

Changes of Command

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USS Nimitz (CVN-68)

CAPT Douglas Graber relieved CAPT Craig Sicola as Commanding Officer of USS Nimitz (CVN-68) during a Change of Command Ceremony, June 29. USS Nimitz, the flagship of Carrier Strike Group 11 (CSG-11), arrived to San Diego on June 28 following a seven-month deployment to the U.S. 3rd and 7th Fleet Areas of Operations. CAPT Sicola took command of USS Nimitz on July 29, 2021 and led the ship through its maintenance phase, work-up cycle and certification, including Tailored Ships Training Availability (TSTA)/Final Evaluation Problem (FEP), Group Sail and Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX). He also led USS Nimitz through the entirety of deployment to the U.S. 7th Fleet Area of Operations. “I am truly grateful to each and every Nimitz Sailor for the honor to serve as your Commanding Officer,” said CAPT Sicola. “This tour has been the highlight of my career, and I am humbled by the incredible passion and dedication you all showed daily. Thank you to the Nimitz crew and your families for the sacrifices you continue to make in service to our country.” CAPT Sicola made history by completing the 350,000th arrested aircraft landing on USS Nimitz while sailing in the South China Sea. Sicola, along with CDR Luke Edwards, Commanding Officer of the “Fighting Redcocks” of Strike Fighter Squadron 22 (VFA-22) in a F/A-18F Super Hornet on April 22, 2023. USS Nimitz is the oldest-serving U.S. commissioned aircraft carrier in the world and the first active U.S. Navy carrier in the Fleet to reach this milestone.

MCAS Beaufort

Col Mark Bortnem officially assumed duties as the Commanding Officer of Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort from Col Karl Arbogast today at the headquarters building aboard the installation. More than 150 persons gathered to witness the time-honored Marine Corps tradition of transferring formal authority from one Commander to the next. The ceremony was attended by a host of Marine Corps leaders including BrigGen Walker Field, Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruiting Depot Parris Island and Eastern Recruiting Region, and Col Adolfo Garcia, Jr., Commander, Marine Corps Installations East-Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, and members of the local community. “I’m humbled for the opportunity to lead and I’m grateful to return to the low country. Although this is not where I was born, in many ways it’s like being home. I’m determined to integrate myself into Team Beaufort and keep this place remaining as the best air station in the Marine Corps, working around the best folks, and with the best Marines,” said Col Bortnem.

USCG Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) “Force from Above”

U.S. Coast Guard Captain Dan Broadhurst relieved Captain Gregory A. Matyas as the 10th Commanding Officer of Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) during a Change of Command Ceremony at Cecil Airport in Jacksonville, FL on 14 July. Rear Admiral Nathan Moore, Deputy Commander of Coast Guard Atlantic Area, presided over the ceremony. Captain Broadhurst previously served as chief of Incident Management at the Thirteenth Coast Guard District and has also served two previous tours at HITRON, most recently as the Executive Officer, from 2019-2021. “I am humbled and honored to return for a third tour at HITRON,” said Captain Broadhurst. “Jacksonville is my own hometown and I eagerly look forward to supporting the community and the unit which have shaped my life and my career. I could not be more proud of the exceptional work this team accomplishes throughout the Western Hemisphere and the immeasurable impact our mission has on regional security and U.S. national counterdrug strategy.” Captain Matyas served as the Commanding Officer of HITRON from May 2020 to July 2023 and retired following the Change of Command Ceremony after 27 years of dedicated service. HITRON is the Coast Guard’s single provider of forward-deployed airborne use of Force Aviation Detachments across Western Hemisphere narcotics transit zones. Since its inception in 1999, the unit has been responsible for the seizure of over \$28.2 billion in illicit narcotics.

Helicopter Maritime Strike Weapons School Atlantic (HSMWSL)

CDR Nathan Browne assumed command of Helicopter Maritime Strike Weapons School Atlantic (HSMWSL) July 14, relieving CDR Michael Henderson during a Change of Command Ceremony at Naval Station Mayport, FL. CDR Henderson led HSMWSL from May 2022 to July 2023, and will report as the Navigator aboard the USS George Washington (CVN-73). During his 15-month tour as Commanding Officer, CDR Henderson strengthened the MH-60R community through continuous assessment and improvement of weapons and tactics instructions, curriculum evaluations, standardization, intelligence products and exercise coordination. “It was an absolute honor to serve this talented team as Commanding Officer. I greatly admire their professionalism, tenacity, and total commitment to our nation and each other. No matter how big the task, they always met it head on. They went the extra mile, countless times, to help ensure our Navy is ready to fight. I’m so proud of the Weapons School team and all they accomplished,” said CDR Henderson. HSMWSL serves as the Atlantic Fleet’s center of tactical excellence for training and evaluation of Maritime Strike combat helicopter aircrews. The primary mission of HSMWSL is to prepare MH-60R aircrew for the tactical challenges of deployment and elevate the level of tactical proficiency throughout the Wing.

Carrier Air Wing 5 (CVW- 5) “Team Badman”

CAPT Michael “Pup” Sweeney turned command of Carrier Air Wing 5 (CVW-5) over to CAPT Patrick S. Corrigan while mid-air in two F/A-18 Hornets on July 14. During the airborne event, CAPT Sweeney, CAPT Corrigan and Rear Admiral Pat Hannifin, Commander of CSG 5, flew in formation and talked through the ceremonial Change of Command using the jets’ radios. “There is no harder job in carrier aviation than serving in the forward deployed forces, but there is also no job more rewarding than serving in the forward deployed forces. The Sailors of “Team Badman” are a big part of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region, which I am extremely proud of,” said CAPT Sweeney. “I am grateful to our host nation of Japan for the support provided to our Sailors and their families,” said CAPT Sweeney. “It has been a privilege for me and my family to experience the culture and to travel the country”. CVW- 5 consists of nine squadrons and 81 aircraft, is forward-deployed to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, and is embarked aboard USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) with Carrier Strike Group 5 (CSG-5) in the Indian Ocean.

