

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

READINESS SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE  
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1999

CONCERNING

THE NATIONAL SECURITY NEED FOR VIEQUES

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here today to share with you our assessment of the national security need for the Vieques training range, and the importance this training site has to the readiness of the U.S. Second Fleet, and U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic. Your sustained support of the men and women who serve in your Navy and Marine Corps Team has positively affected our ability to answer our nation's call worldwide. We are keenly aware of your support and we thank you for it.

Our assessment of the importance of the Vieques weapons range on combat readiness has been detailed in a written report provided to the Special Panel on Military Operations on Vieques, chaired by Mr. Frank Rush. We have provided testimony before that presidential-appointed panel, and we welcome the opportunity to answer your questions on this vital issue.

Our perceptions are shaped by our responsibilities. As Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic, and Commander, U. S. Second Fleet, we are responsible for providing and deploying well-trained and equipped Marines and Sailors, as directed by the Commander-in-Chief, U. S. Atlantic Command, to support the requirements of all five geographic combatant commanders. Unspoken in that mission is the personal responsibility and obligation we have to prepare those Marines and Sailors to the very best of our abilities. The Vieques weapons range offers the best – and most realistic – training available on the East Coast. We owe it to our Sailors and Marines – and to their families – to provide the best possible training before sending them into harm's way. This training protects U.S. interests, deters conflict, wins wars and saves American lives – as evidenced by the performance of U.S. military forces during recent operations in the Balkans and in the Arabian Gulf. To deny our Sailors and Marines this training

would reduce our overall readiness, decrease our likely effectiveness, and place lives of U.S. service members at greater risk.

We are here today to emphasize the uniqueness and importance of Vieques to our military capability.

## **Introduction**

In June of this year, the Secretary of the Navy directed the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commandant of the Marine Corps to conduct a comprehensive review of naval activities on the Island of Vieques, a municipality of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Pursuant to this direction, Commander Second Fleet and Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Atlantic (1) examined the military training requirements met at Vieques, (2) explored alternative sites, both existing and undeveloped, (3) studied the impact of military training on the people of Vieques, (4) reviewed the requirement for live fire and for the continued use of the facilities at Vieques Island by Allied and other forces and, (5) assessed what safety improvements, if any, can be made to operations at Vieques.

A single fundamental truth provides the touchstone for our analysis: Success or failure in combat and the risk that we ask U.S. Sailors and Marines to shoulder, are a direct function of the preparation we afford them prior to combat.

The foundation of U.S. National Security Strategy is an imperative for worldwide engagement by military forces. The National Military Strategy is implemented by Naval forces employing complementary concepts of overseas presence, deterrence, sea and area control and power projection.

Carrier Battlegroups, Amphibious Ready Groups and Marine Expeditionary Units, the operational organizations of forward deployed Naval forces, are the essential maritime elements of the U.S. strategy of worldwide engagement. Operating in an uncertain world, the Navy-Marine Corps Team -- highly mobile, self-sustaining, responsive in nature, and forward deployed -- is typically selected as a first response force in crises. Since 1990, forward deployed Naval forces have responded to crises on average every five weeks, three times more frequently than during the Cold War. It is critically important that these forces be as well prepared as possible to respond on short notice for a wide array of tasks.

### **Importance of Vieques Weapons Range**

The Vieques Training Range, an integral part of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility is critically important for pre-deployment training and preparation for East Coast Navy and Marine Corps forces. It is a range designed to measure, under stress, the performance of people and systems in the maritime combat environment. This unique facility is the only location in the Atlantic where realistic multi-dimensional combat training can be conducted in a combined and coordinated manner. It is the only range which offers a live fire land target complex with day and night capability, an immediately adjacent large area of low traffic

airspace, and deep water seaspace. Co-located are underwater and electronic warfare ranges, amphibious landing beaches and maneuver areas, a full service naval base and air station and interconnected range support facilities. It is the premier U.S. Naval training facility, reflecting more than 50 years of investment and development, and the only place available to East Coast based forces for training in several warfare competencies that are essential for combat readiness; most importantly live ordnance integrated and combined arms training.

