

Multiple Destroyers Were Swarmed By Mysterious 'Drones' Off California Over Numerous Nights

Adam Kehoe and Marc Cecotti : 17-22 minutes

In July of 2019, a truly bizarre series of events unfolded around California's Channel Islands. Over a number of days, groups of unidentified aircraft, which the U.S. Navy simply refers to as 'drones' or 'UAVs,' pursued that service's vessels, prompting a high-level investigation.

During the evening encounters, as many as six aircraft were reported swarming around the ships at once. The drones were described as flying for prolonged periods in low-visibility conditions, and performing brazen maneuvers over the Navy warships near a sensitive military training range less than 100 miles off Los Angeles. The ensuing investigation included elements of the Navy, Coast Guard, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The incidents received major attention, including from the Chief of Naval Operations—the apex of the Navy's chain of command.

The following is our own investigation into these events, during which we discovered these events were far more extensive in scale than previously understood.

A Strange Story Emerges

Last year, documentary filmmaker [Dave Beaty uncovered initial details](#) about the events, centering on the *Arleigh Burke* class destroyer [USS Kidd](#) (DDG-100). That initial account described a tense encounter, culminating in the deployment of onboard intelligence teams.



USS Kidd., USN

New documents significantly expand the public's knowledge of the scope and severity of that incident and reveal others that occurred around the same time. These details come largely from our Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, which resulted in the disclosure of deck logs from the ships involved. Additionally, our investigation utilized hundreds of gigabytes of automatic identification system (AIS) ship location data to forensically reconstruct the position of both military and civilian ships in the area during this strange series of events.

By using the USS *Kidd*'s position as a starting point, we were able to identify several other ships in close proximity to it during the incidents in question, including U.S. Navy destroyers USS *Rafael Peralta*, USS *Russell*,

USS *John Finn*, and the USS *Paul Hamilton*. Subsequent FOIA requests for these ships' records allowed us to build a composite picture of the events as a whole.



USN

Night One: July 14th, 2019

It appears the incidents began with an initial 'UAV' sighting by the USS *Kidd* around 10:00 PM on the night of July 14th, 2019. Deck logs like the one below provide information about the course and speed of the ship. Additionally, they record any other relevant information about unusual events or changes in the ship's behavior. This log records the first drone sighting:

2156			ASSUMED THE WATCH WORKWAY AS BEFORE
2158			AWAY SNOOPIE TEAM FOR UAVS
2201			SET BANCON I
2210	LTOR	090	BANCON I SET
2214			SET RIVER CITY I
2216		090	GTO DEANC
	PAF	CO	

Navy via FOIA

As previously reported, two drones, typically described as UAVs or unmanned aerial vehicles throughout the logs, were spotted by the *Kidd*. The Ship Nautical Or Otherwise Photographic Interpretation and Exploitation team, or "SNOOPIE team," refers to an onboard photographic intelligence team tasked with documenting unknown contacts, events of interest, and other objects of interest on short order.



A member of a destroyer's SNOOPIE team with a video camera in hand., *USN*

Though an [Aegis-equipped ship](#) like the USS *Kidd* has some of the most sophisticated sensors on earth, sailors equipped with consumer-grade cameras act as a kind of nimble spotting and event recording team, able to quickly adapt to changing conditions while providing situational awareness and recording what they see through traditional video and photo methods. You can see a SNOOPIE team in action and one of their products in the video below:



Moments after the sighting on July 14th, the USS *Kidd* entered into a condition of restricted communications designed to enhance operational security and enhance survivability. This is noted throughout many of the logs as “River City 1.” During the events, the ships often engaged “[emissions control](#),” or [EMCON](#), [protocols](#) designed to minimize their electronic emissions profile.

Less than 10 minutes after the sighting, the USS *Kidd* advised the USS *Rafael Peralta* of the situation. The USS *Rafael Peralta* logs show that at around 10:00 PM it activated its own SNOOPIE team. They also show that reports of additional sightings were coming in from the USS *John Finn*.

