

**A REPORT ON THE FIGHTING CULTURE OF  
THE UNITED STATES NAVY SURFACE FLEET**



Conducted at the Direction of  
Senator Tom Cotton  
Congressman Jim Banks  
Congressman Dan Crenshaw  
Congressman Mike Gallagher

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</i> .....	2
<i>FINDINGS</i> .....	6
<b>Insufficient Focus on Warfighting</b> .....	6
<b>A Dominant and Paralyzing Zero-Defect Mentality</b> .....	9
<b>Corrosive Over-Responsiveness to Media Culture</b> .....	11
<b>Under-Investment in Surface Warfare Officer Training</b> .....	13
<b>Poorly Resourced and Executed Surface Ship Maintenance Program</b> .....	16
<b>Culture of Micromanagement</b> .....	18
<i>RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION</i> .....	21

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review was conducted at the direction of Senator Tom Cotton and Congressmen Mike Gallagher, Jim Banks, and Dan Crenshaw as a strictly nonpartisan exercise in Congressional oversight. The authors of this review conducted long-form interviews with numerous active-duty and recently retired or detached officers and enlisted personnel about their insights into the culture of the United States Navy following a series of high-profile and damaging operational failures in the Navy's Surface Warfare community. The discussion below is intended to inform Congress of the findings of these interviews, with an emphasis on subjects including funding, maintenance planning, administrative management, and operational employment.

The review did not focus on any single failure, each of which has been thoroughly investigated by the appropriate authorities, but rather examined the broader question of whether the episodes taken as a whole indicate any underlying systemic problems affecting the performance of the surface Navy. The incidents that formed the impetus for this review included the catastrophic fire on the USS Bonhomme Richard pier-side in San Diego, the collision of the USS McCain in the South China Sea, the collision of the USS Fitzgerald off the coast of Japan, and the surrender of two small U.S. Navy craft to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy in the Arabian Gulf. The direction from members of Congress was to establish if these incidents were part of a series of isolated, unit-level breakdowns, or if they instead indicate larger institutional issues that are degrading the performance of the entire naval surface force.

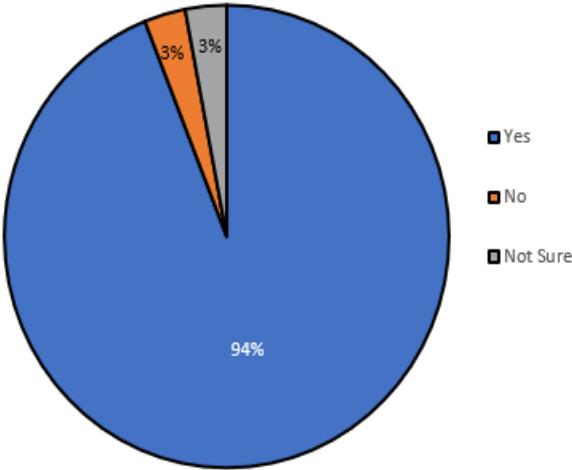
Interviews were conducted both by Congressional staff and outside experts. Interviewers were directed to apply an iterative long-form interview process to a wide variety of individuals and to present members of Congress with a compendium detailing their findings. The review team was directed to employ a high-touch, iterative approach that proceeded without reliance on an interview subject's chain of command in order to encourage nuance and candor on the part of interviewees--as opposed to wider-reach, lower-touch survey methods that are typically used in military climate assessments. 77 unique and formal interviews were conducted with Navy personnel via an extensive hour-long process to establish a common controlled approach to the questions at hand. The interviewees represented a cross-section of Navy personnel at varying ranks and in varying occupational specialties across a broad period of time—though interviewers did exercise a moderate prejudice for speaking to personnel with service in the surface Navy, to officers, and to those with significant time at sea.

By conducting lengthy conversations with knowledgeable subject matter experts and subjects with direct experience in or with the surface Navy, including with ship captains in command, deep and substantive common insights were captured that escape mathematical surveys. Moreover, by conducting the interviews from outside the chain of command via the exercise of the Congress's Title I oversight authority, and by pledging anonymity to participants, interviewers enjoyed a significant level of candor in these conversations. Ultimately the process was able to identify trends that, by the admission of those interviewed, would not normally be shared with their own chain of command.