The Vieques weapons range is the only range along the Atlantic seaboard that can accommodate naval gunfire, the only range at which strike aircraft are afforded the use of air-to-ground live ordnance with tactically realistic and challenging targets and airspace which allows the use of high altitude flight profiles. It is also the only range at which live naval surface, aviation and artillery ordnance can be delivered in coordination. Additionally, the Vieques weapons range is the only training location that can accommodate amphibious landings supported by naval surface fires, air-to-ground ordnance, air-to-surface mine delivery, and artillery ordnance. The Vieques weapons range also offers the opportunity for U.S. forces to train with Allied forces in combined naval exercises, enhancing our ability to operate with potential coalition partners.

Since 1975, Navy and Marine forces have relied mainly on Vieques weapons range to provide the training opportunities required to ensure combat ready forces. The entire range complex at Vieques is designed expressly for integrated fleet operations. Vieques stands alone in its ability to support senior commanders in evaluating and strengthening the readiness of weapons, systems and most importantly, people. While it is impossible to predict how

individuals or forces will react to the stress and rigor of actual battle, preparation in the most realistic training environment possible, under observation by our most seasoned warfighters, offers the best, and most valid capacity to assess potential for success in combat.

### **Importance of Live Fire in Military Training**

Experience with live ordnance and exposure to live fire conditions are essential to combat readiness and are prerequisites for Sailors and Marines who may be called to engage in combat. Foregoing this experience, for whatever reason, is likely to result in increased casualties and suboptimized performance in battle.

Exposure to live ordnance rivets the attention of those who manage, handle and employ it with a combination of fear and reverence that inert ordnance cannot convey. The uncertainty and intimidation when working in a live fire environment can be significantly reduced by the practical experience of live ordnance training. Exposure to live ordnance with fellow Sailors and Marines operating in a high stress environment, as similar to actual combat conditions as reasonable, instills confidence in comrades, seniors and subordinates, and in their procedures and equipment. It provides an opportunity to practice the critical tasks and coordination essential to survival and success in combat. It is incumbent on naval leadership to ensure that Sailors and Marines have the highest probability for success at minimum risk. There is no realistic simulation for this experience.

The use of live ordnance validates every aspect of weapon employment, including combat systems, fusing and arming of weapons, as well as the human factors involved. For effective delivery of live ordnance, ship, aircraft and combat systems must perform flawlessly from "magazine to target." The performance of individuals using weapons loaded with live ordnance is based on actual results and target damage. Live ordnance training develops individuals who know when to --or when not to -- deliver fires. Such skills are highly perishable, and practice is absolutely necessary to ensure accurate delivery of fires.

The safety of U.S. forces in combat is significantly enhanced through the conduct of live ordnance training. Conventional ordnance incident reports, which document systems, equipment and procedural issues that affect the safety and reliability of weapons, are generated largely from experience gained by training with live ordnance. The corrective action taken to remedy ordnance deficiencies improves combat readiness, equipment reliability, and personal safety. Live ordnance training is critical to mitigate the risks to the men and women who employ these systems. Therefore, we must make every effort to gain the maximum benefit from every live fire training opportunity.

Live ordnance training is not without risk. Training conducted by units preparing to deploy is inherently dangerous, yet, the safety record at the Vieques weapons range is strong. Since 1981, there have been three fatalities, all Department of Defense employees/contractors, (two F/A-18 pilots/one security guard). In each case, the fatality occurred on the range. No ordnance-related mishaps have ever occurred outside the confines of the Vieques weapons range. Although any mishap resulting in injury or death is a tragic loss, all Sailors, Marines and civilian

employees of the Department of the Navy accept some risk as a part of our mission to protect the nation. There is not now, nor has there ever been, an effective military training methodology which guarantees zero risk.