2121				CAPTAIN IS OFF THE BRIDGE
2207				USS KIDD REPORTED UAV OVERHEAD WARNED OPERATORS TO SECURE USE LAT: 32°29.902' LONG: 119°24.385' SET 74.8°T DRIFT: 1.1KTS
2210				AWAY THE SHODDIE TEAM JOHN FINN REPORTS TWO DRONES OVERHEAD LAT: 32°29.398' LONG: 119°23.763'
2213				COMMODORE IS ON THE BRIDGE
2215	APC	110		
2218				SECURED LOW VIS DETAIL SECURED SOUND SIGNALS
2227				USS KIDD REPORTED UAV OVERHEAD WARNED OPERATORS TO SECURE USE LAT: 32°29.902' LONG: 119°21.284'
2258				WHISKEY AUTHORIZED BURN THROUGH

Navy via FOIA

For its part, the logs of the USS *John Finn* simply reported possible UAV activity, and deactivation of the ship's AIS transponder system. In fact, the selective deactivation of AIS was a challenge for us in reconstructing ship positions, as we sometimes had to rely on cross-comparison of deck logs to locate the position of the ships.

Shortly after the initial sighting, a red flashing light was spotted.

2251				SECURED AIS DUE TO POSSIBLE UAV ACTIVITY IN THE AREA
2258				CD IS OFF AIR BRIDGE
2242	CE270			
2248		9270		256 DONG
2300	ED90			
2203				REF TO SPARKED MARKED ON TOP RED FLASHING LIGHT SPARKED

Navy via FOIA

Among the more dramatic entries in the logs from this incident is the one below from the USS *Rafael Peralta*, describing a white light hovering over the ship's flight deck.

2307				COMBAT SYSTEMS CASUALTY LOSS OF TIS
2313				WHITE LIGHT IDENTIFIED HOVERING OVER SHIPS FLIGHT DECK
2329				VISIBILITY REDUCED TO LESS THAN 1 NM STATIONED LOW VISIBILITY DETAIL SOUND SIGNALS NOT ENERGIZED DUE TO SOUND
2331				
18 - 21 23 - 29 30 - 32 33 - 36 37 - 40 41				
				2100 - 0000 (CONT'D)
2331				SEARCH OF SUSPECTED UAV
2334				LOW VIS SECTION 3 OF 3 STATIONED ON WATCH @ 2334

Navy via FOIA

The log reflects that the drone managed to match the destroyer's speed with the craft moving at 16 knots in order to maintain a hovering position over the ship's helicopter landing pad. To further complicate what was already a complex maneuver, the drone was operating in low visibility conditions (less than a nautical mile) and at night.

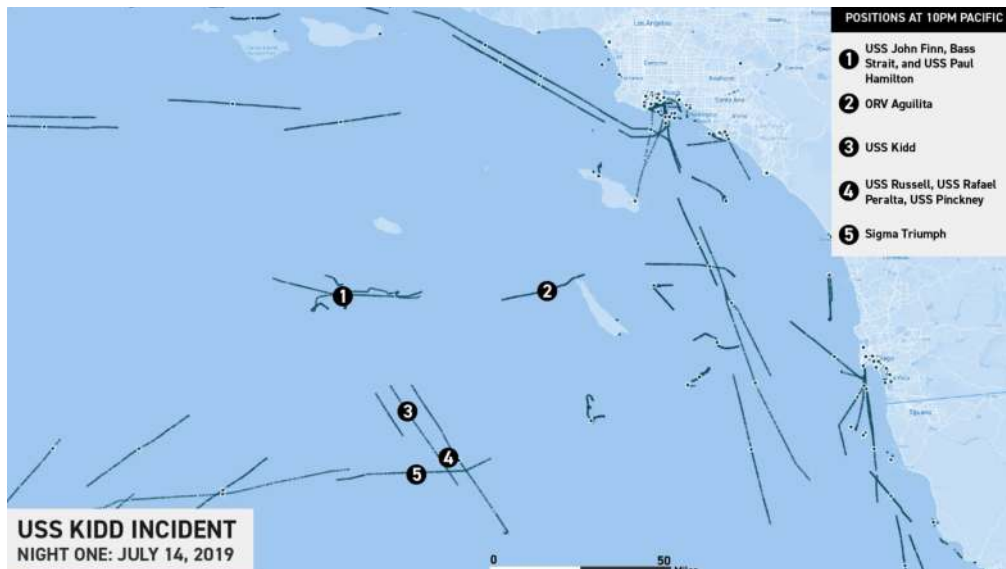
By this point, the encounter had lasted over 90 minutes—significantly longer than what commercially available drones can typically sustain.



