Garudas” Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 134, Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington, waits to receive air-to-air refueling from a Royal Air Force Voyager tanker assigned to 101 Squadron, RAF Brize Norton, United Kingdom, during a Red Flag-Nellis 22-1 mission Feb. 3, 2022, at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. *U.S. AIR FORCE / Airman 1st Class Zachary Rufus*

ARLINGTON, Va. — A squadron of U.S. Navy EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft has returned to its home base after more than six months deployed to the European Command as part of the build-up of forces in support NATO’s eastern flank.

Electronic Attack Squadron 134 (VAQ-134) has returned home to Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington, from U.S European Command, according to a source. The squadron had deployed to Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany in late March 2022.

“The purpose of this deployment is to bolster readiness, enhance NATO’s collective defense posture and further increase air integration capabilities with our allied and partner nations,” said then- Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said in a release that month. “They are not being deployed to be used against Russian forces in Ukraine. They are being deployed completely in keeping with our efforts to bolster NATO’s deterrence and defense capabilities along that eastern flank. The deployment is not in response to a perceived threat

or incident.”

The Navy has five-land-based expeditionary VAQ squadrons in addition to nine carrier-based VAQ squadrons, all equipped with EA-18Gs. For many years they deployed to bases in Southwest Asia to support combat in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and currently deploy to Misawa, Japan. The Navy’s Growlers provide electronic attack support for all of the armed services. The aircraft can jam enemy radars and communications and fire anti-radiation missiles at radar sites.

It has not been announced if VAQ-134 was replaced in Europe by another VAQ squadron. A carrier-based squadron, VAQ-140, currently is deployed to the region on board the USS George H.W. Bush.

In its 2023 budget proposal, the Navy proposed de-activating the five expeditionary VAQ squadrons. While the budget has yet to be passed, the proposal has met heavy opposition in Congress.

Navy Invests in Land-Based Test Site for New Frigate

An artist’s conception of the future USS Constellation. *FINCANTIERI MARINETTE MARINE*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy has invested funding toward building the land-based engineering test site for the Constellation-class guided-missile frigate (FFG).

The Navy’s Supervisor of Shipbuilding, Conversion, and Repair,

Bath, Maine, has awarded to Fincantieri Marinette Marine, Marinette, Wisconsin, a $76.7 million firm-fixed-fee contract modification “for procurement of long-lead time material for the land-based engineering site for the Constellation-class frigate,” the Defense Department contract announcement said.

The land-based test site to be built in Philadelphia will be used to test the propulsion system and other machinery of the frigate design to reduce risk and identify and fix problems before they would be manifest in the lead ship of the class.

The land-based engineering test site was mandated by the Fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act as an expression on Congressional intent regarding solving engineering problems as construction proceeds.

The construction of the U.S. Navy’s next class of guided-missile frigates officially began Aug. 31 with the first steel for the ship cut in a small ceremony at the Fincantieri Marinette Marine Shipyard in Marinette, Wisconsin.

The future USS Constellation (FFG 62) will be the lead ship of a class of at least 20 frigates and is slated for delivery in 2026. The hull of the frigate is be based on the Italian FREMM-class frigate and will be equipped with proven weapons and combat systems.

Work on the contract is expected to be completed by October 2025.

Gerald R. Ford Deploys After

One-Day Weather Delay

The Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) departs Naval Station Norfolk, Oct. 4. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Anderson W. Branch*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The lead ship U.S. Navy's newest class of nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS Gerald Ford (CVN 78), delayed a day for weather, departed Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, Oct. 4 on its first major deployment.

"This afternoon the Navy's newest and most advanced aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) set out on deployment," said Lt. Danielle Moser, deputy public affairs officer for Commander, U.S. 2nd Fleet, in an Oct. 4 release.

The Ford is making what the Navy calls a "service-retained" deployment, meaning it is operating by the authority of the chief of naval operations under command and control of the U.S. 2nd Fleet, rather than under the command and control of a regional combatant commander under the Global Force Management Concept.

Vice Adm. Daniel Dwyer, commander of the U.S. 2nd Fleet, said Carrier Strike Group 12 (CSG 12), of which the Ford is a part, will range throughout the Atlantic Ocean operating with navies of allied and partner nations.

Dwyer, speaking to reporters Sept. 26, said the deployment would provide the Ford CSG commander "a chance to test the carrier's air operability prior to embarking on its first Global Force Management deployment next year. This historic service-retained deployment is an opportunity for the U.S. Navy to come together with other members of the NATO Alliance to exercise and train together within the Atlantic and its littorals while testing out advanced technologies on the first new class of U.S. aircraft carrier in more than 40 years."

CSG-12 and Destroyer Squadron Two staffs will be embarked in the Ford, as will Carrier Air Wing Eight. Deploying with the group will be Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Normandy (CG 60); the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers USS Ramage (DDG 61), USS McFaul (DDG 74), and USS Thomas Hudner (DDG 116); the Legend-class national security cutter USCGC Hamilton (WMSL 753); the Henry J. Kaiser-class fleet replenishment oiler USNS Joshua Humphpries (T-AO 188), and the Lewis and Clark-class dry cargo and ammunition ship USNS Robert E. Peary (T-AKE 5).

Units from eight allied and partner nations will operate with the CSG and include ships from Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. The CSG includes 17 ships and one submarine.

While deployed, the Ford CSG will conduct group steaming, air-defense exercises, maritime domain awareness, long-range maritime strike, distributed maritime operations, antisubmarine warfare exercises and naval integration, Dwyer said.

All eight squadrons of Carrier Air Wing Eight will be onboard for the deployment but some will not be at full strength in terms of numbers of aircraft.

