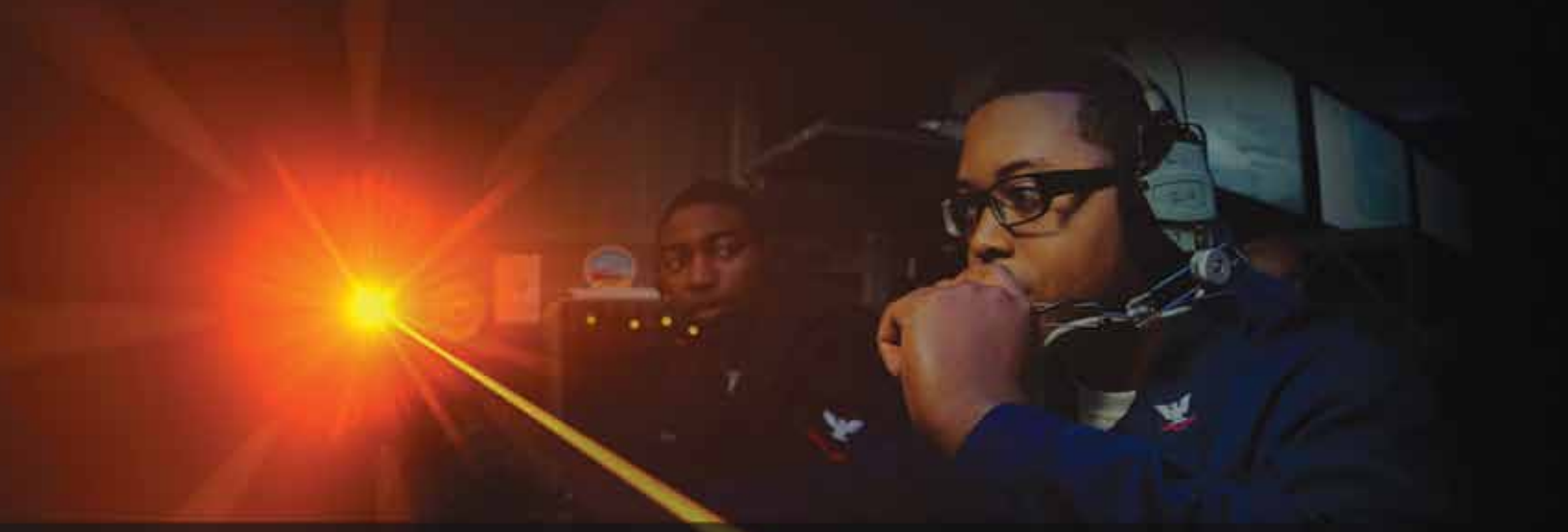

Directed Energy in the Military Environment

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The military operates in the land, air, and maritime environments. In each of these environments, lasers and laser devices are increasingly being seen and used in a variety of ways. Accordingly, the military must protect itself and civilians from the potentially dangerous effects of lasers and other directed-energy devices.

Lasers are being used on the ground to determine the intentions of people who approach checkpoints and to dissuade aircraft from entering restricted airspace. Laser weapons are also being developed for use in the maritime environment. With the use of lasers comes the requirement for eye protection. The eye is particularly sensitive to lasers and its anatomy includes optical components that amplify the power of incoming light. Consequently, the potential for injury or blinding is great.

Naval Medical Research Unit – San Antonio (NAMRU-SA) is poised to lead the way in researching and testing laser glare devices and laser eye protection. The mission of the NAMRU-SA is to conduct medical, dental, and directed-energy biomedical research, which focuses on ways to enhance the health, safety, performance, and operational readiness of Navy and Marine Corps personnel, and addresses their emergent medical and dental problems in routine and combat operations. NAMRU-SA was officially commissioned on 6 May 2009 and is a subordinate command under the Naval Medical Research Center (NMRC) in Silver Spring, Maryland, reporting to Navy Medicine Support Command (NMSC) in Jacksonville, Florida. NAMRU-SA consolidates the Naval Health Research Center Detachment Directed Energy Bioeffects Laboratory, the Naval Institute for Dental and Biomedical Research in Great Lakes, and the NMRC Combat Casualty Care research function. As part of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) 2005, NAMRU-SA has moved to Fort Sam Houston. Two new buildings that have been constructed are the Battlefield Health and Trauma Research Institute and the Tri Service Research Laboratory. A conceptual drawing of the NAMRU-SA Tri-Service Research Laboratory (to house directed-energy research) is shown in Figure 1.

Many factors must be considered when lasers operate in military environments. On the ground, lasers offer a greater likelihood of close contact exposure. In aviation and maritime environments, the mobility of lasers is limited to permanent fixtures on aircraft or ships, so target acquisition can be much more complicated. Often ignored, but just as important and common to all environments, are the psychological factors that need to be explored. These factors include clarifying intentions, communications, and effectiveness. In certain situations,

Figure 1. Naval Medical Research Unit – San Antonio Tri-Service Research Laboratory at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas (artist's concept)

sometimes lasers are coupled with other modalities, such as auditory instructions.

