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STATEMENT OF

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COMMANDER, NAVAL SURFACE FORCES

BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
ON
READINESS:

THE AAV MISHAP INVESTIGATION: HOW TO BUILD A CULTURE OF SAFETY TO
AVOID PREVENTABLE TRAINING ACCIDENTS

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Chairman Garamendi, Ranking Member Lamborn, and distinguished members of the Readiness Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

First and foremost, I want to express my personal condolences to the families of our fallen Marines and Sailor who served their country with pride and honor. This devastating loss underscores the very dangerous work our Sailors and Marines commit to each day in our all-volunteer force, and it once again reminded us of our solemn obligation to provide each service-member an environment where risk is being correctly managed. We are committed as a Navy-Marine Corps team to ensure an event such as this does not happen again.

I have first-hand experience with amphibious operations and Navy-Marine Corps integration as I commanded Expeditionary Strike Group 2. This is the Navy's east coast expeditionary Strike Group, with an integrated Navy-Marine Corps headquarters staff responsible for three amphibious squadrons, a naval beach group, 13 amphibious ships and two tactical air control squadrons, totaling more than 11,000 Sailors and Marines, with the capacity to embark an additional 14,000 Marines. In my current position as the Commander, Naval Surface Forces, I am responsible for the development of current and future readiness of surface forces – including policies and procedures to conduct wet-well operations in support of Marine Corps waterborne operations.

Immediately following the tragic mishap on 30 July, the Navy and Marine Corps discontinued AAV operations. To this point, the Navy has not resumed waterborne AAV operations and will not do so unless and until we are satisfied that all necessary policies, procedures and risk mitigation measures are in place.

Prior to resumption of operations, Marine Corps requirements have been identified to include establishment of positive communications between safety boats, amphibious assault units and the ships they intend to embark or debark; requirement for face-to-face briefings and attendance (live or virtual) at the ship's confirmation brief for all AAV leaders prior to operations; ensuring that safety boats are in the water and removing the ability for an AAV to serve as a safety boat; and, confirming sea states assessments immediately prior to launch from ship's well decks or from the shore. Any additional Navy requirements for our units and any embarked Marine Corps units will be assessed and established following the completion of our ongoing Navy investigation. All Commanding Officers and well deck teams will be trained to

these new requirements and will have reviewed the specific lessons learned from the Marine Corps' investigation into these tragic events.

As the Marine Corps investigation discovered, there are inconsistencies in the Navy and Marine Corps standing operating procedures and policies for waterborne AAV operations. The ambiguity in these policies manifested themselves in decisions made in the planning and execution of AAV operations on 30 July 2020, but we are looking broadly across the full range of Navy-Marine Corps integrated operations to ensure our operating procedures are aligned. LtGen Craporatta, my Marine Corps counterpart at Marine Corps Training & Education Command (TECOM), and I have met and outlined the framework on how we will reconcile our service policies and ensure they are consistent and provide clear direction to operational planners and Commanders at sea.

A specific example involved the policy on the use of safety boats when conducting AAV operations. Marine Corps standard operating procedures did not require the use of a safety boat. Navy policy required the use of two safety boats. Operational planners for this exercise defined a requirement for one safety boat. Both policies allowed for an AAV to serve as a safety boat. Before we recommence ship-based AAV operations, we need to reconcile these differences and identify what "right" looks like in both a training environment and in a warfighting or operational setting.

While the Navy fully supports this and other findings and recommendations of the Marine Corps investigation, the Marine Corps investigation did not fully address Navy actions on the day of this fatal mishap. We are accountable as an organization and must fully address whether Navy actions, or inaction, contributed to the incident and what changes to practice and policy we must make prior to re-commencing waterborne AAV operations. Accordingly, we have initiated our own command investigation with a team of 16 Navy, Marine Corps and civilian subject matter experts in areas such as well deck operations, operational planning, communications in a maritime environment, oceanography, well deck operations, AAV operations, USMC maritime aviation operations, and operational safety.

Specifically, the investigation has been directed to address (1) communications, decisions and actions of Navy personnel involved in the planning, approval and execution of the operation, (2) communications between in Navy and Marine Corps personnel before, during and after the mishap, and (3) whether a clear command and control relationship was established and executed

consistent with the concept of operations. Additionally, the investigation will assess the possible impact of (1) the sea state at the beginning of operations and at time of mishap, (2) the location, movement and other ongoing operations of SOMERSET, and (3) the number and type of safety boats involved as well as the approval process for the same. This investigation will make use of the expansive interviews and evidence previously collected by the Marine Corps, but not necessarily referenced in their narrative report. Our investigation is expected to be completed within 30 days.

Professional seamanship is the standard with no exceptions. We owe it to our Marines and Sailors in our care. As we have demonstrated since the tragedies involving USS FITZGERALD and JOHN S. MCCAIN, it is in our culture to critically evaluate and then make and effectively implement necessary changes. Although we operate in a dangerous and demanding environment and will never be able to eliminate all risk, you have my assurance that we will, with great speed, provide you, the American people, and our Navy-Marine Corps team with our critical assessment of how to best move forward with integrated amphibious operations. On behalf of all Sailors, their families, and our Navy Civilians, I thank you for your continued support, and look forward to your questions.