

Vieques Community Outreach Promotes Safe & Efficient Cleanup of Unexploded Ordnance

Protecting the Public, Reducing Risk & Controlling Cleanup Costs are Top Priorities

DURING DECADES OF military training, the U.S. Navy and its allies expended thousands of munitions at the Vieques Naval Training Range, Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. After training exercises ceased in the early 2000s, personnel from the

A Half Century of Military Training

From the 1940s until 2003, the U.S. Navy used portions of Vieques Island and the surrounding waters for an array of live and inert ordnance military training activities, including amphibious exercises, naval gunfire,



The Navy is keeping people safe while finding a cost-effective way to clean up the hazardous remnants of more than a half century of military training.

Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Atlantic began cleanup of the closed range under the Munitions Response Program. So far, approximately 40,000 munitions items have been removed safely from the former range, which is now a National Wildlife Refuge managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The refuge is located adjacent to the towns and residential areas of Vieques, and NAVFAC has worked closely with the local community to promote awareness of the dangers of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and to develop a safe and efficient cleanup program.

artillery fire, and air-to-ground bombing. As a result, thousands of acres on the east end of the island were impacted by a wide variety of munitions, including bombs, rockets, guided missiles, sub-munitions, mortars, and projectiles.

Vieques currently has a population of over 9,000, and thousands of tourists and recreational boaters visit the island every year. Although many beaches are open to the public, some beaches and their surrounding waters, as well as thousands of acres of inland area, still pose an explosive hazard from UXO. The Navy is keeping people safe while finding a

cost-effective way to clean up the hazardous remnants of more than a half century of military training.

A Legacy of Distrust

Years of tension on Vieques were brought to a head in April 1999, when a local Navy security guard was killed and four others were injured during a live fire training accident. Hundreds of demonstrators established protest camps, and the protests attracted the attention of activists from around the world, including environmental attorney Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and actor Edward James Olmos. The public outcry ultimately culminated with a

decision to close the training range. In 2003, the range was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior for use as a National Wildlife Refuge, administered by USFWS. Although the protests ended, local residents felt lingering resentment toward the Navy over health and safety, economic development, and the island's natural and cultural resources. As the Navy shifted from military training to munitions cleanup and environmental restoration, the majority of the local community entered into a class action lawsuit filed against the Navy regarding alleged health and economic impacts from operations at the former range. The long-term distrust within the local community compounded the technical challenges related to the cleanup, and cleanup workers were viewed with suspicion.

Building Trust & Reducing Cleanup Cost through Innovative Community Outreach

NAVFAC began its community outreach program on Vieques in 2000, prior to the closure of the range. Even today, community outreach focuses on overcoming lingering distrust, building mutual understanding, and fostering two-way communication with community members about the progress of the Navy's munitions response and other environmental restoration activities. This effort requires sensitivity to cultural differences and

Vieques Restoration Overview

THE NAVFAC ENVIRONMENTAL Restoration Program is dedicated to conserving, protecting, and restoring the environment and natural and cultural resources at U.S. Navy facilities worldwide. The munitions response work at the former Vieques Naval Training Range, Vieques Island, Puerto Rico poses unique challenges to NAVFAC and contractor staff. Dense jungle covers much of the work area, requiring painstaking removal of vegetation by hand to expose and safely remove a wide array of munitions types. Workers must deal with high temperatures and humidity, stinging insects, thorny plants, steep slopes, and intense rains. Munitions removal activities must limit disturbance of endangered species and valuable habitat, such as sea turtles, coral, mangrove forests and dwarf coastal vegetation.

The Vieques restoration team was recognized with the 2009 and 2011 Chief of Naval Operations Award and the 2009 Secretary of the Navy Award for Environmental Restoration.

Munitions and related debris pulled from the former Vieques Naval Training Range.



an understanding of the political history associated with the Navy's presence on the island.

Because the primary language of most residents of Vieques is Spanish, the community outreach program is bilingual. All outreach materials are produced in both English and Spanish, and interpreters are present at public meetings to provide simultaneous translations of presentations and discussions. The island does not have a newspaper, so local megaphone trucks are hired to drive through the towns and neighborhoods to publicize public meetings and community events.

The Navy's community outreach program strives to involve local residents in the cleanup process to help create an efficient and cost effective program. The Navy's commitment to engaging the community in the cleanup process has reduced costs in a variety of ways. For example:

- The Navy has reduced the cost of cleanup by training and hiring local residents to work as UXO technicians, rather than bringing in non-residents to work on the island. In addition, the Navy uses local vendors for equipment, security, maintenance, and other services. Use of the local workforce has helped build trust within the community and produced an overall cost saving of \$25 million for the Navy (an average of \$3.6 million per year). In addition, integration of the local community into the cleanup program has contributed jobs and dollars to the struggling Vieques economy.



ABOVE LEFT: NAVFAC Atlantic personnel teach UXO safety during the 2013 Vieques Environmental Fair.



ABOVE CENTER: Artillery rounds stockpiled for final processing.



ABOVE RIGHT: Protest signs were posted near the former Vieques Naval Training Range in 2001.

RIGHT: A protest mural was painted near the former Vieques Naval Training Range in 2001.