“It won’t be the full complement, but it will be nearly the entire air wing,” Dwyer said. “And that is not because of any lack of capacity aboard Ford, but only where the air wing is in the Global Force Management process. We’re still sizing the numbers, but it will be a fairly full air wing, but not the complete air wing.”

New Technology

The Ford, commissioned in 2017, is deploying with 43 new technologies, including the Electro-Magnetic Aircraft Launch System, and the Advanced Arresting Gear.

The Ford's commanding officer, Capt. Paul Lanzilotta, said in a Sept. 29 interview that all systems have been tested and are ready to go, and some will go through further operational testing.

Lanzilotta, a native of Long Island, New York, is an E-2 Hawkeye naval flight officer. He said the Ford has "incredible network connectivity."

Navy Awards Advance Acquisition for Low-Rate Initial Production of MQ-25

A Boeing unmanned MQ-25 aircraft is given operating directions on the flight deck aboard the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77). *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Hillary Becke*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy has awarded Boeing a contract for advanced acquisition of the MQ-25A Stingray aerial refueling unmanned aerial vehicle.

The Naval Air Systems Command awarded Boeing a $47.5 million "firm-fixed-price advance acquisition contract for the production and delivery of MQ-25 Stingray low-rate initial production lot 1 for the U.S. Navy," a Sept. 28 Defense Department contract announcement said.

Boeing was selected Aug. 30, 2018, for the design, development, fabrication, testing, delivery and support of four MQ-25As, followed in April 2020 with an order for three more, according to the Navy's program office. The MQ-25 test

asset, known as T1, made its first flight Sept. 19, 2019. In summer 2021, the MQ-25 T1 test asset successfully refueled three different carrier-based aircraft: F/A-18F, F-35C and E-2D aircraft in 2021. The Unmanned Carrier Aviation Demonstration was conducted in December 2021 on board the USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77). This event marked the first time the MQ-25 T1 test asset was tested aboard an aircraft carrier.

The MQ-25 will leverage existing line-of-sight and beyond-line-of-sight communications links and interface with existing ship- and land-based command and control systems.MQ-25 will be an integral part of the future carrier air wing, increasing the mission effectiveness range with its enhanced refueling capabilities and increasing the number of F/A-18E/Fs available for the strike fighter mission by relieving them of the tanking role. The MQ-25 will also pioneer manned-unmanned teaming and pave the way for future unmanned systems to pace emerging threats.

The MQ-25 Stingray is designed to deliver a robust aerial refueling capability and secondary intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability that extend the range and operational capability of the carrier air wing and carrier strike group, according to the Navy’s program office. The MQ-25 will leverage existing line-of-sight and beyond-line-of-sight communications links and interface with existing ship- and land-based command and control systems.

The MQ-25A is scheduled to achieve initial operational capability in 2025. It is anticipated that 72 air vehicles will be procured.

Work under this contract is expected to be completed in September 2026.

Gerald R. Ford to Deploy at Last, With Slightly Reduced Air Wing

Sailors assigned to the first-in-class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) and the "Tridents" of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) 9 conduct an ammunition onload, Sept. 25, 2022. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class William Spears*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The lead ship U.S. Navy's newest class of nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS Gerald Ford (CVN 78), will depart Norfolk, Virginia, next week on its first major deployment. The carrier is scheduled to deploy next year in support of regional combatant commanders.

The Ford is making what the Navy calls a "service-retained" deployment, meaning it is operating by the authority of the chief of naval operations under command and control of the U.S. 2nd Fleet, rather than under the command and control control of a regional combatant commander under the Global Force Management Concept.

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Navy to come together with other members of the NATO Alliance to exercise and train together within the Atlantic and its littorals while testing out advanced technologies on the first new class of U.S. aircraft carrier in more than 40 years."

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While deployed, the Ford CSG will conduct group steaming, air-defense exercises, maritime domain awareness, long-range maritime strike, distributed maritime operations, antisubmarine warfare exercises and naval integration, Dwyer said.

"Innovation and interoperability are the key focal points of this deployment," Dwyer said. "And we will work together with allies and partner nations to strengthen our collective defense of the Atlantic by maturing our integration for future maritime operations."

All eight squadrons of Carrier Air Wing Eight will be onboard for the deployment but some will not be at full strength in terms of numbers of aircraft.

"It won't be the full complement, but it will be nearly the entire air wing," Dwyer said. "And that is not because of any

lack of capacity aboard Ford, but only where the air wing is in the Global Force Management process. We're still sizing the numbers, but it will be a fairly full air wing, but not the complete air wing."

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Lanzilotta, a native on Long Island, New York, is an E-2 Hawkeye naval flight officer. He said the Ford has "incredible network connectivity."

Several Ford crew members were made available for interviews on Sept. 29 pierside in Norfolk.

Chief Machinist's Mate (select) Kera Archambeault, who accrued two previous deployments on the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70), said the Ford has better amenities for the crew, "like all spaces having better air conditioning, the food is really good, the gallies are really open to bring everyone together."

"We're very by the book here," said Boatswain's Mate Second Class Patrick Schlosser, for whom this will be his first deployment, asked about the ease of maintenance on a new ship. "There are a lot of new systems – this is the biggest, the baddest, the newest ship in the fleet – there are a lot of learning curves that we have to get across. We are able to conduct and do what we need to do regularly with a relative amount of ease and we're pretty efficient at it. … This crew is ready for anything that comes at us. Everybody would

overcome any obstacle that they deal with as far as maintenance goes and any equipment that we deal with.”