The red-lit bridge of an *Arleigh Burke* class destroyer at night., *USN*

According to AIS data, few civilian ships were in the immediate vicinity. AIS is not strictly mandatory in all cases, and can be turned off, so it is possible other vessels could have been nearby, as well. The civilian bulk carrier *Bass Strait*, cited later in the investigation, was situated towards the northern edge of the encounter area. A Liberian-flagged oil tanker, the *Sigma Triumph*, was just south of the position of the three destroyers. The *ORV Alguita*, a 50-foot catamaran, briefly a subject of interest in the official investigation that would come, was just off the western tip of San Clemente Island. Importantly, San Clemente Island is owned by the Navy and is frequently *used for military training* and testing purposes.

The following map shows maritime traffic around the ports of Los Angeles and San Diego on July 14th. The position of each ship at 10:00 PM is marked with a black indicator, and the track of the ship before and after the incident time is marked with colored dots. The approximate positions of each cluster of ships are numerically marked.



Author's illustration

The two groups of destroyers and the *ORV Alguita* form a roughly triangular shape with each side approximately 50 nautical miles long, containing an area just over 1000 square nautical miles. The *Bass Strait* and the *USS Paul Hamilton* were in relatively close proximity at marker one. The *ORV Alguita* was off the northern tip of San Clemente Island at marker two. The *USS Kidd* was at marker three, and the formation of three destroyers was at marker four. The tanker *Sigma Triumph* was just to the west of the formation of three destroyers, at marker five.

Night Two: July 15th, 2019

Due to new FOIA disclosures, we now know that another major series of incursions occurred on the following night, July 15th, 2019.

This time, the USS *Rafael Peralta* was the first to spot the objects and to deploy its SNOOPIE teams at 8:39 PM.

2039			DDG 115 DEPARTED FLYING UAV ALONGSIDE
2039			30° 50.3A (117° 53.6A) BEARING EAST
2040			4 BY SNOOPIE TEAM 4 BY
2041			BEAT BEARS 110° T 0.7 BOUND SMO
			PAID OFFIC

Navy via FOIA

By 9:00 PM, the USS *Kidd* had also spotted the drones and again deployed its SNOOPIE team. The drones seem to have pursued the ships, even as they continued to maneuver throughout the incident.

2056			AWAY THE SNOOPY TEAM STBD SIDE
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Navy via FOIA

By 9:20 PM, the USS *Kidd* logs simply remark “Multiple UAVs around ship” – with the word “above” crossed out:

2120			MULTIPLE UAV'S ABOVE AROUND SHIP
SAF		20	

Navy via FOIA

17 minutes later, the command is issued to man Mark 87 stations:

2137			MAN THE CONN
2137			MAN MARK 87 STATIONS

Navy via FOIA

The meaning of this is not exactly clear, but it could be referring to the Mark 87 Electro-Optical Director that is a component of the massive infrared and optical turret known as the Mk20 Electro-Optical Sighting System (EOSS) located above the bridge. This system was originally meant to help direct the ship's 5-inch gun, but also provides surveillance and tracking over long distances. *The War Zone* has done a [complete profile on this powerful optical system](#), which could have been useful in trying to understand what was going on around the ship and to possibly identify the drones at night.



The Mk20 EOSS., USSN L3Harris

The reference could also be in regards to the ship's 25mm/87 Mk38 chain guns that are also equipped for remote use via a FLIR ball, although this is less likely. There is also the Mk 87 line throwing rifle adapter used for firing lines to other ships during underway replenishment and other activities, but this makes little sense in the context of the moment.