On the ground, laser exposure has been shown to interfere with driving vehicles, making color judgments, and target shooting. In aviation, lasers can interfere with pilot vision, causing afterimages, glare, or temporary ocular injury, with attendant effects on navigation and control. In the maritime environment, lights frequently are used to signal a variety of messages, from direction (left, right, etc.) to more complicated messages such as "man overboard." More prolific use of lasers underscores the need for laser eye protection, a dynamic area of research, which must respond to changing threat wavelengths and changing environments. Figure 2 shows NAMRU-SA personnel executing an operational field test at Kennedy Space Center, July 2009.

Recent studies undertaken by NAMRU-SA have investigated the use of laser dazzlers on sailors in small boats.[a] In these studies, participants were exposed to the laser glare at different angles and distances, in both day and night conditions. Study protocols were approved in accordance with the Institutional Review Board in compliance with all applicable federal regulations governing the protection of human subjects. Participants were given a survey assessing their subjective response to the laser, as well as a more objective visual eye chart. The

Figure 2. NAMRU-SA personnel execute operational field test at Kennedy Space Center, July 2009, in which a nonlethal laser prototype is evaluated for power delivery (stability and beam propagation) at range and human visual effectiveness aboard a maritime target.

results suggested that participants were most affected by the laser at night when they were looking straight at it (as opposed to many degrees away) and at the closest exposure distances. The most surprising finding, however, was that some participants reported being drawn to the laser rather than away from it, especially at farther distances. Participants remarked that they couldn't tell what the signal was, so they would want to go closer to find out. This illustrates that the assumption (by some)—that distant laser lights will deter and repel innocent mariners—might not always be true. Further research is needed to verify this finding, however, before employing laser glare devices in the maritime environment. Figure 3 shows NAMRU-SA personnel executing operational field tests, which were conducted at Cheatham Annex, Virginia, and Panama City, Florida, in 2008–2009.

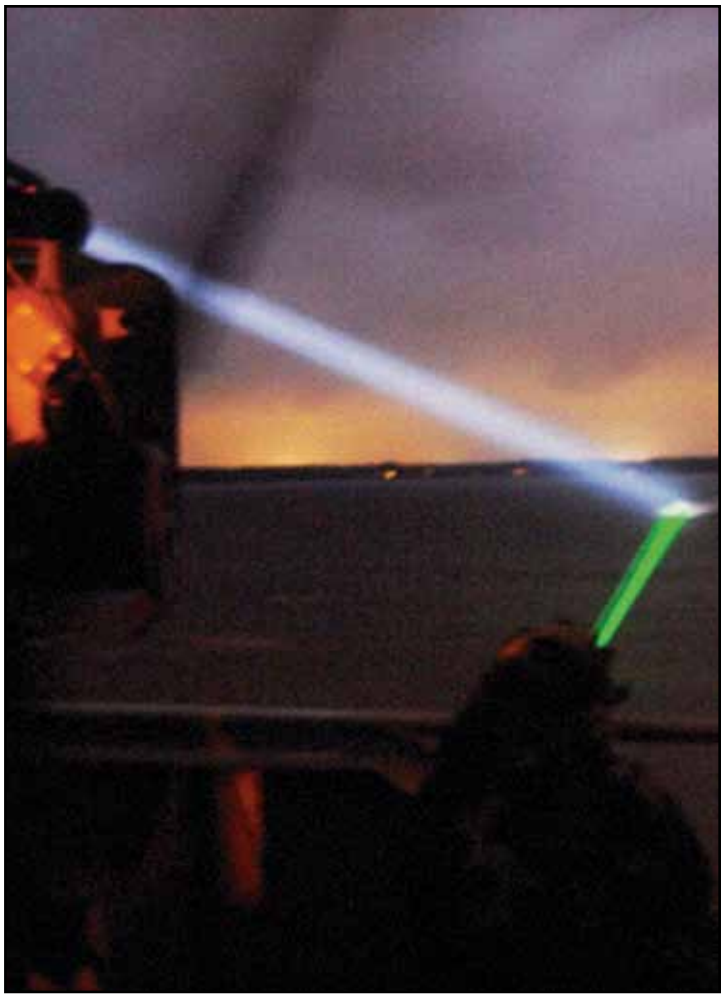

Figure 3. A compact hand-held laser is evaluated for effectiveness in maritime defense against small-boat attacks.

These studies also brought the factor of communication to light. Participants remarked that "green is not a threatening color," and some thought "it could be a signal for help." Many felt curious about the "blinking light" used in the study and would go closer or try to contact the vessel to determine the intent of the message. Green lasers are used because they are more visually salient; however, they may not be as psychologically salient. Participants remarked that if the signal were paired with another signal, such as an auditory one, then the message of "warning" or "do not come closer" might be clearer.

Lastly, these studies brought to light the matter of effectiveness. Laser glare devices are used to stop or alter the behavior of the recipient, but one study yielded mixed results. At close distances, participants noticed the signal, felt affected by it, and reported that their behavior changed in the manner desired by the person pointing the laser. But at greater distances, behavior might not change. Thus, these findings need to be replicated in different maritime scenarios in order to be truly useful in developing laser glare devices. This particular study was encouraging regarding the effectiveness and visual usefulness of glare devices, but it brought up new questions about their psychological impact on behavior. Resolving these questions must be an integral goal of technical research and development studies to determine the operational effectiveness of directed-energy devices, not just for the maritime environment, but for all military environments.

Endnote

a. Results and technical reports are available upon request from the corresponding author or from the NAMRU-SA Public Affairs Officer.