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**An exclusive interview with Hon. Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano, EUNAVFOR ATALANTA Operation Commander, conducted by
Editor in Chief, Catherine S. Schmidt**

Biography of Hon. Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano

Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva is a 1987 graduate of the Spanish Naval Academy.

In 1989 he earned his US Navy wings, becoming a Naval Aviator. He then flew the AV-8V PLUS on board the Spanish carrier 'PRINCIPE DE ASTURIAS.' During that period, he was also appointed as an exchange pilot with the Spanish Air force, flying the EF-18 A+ and taking part in the B-H conflict, where he flew several combat missions deployed from Aviano AB, Italy.

He has commanded the gun patrol boat 'P-11 BARCELO', the high seas patrol boat 'P-63 ARNOMENDI', the LST 'L-42 PIZARRO', the Fleet Air Arm 'FLOAN' and the Airfield of the Rota Naval Base. He was the Director of the Fleet Naval Aviation School and the CO of the 9th HARRIER Squadron. Ashore, he has served in a variety of assignments, most notably as a staff officer in the International Relations Department at the Navy HQ, as ACOS N3 in the SPMARFOR High Readiness Maritime HQ, and as Head of the Operations department at the Spanish Fleet HQ. Abroad he was stationed in Mons, Belgium, serving at SHAPE J5 as the ACO capability requirements and force planning officer; and in Pristina, Kosovo, working as UN peace observer and liaison officer between KFOR HQ and UNMIK HQ.

Additionally, he has attended several national and NATO courses including the NATO Operational Planning, NATO Staff Officer Defense Planning and NATO expeditionary operations courses. He graduated with distinction from the US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, after having completed the Naval Staff and the Naval Command Courses in years 2001 and 2018 respectively. He also obtained a Master of Arts in National Security and Strategic Studies from the same US Naval War College. His academic background is completed with a job as a professor at the High Defense Studies Center in Madrid, Spain. He was promoted to Rear Admiral on the 5th December 2019. As Flag Officer he has been appointed as 2nd Commander of the Spanish High Readiness Maritime HQ and DCOM SPMARFOR. He was appointed as Force Commander of the EU NAVFOR Somalia Op Atalanta on board the frigates NUMANCIA and SANTA MARIA. On 26 February 2021 he was appointed as COS Spanish Fleet HQ, being promoted to Vice Admiral on 3 November.

He has several national Navy medals and medals from UN, UE, NATO, SPAF, and numerous awards and citations. He is married to Matilde and has four children.

Honorable Vice Admiral, it is a great honor to have the occasion of this interview with you. Thank you for your time Sir.

Q 1: The Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea are vital maritime corridors for global trade. These waterways have historically faced significant security challenges, including piracy, illicit activities, and in the recent years the climate change. Improving security conditions in these regions requires a multifaceted approach, involving international cooperation, regional initiatives, and technological advancements. How is EUNAVFOR ATALANTA adapting its operational capabilities to address these challenges?

Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano: On 8 December 2024, we marked 16 years of operation since ATALANTA was launched by the EU in 2008. Over time, the Operation has evolved and adapted to changing circumstances due to several factors: regular updates to our mandate by the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), improvements in information sharing, the strengthening of our position within the maritime security architecture, communication with nations on how to better prepare for the challenges they may face in the Area of Operations, expanded relations and cooperation with other nations and naval operations, and the incorporation of new capabilities, such as anti-drone systems.

All of these changes are vital in addressing the challenges faced by Operation ATALANTA. Over the years, we have been able to improve our information-sharing processes, to ensure that threats are taken into account at the right time and enhance the effectiveness of our efforts in the region.

As you mentioned, these threats require a multifaceted approach that calls for regional cooperation. That is why another line of action that is particularly important to me is to ensure that our actions are in line with regional dynamics, what we call the “maritime security architecture”. Over time, we have been able to build solid ties with regional institutions, nations and naval operations, which allowed us fostering deeper cooperation.

We are always ready to respond to changing circumstances in the region where we operate, incorporating new capabilities as needed.

And what are the key priorities and strategic objectives for moving forward?

Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano: Precisely, we have just presented the activity of the Operation during the last 6 months and the way forward for 2025. The core of our mission —the fight against piracy— remains the basis of everything we do, and that is always in coordination and cooperation with the other stakeholders in the area. On another note, we will continue to advocate for agreements regarding the transfer of apprehended persons, drugs, and arms to regional countries. Furthermore, we will keep optimizing our monitoring of IUU fishing, which is a threat to the livelihood of coastal populations, and the root of many other illicit activities.

We will maintain close coordination and cooperation with our EU sister organizations, the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP-S), EU Training Mission (EUTM-S), both in Somalia, and the EU naval operation ASPIDES. We will strengthen cooperation with other maritime security partners, such as India, consolidating the work done up to date. ATALANTA will also continue to develop existing projects to consolidate its established profile in the area.