At approximately the same time, the USS *Russell* records a frenzy of activity:

2101		SET AND DRIFT IS 147°T AT 0.2 KTS
2115		MULTIPLE DRONES SPOTTED DRG 32°43'N
2126		119° 35.2' W
2128		DRONE SPOTTED 080°T PAZ MOVING LEFT TO RIGHT
2130		DRONE SPOTTED 265°T PAZ MOVING FWD TO AFT
2131		DRONE SPOTTED 266°T PAZ MOVING LEFT TO RIGHT
2138		DRONE SPOTTED 280°T 1000 FT ELEVATION
2140		DRONE SPOTTED 329°T 900 FT ELEVATION
2140		DRONE SPOTTED 321°T 700 FT ELEVATION
2142		2 NM OUT
2142		DRONE SPOTTED 262°T PAZ MOVING LEFT TO RIGHT
2142		DRONE SPOTTED 270°T PAZ MOVING LEFT TO RIGHT

Navy via FOIA

The logs describe drones dropping in elevation, and apparently moving forward and backward, left and right.

Meanwhile, the USS *Rafael Peralta* received a radio call from a passing cruise ship, the *Carnival Imagination*, notifying them that the drones are not theirs, and that they also see as many as five or six drones maneuvering nearby:

2123		CARNIVAL IMAGINATION HAILED DRG 115 ON CHANNEL 16 TO NOTIFY THE DRONES DID NOT ORIGINATE FROM THEIR SHIP. CONFIRMED 5-6 DRONES WITHIN THEIR SIGHT.
2124		SET 228°T DRIFT: 0.1 KTS

Navy via FOIA

The incident continued into the night, with the USS *Rafael Peralta* first recording two UAVs and then four UAVs near their ship:

2140		TWO UAV'S SPOTTED OFF THE STARBOARD WING. LAT: 32°48.420' LONG: 118°18.670' BEARING 318°T AMBER DECK.
2152		FOUR UAV'S SPOTTED OFF THE STARBOARD BRIDGE WING. LAT: 32°48.912' N LONG: 118°11.749' W. BEARING 320°T

Navy via FOIA

Approaching midnight, the USS *Russell* reports a final sighting:

2300	240	230 D FERC
2309	1102150	
2311	230	220 D FERC
2330		HAS THE COMD
2351		DRONE SPOTTED 260° FWD TO AFT
2355		HAS THE DOCK

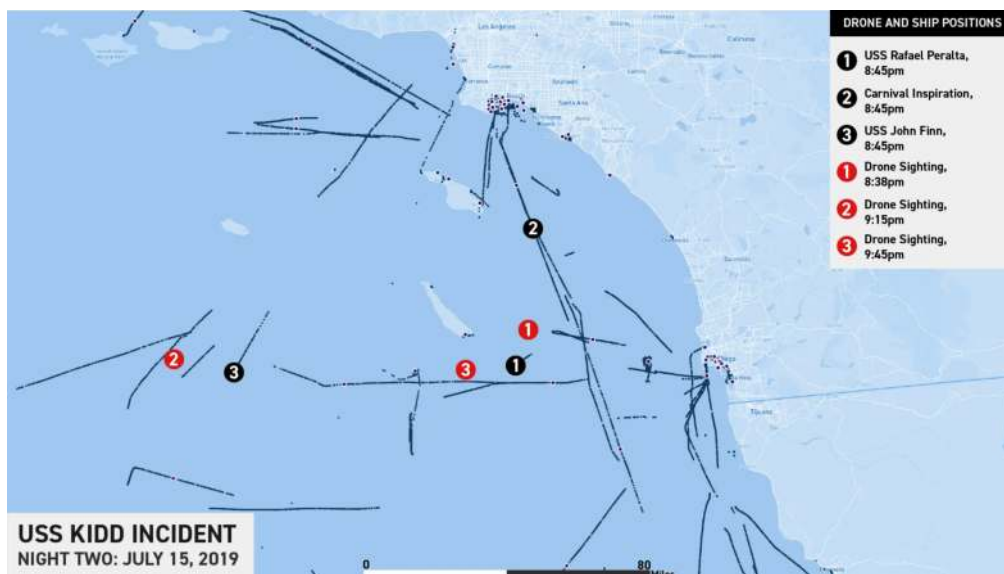
Navy via FOIA

Despite the nearly three-hour duration of the event, none of the warships involved appear to have been able to identify the drones.



An Arleigh Burke destroyer underway at night., *USN*

In contrast to the first night, the second set of encounters occurred closer to shore. Several of the drone sightings placed their position between San Clemente Island and San Diego. The approximate positions of the ships and drone sightings are depicted below. Note that the track dots indicate the position of the ships throughout the event, with a larger black dot indicating the position of each ship near the start of the incident at 8:45 PM.



