

**STATEMENT OF**  
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**CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS**  
**UNITED STATES NAVY**  
**AND**  
**GENERAL JAMES L. JONES**  
**COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS**  
**UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**ON 19 OCTOBER 1999**  
**CONCERNING VIEQUES**

Distinguished members of the Senate Armed Service Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the role of the Vieques training ranges in our National Security. The public debate on this issue has been heated at times and we appreciate the opportunity to discuss the National Security imperatives of this important issue.

As you are well aware, on April 19th of this year, a Marine Corps F/A-18C “Hornet” was involved in a tragic accident at the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. Flying in cloudy weather, the pilot mistook an observation building located within the range for a ground target. He dropped two 500-pound bombs on what he thought was the correct target, and the explosion of these bombs resulted in the death of Mr. David Sanes-Rodriguez, a civilian security guard at the facility, and injured four other military and civilian employees. The Navy and Marine Corps profoundly regret the tragic death of Mr. Sanes-Rodriguez and the injuries suffered by the other victims of this accident. Many Sailors and Marines, over long careers, have lost friends and colleagues due to the hazardous nature of our profession, and we certainly understand the pain, suffering, and questions that this kind of accident leaves with families. We have studied this incident, discovered the factors that led to the tragedy, and have instituted procedures to prevent this type of incident from occurring again.

This tragic accident has prompted some to demand the outright closure of the Vieques facility and the departure of the United States Navy from the island. Before any decision is rendered with regard to these demands, it is important to understand the vital contribution that Vieques Island makes to our national security.

Hydrography, geography, and surrounding airspace make Vieques unique. It lies outside heavily used commercial air corridors and sea routes, providing uniquely un-encroached sea and air space for training. It is a superior site for rehearsing amphibious operations, the only site for aerial mine warfare training, and is the only place on the East Coast where aircraft, naval surface ships, and ground forces can employ combined arms training with live ammunition expenditure under realistic conditions. Integral to that, it is the only range on the East Coast that allows Sailors and Marines to conduct naval gunfire training, one of our most important missions.

It is truly a world-class training facility. The price for a facility of this quality has been steep. Americans have invested more than three billion dollars on land, facilities, and equipment to support our training in the Puerto Rican Operating Area, of which the Vieques range and nearby Roosevelt Roads Naval Station are the centerpiece. Even if a suitable replacement site could be located, which we have not been able to do, land acquisition and construction costs make it

almost certain that duplicating even a fraction of Vieques' capabilities would cost considerably more than the three billion dollars already spent.

The April 19 accident should not override the fact that the Vieques range has an enviable safety record over the course of its more than half century of use. This was the first loss of life on the ground from the release of ordnance. No bomb or round has ever fallen on the actual island of Vieques outside the confines of United States Government property. The live ordnance impact area is at the eastern end of the island; it comprises less than three per cent of the 33,000 acre island and is located nearly ten miles from the island's population center, separated from the inhabitants by a range of hills.

These Vieques training areas provide essential training opportunities to the Navy and the Marine Corps. Within the limits of current technology, many weapons systems and techniques are still learned and perfected with the use of live ordnance under realistic conditions. Such experiences build the skills and confidence our Sailors and Marines need before undertaking their operational deployments.

While simulation and non-live-fire training certainly have value and are integral to our basic training programs, they do not provide an adequate substitute for live-fire training. Live-fire training contains an element of realism that is absent from simulators and non-live-fire training. If we cannot train under this

realism, Sailors and Marines, when placed in a combat situation, will not only face the certain chaos that comes with combat but will also face the uncertainty which comes from handling and expending live ordnance for the first time in a highly complex, time synchronized combat operation. The complexities are enormous and can not be simulated. Failing to provide for adequate live-fire training prior to combat will place our Nation in the position of risking needless casualties through unpreparedness.

Vieques is the only range along the Atlantic seaboard at which strike aircraft are afforded the use of air-to-ground live ordnance with tactically realistic and challenging targets in airspace which allows the use of high altitude profiles. The magazine-to-target handling of live ordnance under these conditions is essential training. We have learned this truth painfully. The ordnance handling accidents which resulted in over 100 deaths on the carriers FORRESTAL and ORISKANY underscore the critical value of this training.

