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Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

## Vieques Training Facilities: *Vital to U.S. military readiness*

*“The Vieques weapons range is an irreplaceable national asset.”*

— Vice Admiral William Fallon, United States Navy  
Commander, US Second Fleet

During routine training on April 19, 1999, the crew of a U.S. Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornet accidentally dropped two live bombs on an observation post in the Vieques, Puerto Rico weapons range. The ensuing explosion killed David Sanes-Rodriguez, a Navy contract employee and a native Puerto Rican, and re-ignited longstanding anti-U.S. military sentiments in Puerto Rico.

In the days following the incident, protestors occupied areas of the training range, halting training exercises on the island. Despite a January 31, 2000 agreement between the White House and the Governor of Puerto Rico to permit the Navy to resume live fire training on Vieques with inert ammunition, protestors continue to occupy the training range, preventing the resumption of training exercises at the facility to date.

The U.S. military has used the facilities at Vieques for over 50 years. A municipality of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the island is located eight miles southeast of the main island of Puerto Rico. In 1941 and 1950, the Navy purchased 22,000 of Vieques’ 33,000 acres at fair market value. The Navy began training on Vieques during World War II and the Marine Corps started using Vieques to practice amphibious landings in the 1950s. Since then, Vieques has developed into a critical training facility for U.S. naval forces.

### A “One-of-a Kind” Facility

Two to three times each year, east coast-based aircraft carrier battle groups, amphibious



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ous ready groups, and Marine Expeditionary Units deploy together to the Mediterranean Sea or the Persian Gulf. In order to safely and effectively operate together, these units conduct combined live-fire training at Vieques that includes air operations, anti-submarine operations, and amphibious landings prior to deployment.

Vieques is a “one-of-a-kind” facility for such training; Admiral Jay L. Johnson, the Chief of Naval Operations, has called the island’s facilities, “...the crown jewel of live-fire, combined arms training.” A 1999 Navy study concluded that no other location in the Caribbean Sea or along the east coast of the United States is capable of supporting the training operations that the U.S. military conducts at Vieques. Since the suspension of training at Vieques, the Navy has been forced to train at a variety of facilities in the United States and overseas, none of which accommodate the combined live-fire training that is possible at Vieques.

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## The Chairman’s View

Since the Navy ceased training on Vieques in April 1999, east coast-based U.S. naval forces have experienced a corresponding decline in readiness. I am extremely concerned by this decline, and am convinced that the facilities at Vieques must be reopened immediately for live-fire training.

There is no question that Vieques offers the best and most realistic training available to east coast-based U.S. forces. According to the Navy and the Marine Corps, Vieques is the only place available to east coast forces to train in

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several warfare specialties essential to combat readiness. I agree with their conclusions that the Vieques training facilities are unique and irreplaceable.

As the *George Washington* carrier battlegroup prepares to deploy in June, it will likely be unable to use Vieques because protestors continue to occupy the range. As a result, there is a *real* danger that this battle group will deploy without training necessary to prepare U.S. military personnel for combat. If units are to deploy with properly high levels of readiness, the Navy and Marine Corps *must* immediately resume live-fire training on Vieques – anything less risks the U.S. military’s ability to execute the national military strategy and endangers the lives of American sailors and Marines.

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It is a unique combination of geography, proximity to other U.S. military facilities, and meteorology that makes Vieques irreplaceable. The island is only three days steaming time from Norfolk, Virginia (the homeport of many east coast-based navy and Marine ships), making it readily accessible to deploying forces. It is also only eight miles from the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, which is able to provide the logistical support necessary for training units. In addition, the island's location in the Atlantic ensures that weather conditions rarely cause cancellations or delays in training.

Vieques is surrounded by wide areas of deep water, which provide the space necessary for ships to conduct large fleet maneuvers. The island is also distant from major commercial airline routes, permitting Navy and Marine Corps pilots to fly combat maneuvers without endangering civilian aircraft. Finally, Vieques includes a bombardment area that is adjacent to a large open space bordered by numerous beaches suitable for amphibious landings, making possible combined amphibious assaults, ground maneuvers, and air and artillery support.

### Realistic, Unique, and Irreplaceable Training

Navy and Marine Corps forces conduct three major types of training exercises at Vieques prior to deploying overseas. First, the Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX) allows carrier battle groups to practice the basic skills that allow aircraft to put bombs on target: crewmembers assemble bombs, missiles, and torpedoes from the ship's magazines; loaders, sometimes for the first time in their careers, move live ordnance across the confusing flight deck of the carrier and place them on aircraft; and pilots fly increasingly complex missions to deliver their munitions to targets on and around Vieques. Each COMPTUEX culminates with a 72-hour exercise in which battle groups exercise these skills in a simulated live-fire combat environment.

Second, the Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFEX) simulates every aspect of naval warfare under realistic combat conditions. This exercise requires the commander of the carrier battle group to integrate air, sea, and amphibious forces into a cohesive force. Aircraft conduct air-to-ground missions on Vieques with live ammunition while units conduct air-to-air and anti-submarine warfare training.

Finally, the Supporting Arms Coordination Exercise (SACEX) allows the carrier battlegroup, amphibious ready group, and the Marine Expeditionary Unit to conduct a combined live-fire amphibious landing. In the assault phase, Marines employ landing craft and helicopters to "assault" the eastern end of Vieques. Simultaneously, carrier-based aircraft and battle group ships provide coordinated live-fire support by bombarding the far eastern end of the island.

During the final stages of the SACEX, Marine mortars, artillery, and helicopter gunships combine with Navy strike aircraft and ships



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to conduct coordinated live fire missions on Vieques' live impact area – the only area on the east coast that is capable of accommodating live naval gunfire. As such, the Vieques SACEX is the only opportunity during the entire pre-deployment training cycle when Marine commanders can conduct live-fire missions supported by battle groups and Marine Expeditionary Units.

Vieques is uniquely suited to support each of these exercises. During Operation Desert Fox in 1998, U.S. naval forces employed groups of up to 30 aircraft on missions against Iraq. The Navy is able to practice similar intensive air operations at Vieques, but flight restrictions elsewhere in the United States limit the number of aircraft that can be launched, the type of munitions aircraft can carry, and the maneuvers that pilots may take. At Vieques, the battle group can rehearse missions exactly as they may be executed against real targets and real opposition only weeks later. Such training is unique and irreplaceable, and represents the most realistic and effective means of preparing U.S. sailors and Marines for combat.

### Conclusion

If Vieques remains closed to U.S. military training, the readiness of east coast-based Navy and Marine Corps units will rapidly erode, decreasing the effectiveness of deploying units and increasing the level of risk to U.S. service members. In the latest Quarterly Readiness Report to Congress, the Department of Defense noted that, "Vieques live fire range access continues to impact [Atlantic Fleet] training readiness." Unless surface ships are allowed to resume naval gunfire training on the island, surface ships will only receive, in Department of Defense parlance, a C-3 readiness rating, indicating, "significant deficiencies which prevent [them] from performing some missions." To date, the Navy has stated that ships with a C-3 rating will not be deployed, although it is unclear what the service intends to do if Vieques remains closed and more of its east coast-based ships fall to the C-3 rating.