Author's illustration

The Official Investigation

As might be expected for such an unusual set of encounters, a formal investigation appears to have been launched immediately. The first email we obtained was dated July 17th, and referenced earlier phone conversations.

By the morning of July 18th, a Navy liaison to the Coast Guard began requesting updates for information on vessels involved in the encounter, citing "higher-level visibility."

From: (b) (6) LCDR COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Thursday, July 18, 2019 9:18 AM
To: (b) (6) LCDR <(b) (6)@uscg.mil>
Cc: (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: UAS Activity

(b) (6)

Any updates on the vessel? The case is getting higher level visibility.

All the best,

(b) (6)

Very Respectfully,

LCDR (b) (6)
U.S. Coast Guard Liaison Officer
U.S. Third Fleet
(b) (6)@navy.mil
(b) (6)@navy.smil.mil
W (b) (6)
C (b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

An hour later, a special agent with Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), assigned to 3rd Fleet as a “Staff CI Officer,” with CI likely standing for “counter-intelligence,” thanked a colleague in the Coast Guard. They mentioned that the information would go directly to the commander of the Pacific Fleet and to the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) – the top of the Navy hierarchy, and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

From: (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Thursday, July 18, 2019 10:26 AM
To: (b) (6) LCDR <(b) (6)@uscg.mil>; (b) (6) LCDR COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: UAS Activity
Importance: High

Great stuff (b) (6) much appreciated! Please let me know the names of those involved as the answer will go directly to ADM (b) (6) (Commander PACFLT) then to CNO. I'll send a message to you (or whomever) that can be passed up the chain thanking your folks for the effort. I'll include the high level of attention this is receiving.

Cheers

(b) (6)

(b) (6)
Special Agent – NCIS
COMTHIRDFLT Staff CI Officer
SIPR: (b) (6)@ncis.navy.smil.mil
Desk: (b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

It appears the initial focus of their investigation was the ORV *Alguita*. An email sent just 10 minutes later expressed the need to relay information about the ship to a larger team.

From: (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Thursday, July 18, 2019 10:38 AM
To: (b) (6) LCDR COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Cc: (b) (6) CIV USN NCIS WEST REG SAN CA (USA) <(b) (6)@ncis.navy.mil>; (b) (6) (IA) (FBI) <(b) (6)@fbi.gov>; (b) (6) CIV (USA) <(b) (6)@ncis.navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: UAS Activity

(b) (6)
I'm going to be out of the office for a bit and don't want the information on the *Alguita* to sit in my inbox for too long. Can you please push the info (b) (6) returns to the cc'd email addresses please?

Many Thanks

(b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

By this time, an agent with the Los Angeles office of the FBI was included in the email chain. Preliminary information indicated that while the ORV *Alguita* did have drones onboard, they had very limited capabilities.

From: (b) (6) LCDR COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Thursday, July 18, 2019 2:21 PM
To: (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Cc: (b) (6) CIV USN NCIS WEST REG SAN CA (USA) <(b) (6)@ncis.navy.mil>;
(b) (6) (LA) (FBI) <(b) (6)> CIV (USA)
(b) (6)@ncis.navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA)
<(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA)
(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA)
<(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: UAS Activity

Good Afternoon,

The Coast Guard contacted the ORV ALGUITA. The Maser explained that their UAS's can only operate a very short distance from the ship (5-10 ft.) and they've been having difficulty operating them. They do have drones on board and they are operational. It is unknown whether they were flying on the day in question. More information to follow.

Very Respectfully,

LCDR (b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

A follow-up email on the evening of July 18th indicated that the Coast Guard had contacted the ship directly via satellite phone. Based on the subject line reference to San Nicolas Island and the time period given by investigators, it seems the ORV *Alguita* was being examined specifically for the events of July 14th.

From: RCC (b) (6) <RCC(b) (6)@uscg.mil>
Date: Thursday, Jul 18, 2019, 5:59 PM
To: (b) (6) LCDR <(b) (6)@uscg.mil>
Subject: Drone Activity IVO San Nicolas Island

Good Evening LCDR (b) (6)

I contacted the owners of the ORV ALGUITA, who provided me with three sat phone numbers for the vessel. I contacted the Captain of the ORV ALGUITA and asked him the following questions:

1. Were you operating drones while underway?

-Yes.