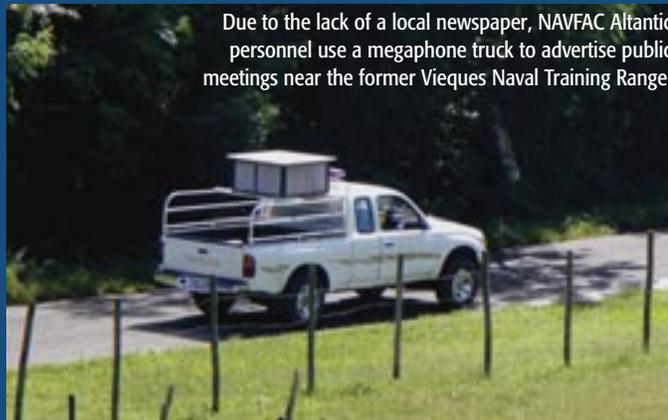
BELOW: U.S. Marines from Task Force Sledge Hammer train on the island of Vieques in August 2001.

Photographer's Mate 2 John Williams

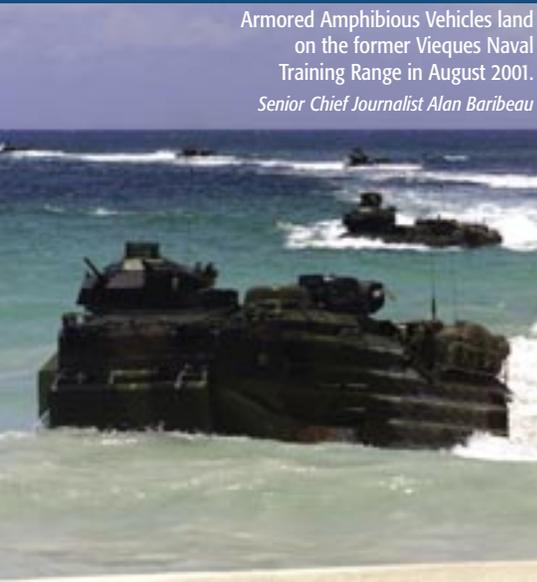


Armored Amphibious Vehicles land on the former Vieques Naval Training Range in August 2001.

Senior Chief Journalist Alan Baribeau



Due to the lack of a local newspaper, NAVFAC Atlantic personnel use a megaphone truck to advertise public meetings near the former Vieques Naval Training Range.



NAVFAC Atlantic personnel host a UXO site visit for community members.



Community outreach focuses on overcoming historical distrust, building mutual understanding, and fostering two-way communication.

- NAVFAC coordinated and led a public site visit to the Eastern Conservation Area on Vieques to demonstrate its sensitive ecology and promote an optimized approach to cleanup. Community leaders saw the value in preserving habitat and later spoke in support of the Navy's plan, which will protect public safety, preserve large tracts of sensitive habitat, and reduce the cleanup cost by \$8.5 million.

Promoting UXO Safety through Community Education

A critical objective of the community outreach program is to promote UXO awareness and safety, thereby protecting the local community and tourists from potential explosive hazards. The Navy conducts a variety of innovative activities to promote awareness and safety. Examples include:

- The Navy coordinated two Vieques Environmental Fairs through collaborative partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies. At these fairs, the Navy exhibit focused on UXO awareness, and Navy personnel taught safety procedures to follow if UXO is encountered. The fairs have attracted hundreds of local community members, including many school children, and have been covered by local and national news media.
- Monthly updates are distributed to the public via email or traditional mail for residents who do not have access to computers. These newsletters provide readers with information about the cleanup program, UXO safety, warnings about the dangers of trespassing, and contact information for Navy personnel who can answer questions and address concerns. In addition, informational flyers are placed at local businesses and other community gathering places.
- UXO warning signs are placed on beaches and roads, and warning buoys and barriers have been installed offshore. In addition, the Navy publishes UXO safety and awareness information in local news media. Many messages are geared specifically toward children to teach them not to pick up suspicious items that may be dangerous.
- In the decade since cleanup began, the Navy has made a genuine commitment to involve the local community. This outreach program has helped to reverse decades of distrust, thereby leading to more efficient and less costly cleanup efforts. In addition, Navy outreach has focused on educating the local residents and tourists about UXO safety, promoting awareness of what to do if UXO is encountered. Overall, the outreach program has been a success in protecting public safety and providing millions of dollars in cost efficiencies for the Navy.

Vieques at a Glance

VIEQUES IS A small island (about 20 miles long and four miles wide), located seven miles off the southeast coast of mainland Puerto Rico. The former Navy property comprises large areas on the eastern and western sides of the Island. After military training operations ended, the U.S. Congress transferred the majority of the property to the U.S. Department of the Interior to be managed as a National Wildlife Refuge by the USFWS. Additional property on the western end of Vieques was transferred to the Municipality of Vieques and the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust. In the center of the island, more than 9,000 residents live in or around two main towns—Isabel Segunda and Esperanza. Thousands of tourists visit Vieques each year to enjoy the beauty and serenity of island's beaches and surrounding waters.

For more information on the Vieques Environmental Restoration and Munitions Response Programs, visit www.navfac.navy.mil/vieques. 

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