

Navy EOD Group Praises Mk18 UUV Performance in Aleutian Waters



Operations Specialist First Class Sean McNamara, assigned to Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit One (EODMU1), launches the Mk 18 Mod 2 Kingfish for an initial underwater survey of Sweeper Cove on Adak Island in the Alaska's Aleutian chain. U.S. Navy/ Senior Chief Petty Officer Brandon Raile

ARLINGTON, Va. – The commodore of a Navy explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) group has praised the performance of the unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) that were used in a recent exercise in the Bering Sea off the Aleutian island chain.

“The technology that is being incorporated in the Mk18 Mod 1 and 2 and also in our smaller next-generation UUVs [is] incredible,” said Capt. Oscar E. Rojas, commander of EOD Group One and commodore of Combined Task Force 35, speaking Sept. 11 to reporters in a media roundtable teleconference. “The resolution of the images that we are getting back from the topography of the seabed is so amazingly clear that it makes our job in IDing so much easier. That’s why when we say a lane is clear of explosive hazards, we have an almost 100% confidence factor that is a fact because of this technology that has been introduced. It is a true game-changer.

“The future of warfighting is unmanned systems,” Rojas said.

The Mk 18 Mod 1 Swordfish, Mk 18 Mod 2 Kingfish and other smaller UUVs were deployed to Adak, an island halfway along the Aleutian chain from the Alaskan mainland, for the Arctic Expeditionary Capabilities Exercise (AECE), the first exercise of its kind. Adak is the site of a former naval air station and deep-water port that were active during the Cold War.

Rojas stressed that this exercise was the first time that the Navy EOD community had exercised its expeditionary mine countermeasures (MCM) capabilities in such a high latitude. He also noted that after 18 years of becoming experts in clearing improvised explosive devices on land in Afghanistan and Iraq, the EOD expertise is being turned toward maritime mine countermeasures in an era of great power competition, although he declined to identify no specific competitor.

The scenario of the exercise was the employment of MCM capabilities to prepare the landing zone for amphibious forces of a Marine Corps Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force.

He said the exercise was intended to increase agility in places where EOD forces have not deployed in a very long time and to test the EOD and MCM technology in cold water. One of the goals was to see how the cold water affected the life of lithium batteries in the UUVs and tethered remotely operated vehicles. Another was to see how the UUVs performed in areas of strong rip currents and widely varying tidal changes, and the effect of 40-knot winds on UUV-deploying boats and communications systems.

“It is important for us to operate in these conditions,” Rojas said. “The environment [in future conflict] is going to be very much like the one we’re training in now.”

He said that the exercise was an opportunity to operate unmanned systems that were designed for “a more benign environment” and to see if the systems were “going to break or going to function as designed.”

The commodore also noted that many of the hydrographic charts of the Aleutian area were outdated, with several shipwrecks found that were not marked on the charts.

Rojas said he tested five different communications systems and exercised the command-and-control systems in a satellite

communications-denied environment, also using High-Frequency radios for communications.

The EOD group also exercised its scalable units of action. In this exercise, approximately 150 personnel from the EOD forces were involved. The EOD group can deploy in three C-17 transport aircraft or with just a few equipment cases on a commercial airliner.