

Littoral Combat Ship, Unmanned Systems Pair Up to Advance Lethality in the Middle East



[Release from U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs](#)

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November 29, 2023

MANAMA, Bahrain – U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) continues advancing lethality at sea, utilizing the Freedom-class littoral combat ship USS Indianapolis (LCS 17) as a staging base and command center for a host of unmanned systems during live weapons firing exercises in the international waters of the central Arabian Gulf, Nov. 27.

Digital Talon 2.0, the second exercise of its type in as many months, showcased “manned-unmanned teaming” by meshing together Indianapolis, three unmanned surface vehicles, and an unmanned aerial vehicle to create a single common operating picture and what is known as a “mesh network” providing targeting data to all stations taking part in the exercise.

NAVCENT’s Task Force 59 – the Navy’s first Unmanned and Artificial Intelligence Task Force – partnered with Indianapolis to demonstrate the ability of unmanned platforms to pair with traditionally crewed ships. The manned and unmanned teams identified, targeted, engaged and then destroyed simulated hostile forces at sea, represented through the use of a target boat.

“This second iteration of Digital Talon continues building on our earlier successes,” said Capt. Colin Corridan, TF-59 commodore. “We keep progressing toward fulfilling NAVCENT’s priorities of deterrence and de-escalation by demonstrating live firing from a tight ‘manned-unmanned teaming’ model.”

In multiple firing events, a T-38 Devil Ray unmanned surface vessel (USV), equipped with a Lethal Miniature Aerial Missile System, and successfully scored direct hits on the target boat each time. As with the previous Digital Talon exercise, a human operator ashore at TF-59’s Robotics Operations Center made the engagement decisions.

The unmanned vehicles taking part in the exercise included a Flexrotor unmanned aerial vehicle; an Arabian Fox MAST-13 USV; and an additional T-38 Devil Ray USV.

Digital Talon 2.0 took a significant step forward, Collidan said, noting the results from this event, “have proven these unmanned platforms paired with our manned combat ships can enhance fleet lethality. In doing so, we are strengthening regional maritime security and enhancing deterrence against malign activity.”

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet’s area of operations encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. This expanse, comprising 21 nations, includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab al Mandeb.