2. What is a visual description of your drones?

-They are small and white Phantom IV drones.

3. Were you operating drones from 2100-0600 PDT on Sunday night to Monday morning (14-15 July)?

-No.

4. What were the times and places you operated your drones?

-The drones were operated close to shore immediately after departing Los Angeles on Sunday, July 14th. The drones are small and are only capable of operating a few feet away from the ORV ALGUITA.

In addition, the Captain of ORV ALGUITA stated he didn't visually (by eye as opposed to RADAR contact) see any USN warships in close proximity to him and he would never operate a drone close to one. Sector LA/LB staff pulled up the trackline for ORV ALGUITA which indicated the vessel transited in the area of the drone activity while the drone activity was reported to have occurred. However, as stated above, the Captain denied operating a drone during those time frames. If you have further questions, the three sat phone numbers provided to me are: (b) (6) (b) (6); and (b) (6). I reached the ORV ALGUITA after the first ring at the first number I listed.

Thank you for your time, and please let me know if there's any other way we can provide assistance.

Very Respectfully,

LTJG (b) (6) USCG
Law Enforcement Duty Officer
District 11 dre
O: (b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

The investigators had encountered several problems at this point. The owners of the *Alguita* denied operating a drone during the time in question, and claimed that their drones were incapable of operating more than a few

feet from the ship. Further, the Phantom IV drone is a small quadcopter and has a maximum flight time of 28 minutes, [according to manufacturer DJI](#), which is inconsistent with the long durations of the incidents and general performance described as observed in the deck logs.



Phantom 4 Pro., *DJI*

Although not referenced in these emails, the *Alguita* was also significantly west of the events of the second night, July 15th, based on AIS data. Apparently recognizing that ORV *Alguita* was a poor fit, investigators conceded that they needed to keep looking. Emails reflect that Navy intelligence began to take a more active role in the investigation by July 19th, with the director of the Maritime Intelligence Operations Center (MIOC) within 3rd Fleet, identified by the acronym C3F, "looping in" the rest of the command's intelligence office, or N2.

From: (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#)
To: (b) (6) [LCDR COMTHIRDFLT](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#)
Cc: (b) (6) [CIV USN NCIS WEST REG SAN CA \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [\(LA\) \(FBI\)](#); (b) (6) [CIV \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT \(USA\)](#); (b) (6) [CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI \(USA\)](#)
Subject: RE: UAS Activity
Date: Friday, July 19, 2019 9:10:17 AM
Attachments: [FW Drone Activity IVO San Nicolas Island \(6.24 KB\).msg](#)

(b) (6)

Thanks. Looping in the rest of the C3F N2 team working this issue.

V/r,
CDR (b) (6)
N2A-MIOC Director
COMTHIRDFLT
COMM: (b) (6)
UNCLAS: (b) (6) [@navy.mil](#)
SIPR: (b) (6) [@navy.smil.mil](#)
JWICS: (b) (6) [@pacflt.ic.gov](#)

Navy via FOIA

Investigators next sought to rule out the possibility that the drones were operated by the Navy itself. By Tuesday of the following week, a representative from the Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility (FACSFAC) based in San Diego clarified that UAVs were only operated by the Navy in certain limited areas. They then provided the following map of operational areas (OPAREAS) with a breakdown of platforms in use.

UAS OPAREAS

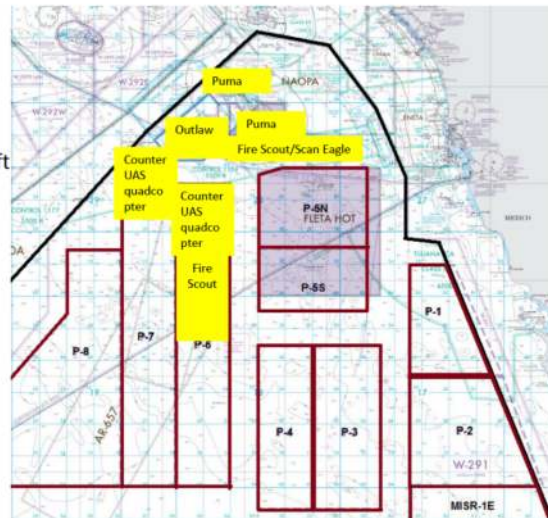
Puma are normally flown by NSW surface to 1.5K.

