

Surface Sailors Level-up, Control the Air



Operations Specialist 1st Class Cameron Rogers leads air intercept controller classroom training at Tactical Training Group Pacific at Naval Base Point Loma, Mar. 10, 2025. Air intercept controllers deploy aboard various platforms to support carrier strike group operations around the globe and have played a key role in recent operations in the Red Sea. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Kelby Sanders)

By MC1 Kelby Sanders, COMNAVSURFPAC Public Affairs, May 2, 2025

SAN DIEGO, California – Since the latest outbreak of conflict in and around the Red Sea in October of 2023, several U.S. Navy ships operating within carrier strike groups have engaged and defeated hostile airborne targets while patrolling the area.

The Sailors communicating and coordinating with fighter pilots to shoot down Houthi missiles and drones, called Air Intercept Controllers (AICs), are trained and supported by an elite team of operations specialists assigned to Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CNSP) in San Diego.

In response to an increased demand for qualified and motivated AICs, Senior Chief Operations Specialist James Byrnes undertook the necessary steps to establish a detachment of enlisted operations specialists dedicated to developing more AICs and providing them with consistent, challenging training opportunities.

Over the past year, this detachment has conducted more than 800 hours of training and “leveled-up” numerous AICs.

“This has changed the culture of what it means to be an air controller,” said Byrnes. “We’ve provided technical experts to the fleet and enhanced our warfighting capability.”

The AIC training pipeline consists of seven levels of expertise, each featuring specific knowledge and quality-of-work requirements focused on their ability to communicate clearly, accurately, and concisely with friendly aircraft in high-stress environments. The AIC must demonstrate continuous improvement to progress to higher levels.

“We operate in a world that is constantly evolving,” said Operations Specialist 1st Class Cameron Rogers. “In my time as an AIC, I have learned that we are never done preparing and never done studying.”

The CNSP AIC detachment utilizes the Tactical Training Group Pacific Battle Lab at Naval Base Point Loma, in Point Loma, Calif., to immerse trainees in simulated air combat exercises, but also deploys its Sailors aboard ships as operators to complement their watch teams.

“I learned that for real world threats, especially when controlling air assets from different branches or coalition forces, simplifying communications to be easily understood is critical,” said Operations Specialist 1st Class Victor Lacey, who has recently deployed aboard Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers USS Spruance (DDG 111) and USS Frank E. Petersen (DDG 121).

Lacey is credited with supervising and controlling six confirmed drone kills while aboard Spruance and earned the Combat Action Ribbon.

The detachment was established with a small team of six Sailors. Within a few months, the detachment was supporting its first carrier strike group deployment.

Due to the program’s success, CNSP increased manning to support 25 billets and they’ve now supported four carrier strike group deployments.

While manning challenges persist fleetwide, CNSP remains focused on placing highly trained and motivated AICs where they’re needed most.

“Personnel are the key,” said Rogers. “The difference is made when people who care and study and execute effective air control are added to the fight. A good air intercept controller is a force multiplier.”