Naval Air Station Meridian, Mississippi

CAPT Luke H. Davis assumed command of Naval Air Station Meridian, Mississippi, from CAPT Timothy B. Moore on July 27, 2023. CAPT Davis earned his “Wings of Gold” in Meridian nearly 20 years ago and said, “It’s exciting to be back in Meridian. I look forward to working with the dedicated NAS team, and our fantastic community supporters. Our mission remains crucial -- generating highly trained strike pilots and specialized enlisted personnel for the fleet.” CAPT Moore will continue his military career at U.S. Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk, Virginia, as the head of Anti-Terrorism/Force Protection Assessments for all U.S. Navy bases in the continental United States.

Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 40 (HSM-40) “Airwolves”

CAPT David Bizzarri was relieved by CDR David Bigay during a Change of Command Ceremony for the “Airwolves” of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 40 (HSM-40) on Naval Station Mayport, July 20. CAPT Bizzarri served as Commanding Officer of HSM-40 from August 2022 to July 2023 and will leave HSM-40 to serve as the Deputy Commander for Helicopter Maritime Strike Wing Atlantic. “I am incredibly honored and humbled to have had the opportunity to lead the men and women of HSM-40, said CAPT Bizzarri, adding, “I know the squadron will be in good hands as CDR Bigay takes command. We have known each other for a long time and I am looking forward to working together again.” During his 12-month tour as Commanding Officer, CAPT Bizzarri meticulously managed the “Airwolves” team of 603 Sailors, 125 civilian and 12 international personnel, graduating 108 Fleet Replacement Pilots and Aircrewmembers, and 309 Enlisted Landing Signalmen. Under Bizzarri’s command he emphasized a strong safety culture and facilitated unparalleled training for the MH-60R warfighters. HSM-40 is one of two MH-60R *Seahawk* Fleet Replacement Squadrons (FRS) that train pilots and aircrew across the U.S. Naval Air Forces, along with foreign students from around the globe.

USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70)

CAPT Matthew Thomas relieved CAPT P. Scott Miller as Commanding Officer of USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) during an underway Change of Command Ceremony, Aug. 7. CAPT Miller’s Command tour included being the first to deploy with a combination of Fourth and Fifth-generation platforms within Carrier Air Wing 2 (CVW-2) that predominantly represent the “Air Wing of the Future.” CAPT Miller addressed his crew one last time prior to officially changing command. “Vinson Sailors are among the strongest, most capable I know and I am truly humbled and honored to have served alongside each and every one of them.” During his two and a half year tour, the Sailors of USS Vinson completed an eight-month deployment to the U.S. 7th and 3rd Fleet Area of Operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, completed a CNO Planned Incremental Maintenance Availability (PIA) four days early, and culminated in successful completion of the Strike Group’s final training and certification exercise. Rear Admiral Carlos Sardiello, Commander, Carrier Strike Group One, presided over the ceremony. “It has truly been my honor to work with you. CAPT Miller,” said Rear Admiral Sardiello. “The success of your crew is a direct reflection of your inspirational leadership, personal integrity, and technical expertise. It is without a doubt that Vinson and her crew remain warfighting-ready thanks to your dedication to duty.” CAPT Miller was awarded the Legion of Merit for his superior accomplishments and will report to the Navy’s Air Warfare Division (OPNAV N98) in Washington D.C.

Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 3 (HSC-3) “Merlins”

CDR Thomas R. Butts relieved CAPT David W. Ayotte Jr. as Commanding Officer during HSC-3’s Change of Command Ceremony held aboard NAS North Island on August 3. As Commanding Officer, CAPT Ayotte led 61 staff officers, 171 students, 638 enlisted personnel, and an additional 173 civilian employees in the maintenance and operation of 26 permanently assigned aircraft. Under his leadership, 57 Fleet Replacement Pilots and 68 Fleet Replacement Air Crewmen were trained in both manned and unmanned aircraft. His skillful management of the Pacific Fleet MH-60S FRS, MQ-8C FRS, Search and Rescue Model Manager and the Fleet Support Detachment enabled the safe execution of all operational commitments. CAPT Ayotte will report to HSC Wing, Atlantic in Norfolk, VA where he will serve as Deputy Commodore.

Strike Fighter Squadron 105 (VFA-105) “Gunslingers”

The “Gunslingers” of Strike Fighter Squadron 105 (VFA-105), stationed aboard NAS Oceana, VA, held a Change of Command Ceremony, Aug. 3, where, CDR Travis “Sweet T” Amerine, assumed all duties and responsibilities as the VFA-105 Commanding Officer from CDR Stephen “Coach” Eckhart. CDR Eckhart time led the “Gunslingers” in their second combat deployment, “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” and the drawdown of American forces in Afghanistan. During the deployment, the “Gunslingers” flew 1,600 sorties, encompassing 3,020 flight hours to include more than 470 combat hours. “It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve with the “Gunslingers”. I wish them all the best on their upcoming deployment,” said the outgoing CO, CDR Eckhart. “I am humbled and honored to serve the greatest Strike Fighter Squadron in the Navy,” said the incoming CO, CDR Amerine, adding, “Tonight... We Ride!”