The benefits of simulation are significant and far-reaching. Every military activity short of all-out war involves simulation to some degree. While simulation can be used to enhance combat performance, it cannot replicate or replace reality. Technology has not yet produced a mechanism which can simulate the complex, end-to-end series of procedures associated with preparing and launching live weapons, then assessing the results in a training environment. Likewise, the handling and use of live ammunition, and the danger, noise, shock and visual effects associated with the impact of live ordnance generates a physiological response which simulation cannot replicate. Because simulation falls short of producing an accurate portrayal of actual combat conditions, we cannot replace all live training with simulation.

### **Pre-deployment Training**

Two of the last three Naval forces to deploy overseas commenced combat operations immediately on arrival in theater. Critical to the readiness of these units was training which included exercises with ships, aircraft and forces ashore; training which prepared the leadership staffs to integrate, coordinate, and manage the full scope of modern naval warfare employing live ordnance in a multi-dimensional environment. The venue for this combined arms, coordinated training was the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility and the integral Vieques weapons range complex. To prepare for the final, comprehensive, integrated pre-deployment training



exercises, the units involved engaged in a stair-step program of preparation in which the Vieques weapons range played a fundamental role.

The pre-deployment training program is dedicated to the certification of Naval forces in the mission-essential tasks which these forces are expected to execute during contingency operations while deployed. During pre-deployment training, elements of the Navy-Marine team conduct unit-level training at several locations. Facilities are selected based on the size and type of training event they can accommodate, on the cost associated with logistics and other forms of training support, and on proximity to home station. No single facility meets all the requirements to conduct focused, relevant, cost-effective training for the vast array of skill groups organic to the operating forces. Each site has restrictions on the size of the force to be trained, ammunition/ordnance usage, or access to the facility. During initial phases, training is conducted at a number of facilities, several of which, including Fallon, NV; Twenty-nine Palms, CA and Camp Lejeune, NC, can accommodate live fire. While all of these facilities provide support critical to Naval forces preparing for deployment, none can accommodate the entire force, and nowhere along the Atlantic seaboard except the Vieques weapons range can naval expeditionary forces simultaneously employ live ordnance using all fire support assets.

As the pre-deployment training program progresses, the tempo of operations during exercises is gradually increased to ensure integration of all elements of the Navy-Marine team. Exercises of increasing difficulty and complexity that replicate actual crises/combat situations test the ability of the entire force to execute combat missions in a hostile environment.

Intermediate phases of training for Naval forces are conducted in the Puerto Rican Operating Areas including the Vieques weapons range. The land, air, and sea space in and around Vieques offer a unique training opportunity for these naval forces. Cruisers and destroyers conduct command and control training, live ammunition handling, navigation, gunnery maneuvering, counter battery spotting, and counter battery engagement. Cruiser and destroyer readiness certification depends on the firing of naval gunfire, and the Vieques weapons range provides the only East Coast venue for this training. Once on-station off the coast of Vieques, the Amphibious Ready Group defends against simulated attacks conducted by surface support craft from the Naval Station at Roosevelt Roads.

The air-to-ground delivery profiles permitted at the Vieques weapons range make it the ideal range for strike aircraft training. Delivery profiles of aircraft dropping ordnance at the Vieques weapons range vary depending on mission, ordnance type, weather and scenario. The Vieques weapons range offers the option of live ordnance drops from ten different profiles. Most notable are high altitude attacks (beyond surface-to-air missile range) using laser-guided training rounds or laser-guided bombs and coordinated strikes by 15 to 30 aircraft approaching from different directions with pre-assigned targets--training only available at the Vieques weapons range.

The bomb assembly teams on the aircraft carrier pull bomb bodies, fuses, and fins from magazines, and exercise the complex set of elevators used only for the movement of ordnance. For the first time, ordnancemen from the carrier and the embarked squadrons assemble, move, and load live ordnance in the tight confines of shipboard magazines and in the ordered chaos of

the flight deck. The strike mission that these operations support is the most demanding because of the high volume of ordnance and constrained time frames required to effectively and realistically engage targets ashore.

In addition, the over water, inert ordnance mining ranges near Vieques play a key role in the training of Navy units in this critical warfare area. A generally benign sea state for recovery boats, coupled with the integrated Carrier Battlegroup training available at the Vieques weapons range, make it the best location for mine training operations. Procedures are in place to ensure mining exercises are conducted safely, and recoverable inert mines provide additional training for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams that furnish recovery and scoring services.

