

## **NATO closes historic satellite ground terminal after 38 years of service - ACT**

Written by U.S. Navy Petty Officer Sarah R. Langdon  
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After 38 years of service in the United States, NATO Communication Information Services Agency's (NCSA) Satellite Ground Terminal F-3 (SGT F-3) officially closed its doors for good June 30.

SGT F-3, situated on the quiet, rural and sprawling base of Naval Support Activity (NSA) Northwest Annex in Chesapeake, Va., near the North Carolina border, was the first military installation in the United States ever constructed exclusively with international funds.

Since it began operating April 1, 1972, the command has provided 24-hour-a-day, uninterrupted and two-way communication capabilities between U.S. officials in Washington D.C., Headquarters, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (HQ SACT) in Norfolk, and senior government and military officials throughout the world.

SGT F-3's 23 staff members, who simply refer to the understated, one-story building as "F-3", celebrated the completion of the command's mission and marked the occasion with a decommissioning ceremony June 25.

U.S. Army Colonel Stephen J. Mayhew, NCSA Sector Norfolk, and U.S. Navy Warrant Officer Timothy Heck, SGT F-3's final Officer-in-Charge (OIC), both spoke on the command's unique history and contributions to NATO. German Air Force Lieutenant General Kurt Herrmann, Director NCSA, was unable to attend the ceremony, and instead addressed staff and guests via a pre-recorded message.

"Indeed, it is a sad day when we disband an operational facility and the closure of SGT F-3 is an especially momentous occasion," said Herrmann. "This site, tucked away in the farmlands of Virginia, was the only one of its kind in the United States and has provided exceptional support to NATO for the past 38 years.

"Although it is a sad day in many respects, at the same time this even celebrates NCSA's success," he continued. "As communicators, we know that technology continually advances and as a community, we have become masters of change, continually improving NATO's communication capabilities, security and efficiency. This closure today is a result of our

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successes - successes in meeting NATO challenges by ushering in technological advances.”

Many people are unaware SGT F-3 even existed. Initially, it was one of only a handful of satellite ground terminals established in the mid-70s to prove satellite communications could be reliable, cost effective and provide the required level of security for the Nations, Herrmann said. It was the third of 12 fixed sites built by 15 NATO member countries and its mission was to provide secure voice connectivity and enable political consultation between the President of the United States, Prime Minister of Canada and Heads of State of other NATO Nations in times of crisis. It was also tasked with providing communications to protect the Atlantic’s sea lanes.

During its tenure, SGT F-3 hosted 17 Navy OICs. Its communications operations were conducted primarily by U.S. Navy enlisted electronics technicians (ETs) and information technologists (ITs) and NATO civilian engineers. The command provided vital services throughout the 1980s and moved with the times in the 1990s, upgrading to high-speed and high-bandwidth devices. The command established the first video teleconferencing link into Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in the mid-90s and most recently, supported drug interdiction forces led by the United States and Canada in the war against the drug cartels of South and Central America.

As communication technologies and capabilities have changed, so have NATO’s missions and requirements. As a result NATO is reducing the number of SGTs it maintains, which included closing SGT F-3.

In his remarks as SGT F-3’s final OIC, Heck thanked the command’s Sailors for their hard work and contributions to the command, especially during the decommissioning process.

“The group of Sailors I have had the pleasure of working with over the last few months continue to impress me every day,” he said. “Their professionalism, tenacity and dedication to duty have inspired me. I want to say thank you to them for their hard work and efforts throughout this decommissioning process. Without you this could not have been done so quickly and efficiently.”

As Hermann wrapped up his address, he focused on the command’s more than 30 decades of service by referencing the Navy’s respect for one of its most time honoured traditions “the

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Watch.”

“For 38 years, the United States Navy and NATO civilian engineers have stood the watch at this facility,” he said in closing. “Before some of us were born, F-3 stood the watch. While some of us were still in school, F-3 stood the watch. As the storm clouds of war and conflict loomed on the horizon, F-3’s perseverance, determination and pursuit of excellence stood the watch. The Alliance is forever grateful for your efforts. Thank you for standing the watch.”

Following Hermann’s remarks, the NATO and U.S. flags were symbolically lowered for the last time and presented to Mayhew and Heck. SGT F-3’s last watchstander, U.S. Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Stephen Harmon, stood at attention and addressed Heck.

“Sir, the watch stands relieved.”