

STATEMENT BY ADMIRAL JAY L. JOHNSON, CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS,
AND GENERAL JAMES L. JONES, COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS
CONCERNING THE NEED FOR CONTINUED TRAINING
ON VIEQUES

On April 19th of this year, a Marine Corps F/A-18C "Hornet" was involved in a tragic accident at the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. The aircraft was from a squadron training for deployment to the Mediterranean Sea and Arabian Gulf on board USS JOHN F KENNEDY. Flying in cloudy weather, the pilot mistook an observation building located within the range for a ground target. He dropped two 500-pound bombs on that he thought was the correct target, and the explosion of these bombs resulted in the death of Mr. David Sanes-Rodriguez, a civilian security guard at the facility, and injured four other military and civilian employees. We are deeply sorry for the death of Mr. Sanes-Rodriguez and the injuries suffered by the other victims of this accident. Many of us, over long careers, have lost friends and colleagues in accidents involving air and ground live-fire training, and we understand the pain, suffering, and questions that this kind of accident leaves with families.

This tragic accident has prompted many on Puerto Rico to demand the closure of the Vieques facility. Some around the United States have recently voiced their support for its closure as well. As the dialogue over Vieques continues, it is important to understand the vital contribution that Vieques Island has made, and continues to make, to our national security. Opened in 1941 as World War II unfolded, Vieques, along with nearby Culebra Island, served as the primary training ground for Marine and Army amphibious forces formed at the outset of the war. Both facilities enabled Soldiers and Marines to train realistically for large amphibious operations with integrated live air and naval gunfire support from the U.S. Fleet. The men who sharpened their warfighting skills on Vieques and Culebra went on to win the vital first victories of the war, conducting the successful amphibious landings in North Africa, Italy, France, and in the South and Central Pacific. Just about every senior wartime leader in the Navy and Marines, as well as many in the Army, participated in significant training operations in this area.

The unique training environment afforded by Vieques and Culebra featured prominently in preparing for our nation's subsequent wars and the long periods of violent peace that separated them. Combat actions in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the interventions in Lebanon in 1958 and 1982, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Grenada in 1982, and the Gulf War in 1991 were conducted by Sailors and Marines trained to a realistic, demanding live-fire standard on Vieques. In 1975 Culebra Island was returned

to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. This left Vieques as the only place on the East Coast where aircraft, naval surface ships, and ground forces could employ combined arms training with live ammunition under realistic conditions.

Vieques is unique because of its hydrography, geography, and surrounding airspace. It lies outside heavily used commercial air corridors and sea routes, providing sea and air space for live-fire training. It is a superior site for rehearsing amphibious operations in a live-fire environment. A world-class training facility of this type comes at a significant price. Americans have invested more than three billion dollars on land, facilities, and equipment to support our training in the Puerto Rican Operating Area, of which the Vieques range and the nearby Roosevelt Roads Naval Station are the centerpiece.

The fundamental value of the Vieques facility is proven every day by our forward deployed naval forces. The Aircraft Carrier Battle Groups and the Amphibious Ready Group that trained at Vieques within the last year ended up flying combat operations over Iraq and Kosovo within days of their arrival overseas. They delivered many of their attacks from high altitude, and their ability to do so successfully was directly related to the training they received at Vieques.

The future of Vieques Island as a training facility must transcend the emotion of the April 19th tragedy. The accident should not override the fact that the range on Vieques has an enviable safety record over the course of its more than half century of use. This was the first loss of life from the release of ordnance and no bomb or round has ever fallen on Vieques outside the confines of the range. Ordnance impact areas are at the opposite end of the island from its population center - nearly ten miles to the east, separated by a range of hills.

This issue is not limited to the interests of one region or locale. Communities throughout the United States and its territories share both the burden and benefits associated with nearby bases and ranges that support our national military capabilities. Some of those bases perform purely administrative or logistical functions, and some host combat units which must train in the field on a regular basis with rifles, machine guns, mortars, artillery, and aircraft. On the east coast, only Vieques provides a site to practice the combined land, sea, and air maneuver and live-fire skills that are fundamental to our ability to fight and win our nation's battles and wars.

This burden of hosting defense facilities is not limited to American citizens alone. Around the world, every day, our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines train with live ammunition on the territory of our allies and friends. Some of our overseas bases have integrated live fire and maneuver ranges, and they too are critical to the maintenance of essential warfighting skills. Our friends and allies also have interest groups that would prefer that these activities not take place near their communities. The "not in my backyard" movement is a phenomenon that, if it succeeds at home, could greatly undermine training opportunities abroad for our men and women in uniform.

Within the limits of current technology, many skills and techniques of weapons and aircraft training are still learned and perfected with the use of live ordnance under realistic conditions. Such experiences build the skills and confidence our forces need before undertaking their operational deployments. The success of our military forces around the world depends on regular access to our national training facilities at Vieques Island and other sites that provide these experiences. Decreasing, restricting, or eliminating access to such facilities as a result of a once-in-a-generation accident will result in reduced combat skills proficiency of our servicemembers and could cause loss of American lives in future conflicts. Before rendering any judgement that places men and women of our armed forces at increased risk, we must carefully weigh the short-term benefits of such decisions against the likely long-term consequences.