During the final stage of pre-deployment training, naval forces conduct Advanced Integration Training, designed to reinforce the lessons learned earlier and to bring all elements of the Naval force (Carrier Battlegroups and Amphibious Readiness Groups) together.

The Joint Task Force Exercise is the culmination of training and preparation for deployment. This exercise requires the U.S. Naval and often, Allied forces, to integrate all assets to accomplish missions in a multi-threat, multi-dimensional environment. Throughout the exercise, Navy and Marine commanders must analyze mission requirements, prioritize and allocate assets, respond to constant changes in the exercise scenario, and orchestrate a coordinated response to crises similar to those they will face when deployed. To meet exercise requirements, planners and fighting forces must efficiently employ personnel and assets. The exercise serves as the ready-to-deploy certification for the Navy-Marine team, requiring tests of

critical plans, synchronized employment of available assets and realistic training with live ordnance. A centerpiece of the Joint Task Force Exercise is the Supporting Arms Coordination Exercise conducted at the Vieques weapons range and the maneuvering areas adjacent to the weapons range.

The Supporting Arms Coordination Exercise is an event driven, live fire exercise designed to test communications and fire support coordination capabilities. It is the only training event in which forces preparing to deploy can exercise their most complex capability--the employment of combined arms to support a Marine amphibious assault. Amphibious ships and assault forces are most vulnerable during ship-to-shore movement. Success during this operation hinges on the ability of commanders and fire control agencies to integrate the delivery of ordnance from naval surface ships and strike aircraft. Firing of individual weapons (or groups of one type of weapon) is a critical unit-level skill, but does not produce the combined arms effect required to effectively engage hostile targets. Military forces are trained at Vieques weapons range to master the ability to combine the effects of various weapons systems and to simultaneously and sequentially engage multiple targets. This mastery of combined arms allows U.S. forces to bring decisive combat power to bear and to win our Nations' battles.

### **Alternatives to Vieques**

The Vieques weapons range complex provides a unique and significant dimension to naval pre-deployment training. The quality of realistic, integrated training during the predeployment cycle translates directly into mission success or failure. Key to realistic

integrated training is the ability to conduct live fire training The Vieques weapons range is the only range on the East Coast where live fire naval surface fires support and tactically realistic air-to-ground training can be conducted.

To find potential alternative locations to Vieques, several sites were carefully examined. Each site was evaluated as a possible substitute for all or part of the training currently being conducted at the Vieques weapons range. Sites examined included existing ranges, as well as potential ranges not yet established that may be of value in training East Coast Naval forces for deployment and possible combat operations. The suitability criteria, based on training and readiness requirements are:

- Availability of an air-to-ground live ordnance range with tactically realistic and challenging targets and airspace which allows the use of high altitude weapon delivery
- Availability of Naval Surface Fire Support firing range which permits training of ships, forward spotters, and fire coordination teams
- Ability to exercise combined arms amphibious operations
- Availability of nearby naval and air base support

A total of 18 sites were examined, and only one alternative location, Culebra Island -- satisfied the stated criteria. However, Culebra Island was closed to naval training operations in 1975. As a result, additional investments were made to enhance the capabilities of the ranges at Vieques Island. It appears infeasible to reopen Culebra.

No site evaluated could provide the level of flexibility and combat realism afforded in the conduct of combined arms training that is available at the Vieques weapons range. The central issue in all cases was the alternative range's inability to support concurrent training events involving forces operating from the sea, a core tenet of naval doctrine.

No other existing or potential alternative shore site could accommodate naval surface fires support. Some sites were too far inland to be reached by naval guns; and at other locations naval surface fires would interfere with existing state or federal highways, inter-coastal waterways, and/or wildlife sanctuaries. While naval guns can be exercised in open ocean areas, this training method does not prepare all members of the fire support team. Land or air-based spotters, who track the landing of the explosives, and provide immediate feedback to increase the effectiveness of the next strike cannot be properly trained unless land targets are used. This spotter training is essential to support Marines as they move ashore. For this reason, open ocean naval gunfire at smoke markers or simulated targets was deemed an unsuitable alternative.