Q 2: The 52nd edition of the SHADE (Shared Awareness and De-confliction) Conference, co-chaired by Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and Operation ATALANTA, was held in December 2024, in Bahrain. This crucial gathering brought together a diverse range of stakeholders, including military personnel, industry representatives, and academic experts, to address and strengthen the maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean region.

Could you please share the main takeaways from this conference?



Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano: During the 52nd SHADE (Shared Awareness and De-confliction) Conference, the transformation of the Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa (MSCHoA) into the Maritime Security Centre Indian Ocean (MSCIO) was presented. This is a significant advancement, as it will serve as a hub for maritime awareness and security operations, focused on enhancing data analysis, intelligence sharing, and engagement with the shipping industry, and thus, contribute to strengthening maritime security across the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf. A major milestone in information sharing was achieved by formalizing standardized Best Management Practice, as well as sharing reporting forms between MSCIO, JMIC and United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO). This strategic partnership is now fully operational, enhancing maritime security coordination by facilitating seamless information exchange, standardized vessel registration, and report forms.

It represents a significant step forward in regional maritime security capabilities in support of the shipping industry, while maintaining a constant and fluid relationship with the maritime industry.

Q 3: Regional cooperation is crucial for effective maritime security. What initiatives is EUNAVFOR undertaking to strengthen further partnerships with regional navies and maritime agencies? How can these collaborations be leveraged to address shared security challenges and improve maritime domain awareness?

Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano: Only during the second half of 2024, the Operation has conducted seven focused operations – targeted operations addressing specific areas of the mandate – and six joint activities at sea with other operations and navies to enhance interoperability. These activities at sea, combined with numerous capacity-building and enhancement exercises with local forces in the Area of Operations, and big regional exercises, have further strengthened existing relationships. Regular engagements with maritime security centers in the region continues to be a crucial point in bolstering ATALANTA’s footprint in the area.

The presence of ATALANTA, along with its ability to offer training, expertise, participation, and support for addressing other needs of regional countries, is a key strength in integrating into the maritime architecture, which is fundamental for the operation.

Q 4: Please tell us how do you see the year 2025 ahead for EUNAVFOR in Operation ATALANTA? Does EUNAVFOR consider to increase its presence in the area of its operation or beyond?

Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano: We wrapped up 2024 with the news that the European Union had extended the Operation until 28 February 2027, which demonstrates the strong support of the EU member states and contributing nations to our efforts and commitment to maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean. With this in mind, we face 2025 with great enthusiasm, committed to maintain our role as reference in maritime security, and keeping the threat of piracy deterred in this region.

The new mandate for the Operation further strengthens our position as a key tool for the EU's foreign actions in the Indo-Pacific, complemented by the recent launch of our [MSCIO website](#). Additionally, our objective of contributing to the development and enhancement of maritime security architecture in the area of operations gives us valuable opportunities to deepen cooperation with the coastal states in the area of operations, particularly Somalia. We have an exciting year ahead.

Operation ATALANTA is more relevant and necessary than ever. It will remain a key tool in the EU's strategy for the Indo-Pacific. We will continue with our ongoing efforts, as we have done so far. The Operation is ready to evolve as the security situation requires.

- See more news from [EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta](#)
- More about [Operation ATALANTA \(Official site\)](#)
- News from [the Spanish Navy](#)

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U.S Army-led Exercise Arctic Forge 25

Posted on [February 5, 2025](#) by [U.S Europe World Affairs.com](#)

February 17, 2025 marks the beginning of the biennial Exercise Arctic Forge 25, led by a U.S. Army Europe and Africa. The exercise will continue until February 28, 2025 in the High North.



With much enhancement this year, the Arctic Forge 25 elevates military capabilities and cooperation in the High North to a new level, fostering an unprecedented environment for operational readiness among allied forces.

Confirmed by the U.S Army Europe and Africa, the Exercise is designed to integrate seamlessly with Finnish Defense Exercise 25 and [Norwegian Joint Viking 25](#), establishing a robust framework that promotes significantly the Arctic readiness and interoperability in the High North.

Key aspects that underline the strategic importance of the Arctic Forge 25

- Enhancing Operational Readiness;
- Fostering more Interoperability between U.S Forces and NATO allies;
- Providing the Environmental Adaptability, inter alia, extreme temperatures, limited daylight and unpredictable weather conditions, which of all necessitate the implementation of specific military strategies to ensure missions' effectiveness;
- Demonstrating the continuation of [the U.S commitments](#) in safeguarding peace and security in the Arctic region.

Acknowledgments: Sources U.S Army Europe and Africa. Article by Catherine S. Schmidt, Editor in Chief.

The United States-NATO Allies and European Partners in Combined Resolve 25-1

Posted on [January 16, 2025](#) by [U.S Europe World Affairs.com](#)

Starting January 17 through Feb. 16, 2025, Exercise Combined Resolve 25-1 will be taking place at the 7th Army Training Command and Joint Multinational Readiness Center in a U.S. Army Base in the south of Germany.