Outlaws are targets for GUNEX Or TRACKEX during fleet training.

Fire Scouts are Helo type(UAS) aircraft That operate SFC-10K off of an LCS.

Scan Eagles are in support of the COAST Guard and operate SFC-3K Off Cutters.

Quadcopters operate SFC to 500ft In support of counter UAS training Conducted by 3rd Fleet.



UAS's not listed

MQ-4 - operate above 45K in all of 291.

MQ-9 - operate 20K-30K Over the areas listed Fire Scout, Outlaw and Puma.

Small experimental UAS aircraft at VC-3 or NOTS pier located on San Clemente.

Navy via FOIA

Somewhat cryptically, one of the investigators referenced “recent observations” and further clarified the need to “correlate or rule out operations.” He further requested data detailing operations between the 14th to the 17th of July.

From: (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA)
 To: (b) (6) E FACSAC SAN DIEGO; (b) (6) LCDR USN (US); (b) (6) CDR USN FACSAC SAN DIEGO (USA)
 Cc: (b) (6) CAPT USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA); (b) (6) CAPT USN (USA); (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA); (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA)
 Subject: FW: UAS OPAREA
 Date: Tuesday, July 23, 2019 4:10:29 PM
 Attachments: UAS OPAREA.pptx

(b) (6), et al.,

Very much appreciate the quick turnaround and info provided. With some recent observations that you are aware this provides more information for us to build upon. I've Cc'ed individuals within the Third Fleet organization that would benefit from the graphic you provided.

With regards to the spreadsheets you provided earlier, do you keep those archived in such a way that if there are any questions regarding an incident and C3F wanting to correlate or rule out operations, who would be the best person to query? LCDR (b) (6) provided examples back to the 18th. Believe that if you have those same daily spreadsheets for the 14-17 July those could be useful as well.

Again, thanks for the info provided!

V/R,
 CDR (b) (6)

CDR (b) (6)
 N31, Current operations
 NIPR: (b) (6) @navy.mil
 SIPR: (b) (6) @navy.smil.mil
 Office: (b) (6)
 Cell: (b) (6)
 Fleet Command Center: (619) 524-9534

Navy via FOIA

FACSAC San Diego, in turn, sent spreadsheets of scheduled activity during that time, and explained that UAV operations are highlighted in yellow. Though the flight schedules released to us for July 14th are completely redacted, the underlying highlighting is visible. No yellow highlighting can be seen for July 14th:

~~FOUO~~

Page 1 of 2

Navy via FOIA

By the afternoon of July 23, the investigators were still grappling with determining the intent behind the incidents.

From: (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Tuesday, July 23, 2019 4:14 PM
To: (b) (6) CDR USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>;
(b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Cc: (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) LCDR
COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: ORV ALGUITA

(b) (6) - Roger all and had already captured most of the below. Thanks! We need to get to the "what is the intent" of all this, once we do, the determination to make ALGUITA a COI can be made.

(b) (6) - Yes, please have any updated info on ALGUITA sent me, LT (b) (6), and LCDR (b) (6) (cc'd). Unfortunately, the I&W watch does not have a group account.

Thanks again and let me know if you have questions or concerns.

v/r (b) (6)

Navy via FOIA

The last email disclosed to us was from July 25th. It references a classified briefing on drones (referred to here as UAS).

From: (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Sent: Thursday, July 25, 2019 5:00 AM
To: (b) (6) LCDR COMTHIRDFLT <(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR
USN COMPACFLT PEARL HI (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>; (b) (6) CDR USN
COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Cc: (b) (6) CDR USN COMTHIRDFLT (USA) <(b) (6)@navy.mil>
Subject: RE: ORV ALGUITA

(b) (6)

Thanks! I'll send you the UAS brief given to Admiral (b) (6) and (b) (6) on SIPR.

v/r
CDR (b) (6)
C3F Intel Ops Lead
CCSG-7 N2
COMM: (b) (6)
NSTS: (b) (6)
Tandberg: (b) (6)
SIPR: (b) (6) navy.smil.mil
JWICS: (b) (6)@pacflt.ic.gov

Navy via FOIA

A further FOIA request for information about these briefings was denied due to their classification level. After July 25th, the email trail turns cold.