No other existing site could accommodate the sea-based, high altitude flights and the large number of strike aircraft required to realistically prepare aircrews for air-to-ground combat operations. Problem areas included the necessity to re-route commercial air traffic, and extremely restrictive entry and egress routes which would result in unrealistic and ineffective training.

With no single site available to accommodate all the training conducted at Vieques, alternate sites were evaluated for their suitability to accept a portion of the training. This can be

done in some limited areas, but must not be done in a manner that significantly degrades training to support the effective integration and coordination of all combined arms. A piecemeal approach to training does not allow simultaneous and sequential attack, and would result in an increased risk to Sailors and Marines and a greater likelihood of casualties in combat.

### **Readiness Impact**

Because no suitable alternative to the Vieques weapons range exists, the curtailment of training operations would have an immediate impact on Navy and Marine readiness. Marine combat forces have limited organic artillery and depend heavily on air and naval gunfire support to protect and defend engaged troops. The gun crews on U.S. Navy ships must routinely practice with forward air controllers and spotters ashore, training together to facilitate the coordination required in combat. The Vieques weapons range is the only range in the Western Atlantic and on the East Coast where naval gunfire training is conducted. This is a critical individual ship qualification, without which, ships must report 'not ready' for amphibious operations and cannot report higher than 'deficient' in overall readiness. This week the John F. Kennedy Battle Group will deploy with one ship in precisely this deficient status due to the inability to use the Vieques weapons range.

Without the Vieques weapons range, deploying units would have no opportunity to conduct multi-dimensional, fully integrated, phased warfare training. Airwings would deploy at reduced readiness not having had the opportunity to practice the way they intend to fight. Marines would deploy without having conducted an exercise incorporating all supporting arms in

a live fire scenario. Cruisers and destroyers would not be fully ready to support amphibious operations using naval guns to protect Marines maneuvering ashore. The Navy-Marine team would deploy without having tested its ability to integrate, organize, execute and sustain high tempo combat operations with live fire ordnance. Standards would have to be waived and reduced levels of readiness accepted. Carriers and Amphibious Ready Groups, our premier tools of national will and the most flexible elements of our national military strategy would deploy less ready for combat. Tasking our forces to carry out combat operations without having first practiced integrated operations using live ordnance would add significant risk to every Sailor and Marine and compromise mission success. The Eisenhower Battle Group and Wasp Amphibious Ready Group/24 Marine Expeditionary Unit will begin intermediate training this month and without access to the Vieques weapons range, will likely deploy with significant deficiencies in several important readiness categories.

### **Special Responsibilities to the People of Vieques**

The safe conduct of operations on the island of Vieques has been, and remains the primary concern of naval personnel who work and train there. The recent tragic death of a security guard on the Vieques weapons range has raised valid concerns among members of the population about the safety of training operations on Vieques. The security guard was killed on range property, approximately ten miles from the nearest town on the island. This tragic accident, like any mishap has prompted an intensive review of our safety efforts to see whether we can do more to avoid, as much as humanly possible, the risk to anyone, civilian or military, from our training activities.



Safe range operations are dependent on the following factors: facilities that permit complete control and security of the range, operating procedures founded on safe practices, personnel fully qualified and trained in all facets of range safety, and the knowledgeable cooperation of the people living on Vieques. Vieques island enjoys a large buffer zone that provides approximately ten miles of separation between the populated areas and the weapons range. The Navy uses a number of means to inform the people of the island about all planned range operations, including printed notices and daily messages to the U.S. Coast Guard. Every effort is made to inform bystanders, both on the island and in the waters surrounding the range complex to remain clear of range operations. Every aspect of range operations, to include facilities, procedures, personnel, and interaction with the local population is predicated on ensuring the safety of the people of Vieques. This concerted effort has benefited the entire community and a half-century of training has produced a spotless off-range safety record on the Island.

