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U.S. MILITARY

Guantánamo Base Gets New Leader

Navy Capt. Mark Leary has been tapped to run the 45-square-mile U.S. base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

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The U.S. Navy base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has a new commander, the fourth Navy captain to lead the isolated outpost since the Pentagon set up its offshore prison camp for suspected terrorists there.

Navy Capt. Mark Leary, a helicopter pilot, arrived this month from the Navy Command College in Newport, R.I. He had earlier served on the USS John F. Kennedy aircraft carrier in the North Arabian Sea during combat strikes on Afghanistan in the war to topple the Taliban and oust al Qaeda.

"We are on the leading edge of America's strategy to promote a more peaceful and stable world," Leary said in remarks at the Sept. 22 ceremony at Guantánamo, when he took charge of the base.

A native of Worcester, Mass., Leary declared himself "proud to be part of this incredibly diverse and unique community," which past commanders have boasted is a typical slice of Americana. The 45-square-mile base has about 10,000 civilians and U.S. forces, a K-12 school for sailors' children plus a downtown with a church, McDonald's and mini-golf course.

Since 2002 it also has housed the Pentagon's showcase prison on a remote bluff overlooking the Caribbean, which is today home to 500 or so "enemy combatants" captured abroad from Afghanistan and elsewhere in South Asia to Gambia in Africa and Bosnia in Europe.

While the Navy base provides some services for the prison, that operation is run by a different commander -- a two-star Army general.

Because the base has an airstrip, the usual route in and out of Guantánamo, the commander has traditionally been an aviator.

Leary replaces Capt. Larry Cotton, who was dispatched from Jacksonville in July after the Navy relieved the previous commander, Capt. Les McCoy, of his command. Cotton returned to Jacksonville as chief of staff for the Navy's Southeast Region.