Combined Resolve 25-1, develops further the joint capabilities, it enhances the readiness and interoperability across the wide scope of U.S- European armed forces. It ensures the collective defense posture remains ready and robust.

This exercise facilitates opportunities for U.S- NATO allies and partners to experience, and immerse themselves in each other's military cultures and frameworks. It as well strengthens their partnerships in a profound way.

Announced by 7th Army Training Command, the participating armed forces in the [Combined Resolve 25-1](#) are from: Albania, Armenia, Belgium, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Combined Resolve 25-1 will be led by [7th Army Training Command](#).

Acknowledgments: Sources and the Combined Resolve 25 logo: 7th Army Training Command/ U.S Army Europe and Africa. Article by Catherine S. Schmidt, Editor in Chief.

Inspirational Speech

Leadership Starts With You

By Hon. Major General John L. Gronski, Deputy Commanding General, United States Army Europe (RET) and the Founder and CEO of Leader Grove



I believe leaders must dedicate themselves to serving others and caring for those they lead. However, they must also prioritize taking care of themselves before they can effectively care for others. Self-care is not just a good practice for leaders; it is an essential component of effective leadership.

Whether in a formal leadership position or not, we must give ourselves permission to care for our own well-being. This is not selfish; in fact, it enables us to lead selflessly and more effectively.

Years ago, I was preparing for an Army deployment to Iraq, where I was tasked with leading approximately 5,000 men and women in a difficult fight in a violent and chaotic environment. Before deploying, I sought advice from my mentors, and they all stressed the importance of self-care in order to lead effectively.

They recommended activities like exercising regularly, ensuring I ate three balanced meals a day, staying hydrated, reading fictional novels unrelated to the war, getting at least seven hours of sleep daily, and taking at least one day off each week to recharge.

This advice was invaluable. Unfortunately, I did not follow it once I arrived in country. I became consumed by the daily challenges and responsibilities of command and pushed myself to exhaustion. After my year-long deployment, I had time to reflect upon my return home, and I realized that by ignoring the guidance of my mentors, I had made a significant mistake. However, I also learned a valuable lesson: a leader must first take care of themselves before they can effectively care for those they lead.

By all accounts, including feedback from the men and women I led and the leaders I worked with, I did a good job. But in hindsight, I believe I could have been a far more effective leader if I had prioritized self-care during the deployment.

I believe that while leaders must place the welfare of their followers above their own, they must also take the time to care for themselves—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—before they can most effectively serve and support those they lead.

Self-care is the intentional practice of engaging in activities that preserve and improve one's overall well-being. It encompasses physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, helping individuals maintain balance, reduce stress, and enhance resilience. Key components of self-care include:

1. **Physical self-care:** Exercise, eating nutritious food, getting enough sleep, staying hydrated, and addressing medical needs.
2. **Mental self-care:** Engaging in activities that stimulate the mind, such as reading, solving puzzles, or learning something new.
3. **Emotional self-care:** Taking time to relax, pursuing hobbies, practicing mindfulness, journaling, and seeking support when needed.
4. **Social self-care:** Spending time with loved ones, setting boundaries, and nurturing positive relationships.

5. **Spiritual self-care:** Participating in practices that align with one's beliefs or values, such as prayer, meditation, or spending time in nature.

Self-care is essential for preventing burnout, enhancing resilience, and maintaining a healthy, balanced life.

A useful behavioral strategy to incorporate self-care is the “Go,” “No,” “Slow” framework.

- **Go** refers to activities and behaviors that should be embraced and incorporated into your life. These include actions that contribute to your physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being, as well as striving to achieve your goals.
- **No** represents recognizing and avoiding unhealthy, unproductive, or high-risk behaviors. This includes things like excessive drinking, speeding, or engaging in disrespectful or sarcastic interactions.
- **Slow** involves intentionally performing actions at a slower pace. This could include pausing before speaking, taking time to listen attentively to others, journaling, reading, or simply sitting quietly and reflecting.

By applying this framework, we can foster greater self-awareness, reduce stress, and enhance our overall ability to care for others. When leaders take the time and have the discipline to practice self-care, they will not only lead more effectively but they will set a good example for future generations of leaders.

Hon. Major General John L. Gronski, Deputy Commanding General of the United States Army Europe (RET) and the Founder and CEO of [Leader Grove](#). He is an author, a speaker, and a coach with decades of experience in leadership.

[Visit Leader Grove](#)

Acknowledgments

Image-1 Hon. Vice Admiral Ignacio Villanueva Serrano, EUNAVFOR ATALANTA Operation Commander. **Image-2** the 52nd edition of SHADE Conference, in Bahrain 16-17 December 2024. Media images © EUNAVFVOR Atalanta. **Image-3** Hon. Maj. Gen. John Gronski, Deputy Commanding General of U.S Army Europe visiting Romanian forces during NATO Operation Atlantic Resolve at Smardan Training area in Romania. April 20, 2017. © United States European Command/ by Army Pvt. Nicholas Vidro, 7th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment. Article “Leadership Starts With You” © LeaderGrove

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