The impact of Naval forces training on Vieques' economy is difficult to define. For reasons having little to do with naval operations, Vieques remains isolated from the main island of Puerto Rico. This is because communication and transportation opportunities are limited and expensive. The main island sells power, water resources, and virtually all fruits and vegetables to Vieques. The U.S. Navy recognizes that it has an obligation to contribute to employment on the island and will continue to seek ways, consistent with appropriate legislation, to provide the citizens of Vieques greater opportunities for economic development.

Naval forces have proven to be good stewards of the environment. An environmental assessment in 1986 concluded that while the continued use of Vieques for naval training would result in minor localized impacts, land use management, soil erosion control, and the sanctuary effect of restricted access to portions of the island would outweigh these adverse impacts. The report found that protected wildlife habitats and conservation zones had actually improved since 1978.

Noise is another area of concern among residents of Vieques. The firing and detonation of ordnance generates noise that may result in minor adverse effects over a wide area. Under certain environmental conditions, noise may be transmitted greater distances as a result of "sound focusing." Naval personnel make sound focus predictions which are used for operational planning. Sound focus verification is conducted during exercises. If noise levels rise to predefined unacceptable limits, exercise events are immediately modified or, if necessary, halted. The Navy continues to maintain noise levels within safe and acceptable limits.

The Navy recognizes our special responsibility to the people of Vieques. Through a continuing Navy Outreach Program, we have provided medical and dental equipment and supplies to the local hospital, and made military recreational facilities available for public use. The Navy beaches on Vieques are available to the general public year-round with the exception of those short periods when military maneuvers are taking place (45 days in 1998). Following Hurricane Georges in September 1998, the military provided shelter, food, two million gallons of water, electrical power, and work crews to clear debris and repair damaged buildings. Naval forces continue to facilitate economic and agricultural development. Past efforts and those that

continue today are focused on improving the welfare and economic well being of the people of Vieques.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

Our study has reaffirmed that the Vieques weapons range provides unique training opportunities vital to military readiness, and contributes significantly to the ability of naval expeditionary forces to achieve our national strategic objectives. This study examined alternative plausible sites and concluded that none, either in existence or yet undeveloped, could replicate the quality and scope of training currently available at the Vieques weapons range. Vieques is the only location on the East Coast where integrated and combined arms live ordnance training can be conducted. Therefore, the Vieques weapons range must be retained for air-to-ground, naval surface fire support, inert mine, and combined arms amphibious live fire training.

We recognize the special responsibility Naval forces have to our fellow citizens on Vieques. To offset the impact of our training activities at the Vieques weapons range, we recommend:

- That the number of training days on the range and the amount of ordnance training currently conducted, to include the mix and quantity of live and inert ordnance, be carefully scrutinized for consolidation and reduction and, where possible, be moved to other ranges in consonance with current readiness and defense requirements.

- That the range safety enhancements proposed for the Live Impact Area be implemented immediately.
- That sound focusing monitoring equipment be relocated to enhance sensitivity to noise along the South coast populated areas.
- That the Navy continue to support ongoing economic development and growth.
- That the Navy support scientific health studies on Vieques and adapt operations to conform to any scientifically established results.
- That a partnership with the Government of Puerto Rico be formed to address the possible return of additional land on the island.
- That economic incentives for the citizens of Vieques be rapidly implemented in recognition of their contribution to the national defense and to enhance their quality of life.
- That in the interest of their own safety, protesters currently trespassing in the Live Impact Area be moved clear of the danger area.

U.S. and Allied Naval forces will continue to deploy in support of global security imperatives. Service men and women, to include many of Puerto Rico's sons and daughters, will answer the call to duty. They, their families, and the American people must be assured that military leaders have done everything possible to maximize their chances of success in combat while minimizing the loss of life. Civilian and military leaders today, implicitly or explicitly, rely on the Vieques weapons range to mitigate risk in combat and ensure success. Future leaders will be compelled to do the same. The Vieques weapons range is an irreplaceable national asset.

Once again, we would like to express our sincere appreciation for this opportunity to appear before you and for your longstanding support of your Navy-Marine Corps Team.