Naval Surface Fire Support, i.e., surface gunnery for direct or indirect fires, can only be done on Vieques. Naval guns are unique weapons in that they are fired by the Navy but directed, spotted and adjusted by Marines ashore. Teamwork is the heart of this relationship—teamwork that can and does cross service boundaries. Live-fire practice brings the team together, providing the knowledge and confidence in each other's abilities that are necessary for success. While ships

can physically fire naval gunfire in the open ocean, this does nothing to develop the naval gunfire team. While many of the individual pieces can certainly be trained in isolation, putting them all together at the Battle Group/Amphibious Ready Group level can only be done by integrated training, and such training is only available on the Vieques range.

The impact of the current situation on readiness is such that naval gunfire qualifications and expenditure of air-to-ground ordnance have been put on hold while this issue is debated. It has already affected readiness of deployed units. Our experience in Operation DESERT FOX showed that pilots who participated in integrated training at Vieques were nearly twenty per cent more effective on target than those who did not. One surface combatant of the JOHN F. KENNEDY Battle Group deployed in late September unqualified for naval gunfire operations. The Marines of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, recently arrived in the Mediterranean, only received about half of the usual Vieques training. In February, the EISENHOWER Battle Group will deploy to the Mediterranean. Originally scheduled to train at Vieques in September and December, if the current situation continues, three of the six naval gunfire capable ships of the Battle Group will be unqualified at departure; the fourth within two months of deploying. While physically capable of naval gunfire, these ships will not have been afforded the opportunity to develop the integration skills necessary to be an effective team.

Additionally, the air wing will deploy marginally ready for combat operations. Within the EISENHOWER Battle Group, 463 primary ordnance handlers aboard the carrier and 120 ordnance handlers in the surface combatants will not have exercised in magazine-to-target integration training. This puts lives at risk.

Given the unique nature of the Vieques ranges, it is essential that we understand that this issue is not limited to the interests of one region or locale. Communities throughout the United States and its territories share both the responsibilities and benefits associated with nearby bases and ranges that support our national military capabilities. Some of those bases perform purely administrative or logistical functions, and some host combat units which must train in the field on a regular basis with rifles, machineguns, mortars, artillery, and aircraft. Many have impact areas that are considerably closer to civilian population centers than those on Vieques. Some of these bases are under similar pressure to that faced by the Vieques training ranges today.

The responsibility of hosting defense facilities is not limited to American citizens alone. Around the world, every day, our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines train with live ammunition on the territory of our allies. Some of our overseas bases have integrated live-fire and maneuver ranges, and they too are critical to the maintenance of essential warfighting skills. Our allies also have

interest groups that would prefer that these activities not take place near their communities.

The “not in my backyard” movement is a phenomenon that, if applied at Vieques, could greatly undermine training opportunities for our Sailors and Marines elsewhere. In practical terms, the world is watching to see the direction we take on this issue.

Our responsibility to the American people extends beyond that of being ready to win our Nation’s battles; it also includes being good neighbors to those citizens living near our bases. As good neighbors, our goal should be to have an ongoing dialogue which allows for the timely airing of grievances and, if required, appropriate corrective action. Our neighbors in Vieques have identified some deficiencies in the relationship which we have an obligation to correct or address. We can and will do better in this regard. Unfortunately, the lack of formal, ongoing negotiations between the affected Puerto Rican interests and the Department of Defense has made this difficult in recent months.

In sum, the fundamental value of the Vieques facility is proven every day by our forward deployed naval forces. Carrier Battle Groups and Amphibious Ready Groups, having trained at Vieques within the last year, conducted combat operations over Iraq and Kosovo within days of arrival in their theater of operations. They executed many of their attacks from high altitude, and their



ability to do so successfully, without loss of American life, is directly related to the training they received at Vieques.

Four Commanders-In-Chief of Unified Commands, including CINCSOUTH, CINCCENT, CINCEUCOM and CINCJFCOM, have recognized the value of Vieques training. These unified chiefs, responsible for United States military operations covering over half of the globe, have written letters supporting the continued use of the facility. Faced with a daily need for forces on station and ready, they will inherit the outcome of any decision on the Vieques situation.

Amphibious operations are the most complex of military missions, requiring total coordination between Navy and Marine Corps forces, resulting in a high degree of expertise and confidence within the force. As history shows, it is not a question of whether they might be used, but when they will be used in support of our National policy.

Thank you for considering this statement in your deliberations of this important national security issue.