Press Release

Cybersecurity Competition Challenges South Carolina Students
By NIWC Atlantic Public Affairs

CHARLESTON, S.C. — The eighth annual Palmetto Cyber Defense Competition (PCDC), hosted by Naval Information Warfare Center (NIWC) Atlantic in collaboration with the South Carolina Lowcountry Chapter of the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association (AFCEA), was held April 17-19 in a virtual format due to COVID 19 concerns.

The goal of PCDC is to energize South Carolina high school and collegiate students to focus on the development of networking and cybersecurity skills through science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). During the competitions, students from each school formed Blue Teams that operated and secured the combined systems of a digital cooperative network. The teams were challenged to properly configure/reconfigure an IT network, add new services, and respond to additional requirements -- all while defending against Red Team hackers attempting to disrupt their network.

"This is a unique environment for students to be able to test their knowledge in networking and cybersecurity. They are operating real-life networks to keep a business's infrastructure secure, all of which was hosted in the cloud" said Jeff Sweeney, NIWC Atlantic IA & Navy Cybersecurity Division Head and PCDC Director.

Approximately 135 dedicated high school and collegiate students gave up their weekend and 100 plus volunteers from NIWC Atlantic, AFCEA and corporate partners participated in the weekend competition.

High school students from around South Carolina competed Saturday. First place winners were from Palmetto Scholars Academy. Academic Magnet High School earned second, and third was taken by Porter Gaud High School.   The high school competition is open to all schools in South Carolina but only ten teams can qualify to compete. The top three teams from the previous year are invited back, while the remaining seven positions qualify through the state round of the CyberPatriot Competition. The Academy for the Arts, Science and Technology, Hanahan, Wando, Governor's School for Sciences and Mathematics, Home School Support Network, South Aiken and Spartanburg also competed.

The collegiate competition held Sunday was open to colleges and universities in South Carolina as well as The United States Naval Academy team from Annapolis, MD. Three of the ten slots are designated for the top three teams of the previous year. The remaining teams must qualify through the Southeast Regional Collegiate Cyber Defense Competition.

Clemson University took first place, the College of Charleston second and Horry Georgetown Technical College third. ECPI University, The Citadel, Trident Technical College, Charleston Southern University, United States Naval Academy, and Charleston Southern University also competed in the event.

Also included on Saturday was the inaugural Southeast Region Collegiate Hack Warz® @ PCDC competition which included nine teams from multiple states. Hack Warz® was also held virtually.   Teams of three students each were challenged to compromise several systems and gain valuable tokens (flags) for points. Horry Georgetown Technical College took first place, the Citadel second and United States Naval Academy third.

"The big picture is that we're trying to develop our current and future cybersecurity workforce," said Sweeney, the competition director. "There's a great need for people in this field and it's important to get more of our young people involved."

The cyber defense competition is part of a growing movement to develop technical skills and interest in the area of networking and cybersecurity in preparation for exciting careers in STEM.

"This is the eighth year of PCDC and it has been fulfilling to see the pipeline of students who have participated in the competition who are then hired by either us at NIWC, many of which are now on our PCDC staff, or one of our local business partners," said Sweeney.

Department of Defense and Corporate teams competed on Monday with embedded college students on their teams during this event that is considered an important training event for industry professionals.

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