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. DEFENSE: Navy enlists dolphins, sea lions to patrol waters near base (*Greenwire*, 12/07/2009)

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Dina Fine Maron, E&E reporter

The newest batch of sentries at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor will not have to wear uniforms. But they won't get to clock out for breaks -- and they will be paid in fish.

The base near Washington's Puget Sound is slated to receive up to 20 Navy-trained bottlenose dolphins and California sea lions to patrol the shoreline around the submarine base as part of a bolstered security initiative started after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The plan, proposed more than three years ago, was approved last month after a lengthy environmental impact assessment. The animals will be on the lookout 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for swimmers or divers in the base's restricted waters, said Tom LaPuzza, a

spokesman for the Navy Marine Mammal Program.

The deployment, planned for sometime in 2010, will mark only the latest maneuver for the marine mammal unit, founded almost 40 years ago.

During the Vietnam War, dolphins and sea lions were tapped by the Navy for assistance in duties ranging from mine detection and object retrieval to finding and marking enemy swimmers as part of an official U.S. Navy Marine Mammal Program. Since then, the animals in the marine fleet have been sent to other U.S. Navy bases and were deployed to help clear mines from the waters by Umm Qasr during the early stages of the war in Iraq.

None of the animals has ever been injured or killed in the line of duty, according to the Navy.

"We enlisted marine mammals because modern technology has not yet caught up with their innate sensory abilities," LaPuzza said. Dolphins have superior biological sonar that allows them to find mines and swimmers for the Navy, and sea lions have excellent low-light vision and underwater directional hearing capabilities useful for deepwater object retrieval missions and swimmer detection, he said. Also, unlike human divers, both animals can take repeated deep-sea dives without experiencing adverse health effects.

Enlisting the marine contingent

The animals are not taught to take out an intruder themselves or attack the person in any way.

They are each trained at the program's center in San Diego to alert their human handlers to a swimmer's presence, mark his or her location, and then swim away while humans apprehend the intruder, LaPuzza said.

The program was scaled down with the end of the Cold War because the Navy thought it would have reduced security needs, according to Navy officials. The Navy also thought that technology like mechanical sonar would soon be available that would match the animals' innate abilities, said LaPuzza.

"In the late 1990s, we saw machines wouldn't be ready and started up the program again," LaPuzza said.

Even during the scale down, the fleet size dropped down to 83 because of the animals' long life spans -- typically the late 20s for the sea lions and upward of 30 years for the dolphins. Now there are more than 100 animals in the service.

Navy officials would not comment on whether there has been a specific threat to the Washington base that would prompt increased security but said that utilizing the marine mammals was part of a comprehensive effort to augment security forces from terrorist threats.

Though the marine mammals were captured from the wild in the early years of the program, since the late 1980s, the program has bred its dolphins in-house at its training facility in San Diego and buys young sea lion pups from marine parks, said Mark Xitco, who heads up all the marine mammal training and care for the program.

A day in the life

When out on patrol, the animals are accompanied by handlers in small power boats. If a dolphin senses an intruder, like a swimmer or a diver, it swims up to the boat and touches a sensor to alert a handler. Then, if the handlers and military personnel decide it is necessary to investigate the threat further, the handler will place a strobe light or a noisemaker on the dolphin's nose, LaPuzza said. The dolphin is trained to swim to the intruder, bump him or her from behind -- which would knock the device off its nose -- and then quickly swim away while military personnel take over.

Sea lions are trained to maneuver slightly differently. Individual sea lions are trained to swim up to an intruder with a cuff held in the sea lion's mouth and bump up against the intruder's leg, at which point the cuff will snap shut. Then the intruder can be reeled in with an attached tether the animal left with military personnel.

Training the animals is very similar to training a dog to chase a ball, explained Chris Harris, a civilian Navy employee who works as a trainer at the San Diego facility. "Conceptually, it's the same. The animals get a food reward, and we give both tactical and words of praise," he said. They start training dolphins born in their program within the first few weeks of life, he said.

The animals, currently housed at the San Diego training facility, will be flown to their new location to report for duty sometime in 2010. Approximately 300 marine mammals have passed through the Navy's program, though not all completed training and were sent out to the field, according to Xitco.

Decades in the making

Even before the recent push to bring on a full-time marine mammal guard to look out for almost a dozen of the Navy's submarines and 9,500 personnel, the Navy considered bringing dolphin guards to Kitsap-Bangor two decades ago, but the move was stalled by a lawsuit from environmental groups charging that the Navy failed to analyze the effects of the proposed actions on the dolphins themselves and then a loss for security funding in the 1990s.

More recent critics of the animals' deployment to the Washington base were concerned about how the cold waters might affect the dolphins and about both dolphin and sea lions' waste polluting the shellfish harvest areas nearby. Those issues were addressed during the environmental impact review process, according to LaPuzza. The Navy agreed to house the animals in enclosures when they are not patrolling, which will prevent their waste from seeping into Hood Canal, and if temperatures drop below 52 degrees the dolphins' enclosure will automatically be heated, according to the environmental impact statement [report](#).

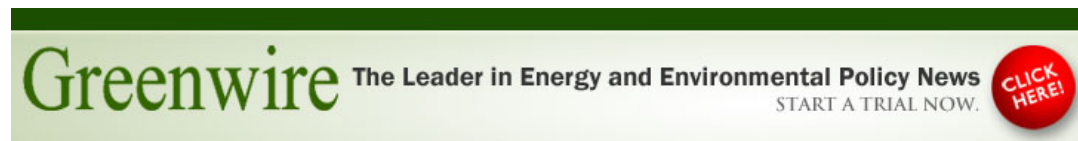
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