Remarkably, the drone incidents began occurring *again* around this time. Renewed sightings occurred during the early hours of July 25th and July 30th, just as investigators were beginning to examine classified briefings and were apparently still seeking to identify the intent behind the July 14th and 15th incursions.

The incident on the 25th involving the USS *Kidd* began around 1:20 AM, with the SNOOPIE team being deactivated around 1:52 AM.

TIME	ORDER	CSE	SPEED	DEPTH	RECORD OF ALL EVENTS OF THE DAY
18 - 21	23 - 29	30 - 32	33 - 36	37 - 40	41
0000-0300 (CONT'D)					
0118	L200				
0123					AWAY SNOOPIE TEAM FOR UAV
0135		200			248 DFMC
0144	L445				CO ON THE BRIDGE
0149					CO OFF THE BRIDGE
0152		145			133 DFMC
0140					SECURED SNOOPIE TEAM
0150		140			100 DFMC

Navy via FOIA

The incident on July 30th was longer, with the team activated around 2:15 AM and only deactivated by 3:27 AM:

0216					AWAY SNOOPIE TEAM FOR UAVS
0226	L15R	210			
0222		240			218 DFMC
0224					CO ON THE BRIDGE
0250	L5R	205			

Navy via FOIA

0325					RED DECK
					CO OFF THE BRIDGE
0327					STAND DOWN SNOOPY TEAM
0411	L30R	110			

Navy via FOIA

These later incidents are notable because they occurred during the investigation, and after FACSAC San Diego had been closely consulted.

At the time of writing, we do not have complete deck logs for the month of July except for USS *Kidd*, so it remains uncertain if other ships also continued to have drone encounters later in the month.

Further information continues to emerge from FOIA requests, but based on the available evidence it appears that the initial investigation did not ultimately identify the source of the drones.

Increasingly Pressing Questions

Cumulatively, these new details raise a host of difficult questions.

It is unclear why anyone would operate drones near Navy warships in such a brazen manner. Commercially available drones are not commonly capable of flying for such long durations across great distances with speeds in excess of 45 miles an hour. Based on the pooled data available from the deck logs, we estimate the drones traversed at least 100 nautical miles in the July 14th incident.

Furthermore, the drones were able to locate and catch a destroyer traveling at 16 knots in conditions with less than one nautical mile of visibility. Equally baffling, their operators appear to have coordinated at least five to six drones simultaneously. Then there is the question of line-of-sight control, and control methods in general, which

make the capabilities described all that much more puzzling.



A U.S. Navy destroyer cruises under the stars. , *USN*

To be sure, [San Clemente Island](#) and nearby training area FLETA HOT are hosts to a bevy of testing, which can include classified programs. Is it possible that the drones were operated by the military itself in an errant test of some kind?

If so, the incursions continued after a concerted investigation that reached the highest level of the Navy hierarchy. It also appears that no UAV activity was scheduled by FASFAC San Diego during July 14th. On the other hand, it is a general area where extremely [strange things have occurred in the past](#).

If the drones were not operated by the American military, these incidents represent a highly significant security breach. If they were part of some kind of covert action, it is nonetheless unclear why they were flown so openly and so frequently in almost a harassing manner. More troubling still, if a foreign state actor was involved, where exactly were the drones launched from?

One thing is fairly sure: the U.S. Navy has a large amount of data on these events. The documents above reflect that multiple independent photographic intelligence teams were deployed. These teams are only a small part of a sophisticated suite of surveillance capabilities and [advanced sensors](#), including the ability to [detect radio emissions](#) in the vessels' vicinity, available to any one of the ships involved. This is on top of the land-based sensors that closely surveil the area. In fact, it is puzzling that those sensors, coupled with a likely extensive photographic record, were not sufficient in and of themselves to resolve the matter. This calls into question the "drone" designation. Was there ever even a hard description of these craft beyond lights in the sky?

The question remains: who was operating these craft with apparent impunity, and for what purpose, and was this extremely bizarre case ever resolved?

Our investigation into this event is still underway and we will update you as soon as more information becomes available.

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