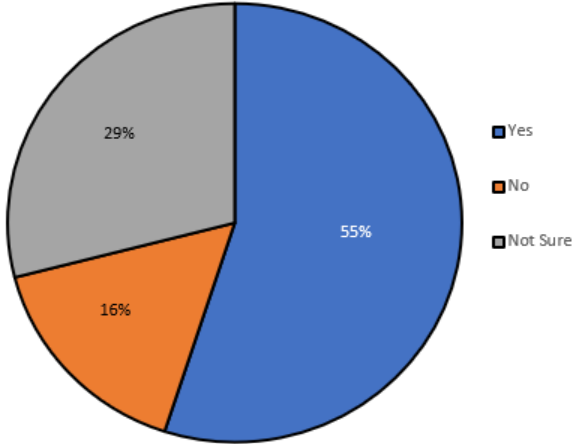
The results of this project are unambiguous. There was a broad consensus across interviewees on numerous cultural and structural issues that impact the morale and readiness of the Navy’s surface force. These include: an insufficient focus on warfighting skills, the perception of a zero-defect mentality accompanied by a culture of micromanagement, and over-sensitivity and responsiveness to modern media culture. Structural issues identified include lack of resources and consistency in surface warfare training programs, and the Navy’s underwhelming commitment to surface ship maintenance—a problem that spans decades.

Concern within the Navy runs so high that, when asked whether incidents such as the two destroyer collisions in the Pacific, the surrender of a small craft to the IRGC in the Arabian Gulf, the burning of the Bonhomme Richard and other incidents were part of a broader cultural or leadership problem in the Navy, 94% of interviewees responded “yes,” 3% said “no,” and 3% said “unsure.” And when asked if the incidents were directly connected, 55% said “yes,” 16% said “no,” and 29% said “unsure.” This sentiment, that the Navy is dangerously off course, was overwhelming.

**FIGURE 1: Do you believe these incidents are part of a broader problem in Navy culture or leadership?**



**FIGURE 2: Do you believe there is a direct connection between the incidents?**



## Specific Issues Raised

**Insufficient leadership focus on warfighting.** Perhaps the most concerning comment and consistent observation amongst interviewees was that the service does not promote or advance surface ship warfighting in a meaningful way. Finding and sinking enemy fleets should be the principal purpose of a Navy. But many sailors found their leadership distracted, captive to bureaucratic excess, and rewarded for the successful execution of administrative functions rather than their skills as a warfighter. There was considerable apprehension that the surface warfare community in particular lost its fighting edge in the years following the end of the Cold War. With China building and operating a competitive fleet, the lack of proper attention on warfighting was of deep concern to many interviewees.

**A dominant and paralyzing zero-defect mentality.** A prevalent theme emerged over the course of the interview process: near universal disdain for the so-called “one mistake Navy,” the practice of treating certain errors with career termination and offering no opportunity for recovery. A former senior leader framed this problem using an evocative historical analogy, suggesting that none of the four key Admirals who led victorious fleets in World War II would have made it to the rank of Captain in today’s Navy. The general unwillingness to rehabilitate one-off mistakes, the disinclination to weigh errors against the totality of a naval career, and the practice of discipline-by-paperwork were broadly understood to be a drain on the Navy’s retention efforts.

**Under-investment in surface warfare officer training.** The investment in surface warfare officer training pales in comparison to investments in aviation and submarine communities. Compounding its under-investment problem, the surface Navy has “re-imagined” its officer training programs multiple times in the past 20 years, often seeking efficiencies (i.e. even smaller investments) and leaving the commanding officers with inconsistent, often ill-prepared wardrooms.

**Poorly resourced and executed surface ship maintenance programs.** Nearly every interviewee had a story of a cancelled, delayed, or drastically reduced major maintenance availability. Often this was identified as a problem driven by senior civilian leadership and combatant commanders who consistently accepted the “maintenance risk” to squeeze an extra month or two out of a deployment. But this was also seen as a failure in manning and training the surface community to develop and assess maintenance work packages. Finally, there was an overwhelming perception that the surface Navy is the “billpayer” as aviation and submarine nuclear maintenance packages were seen as too risky to underfund. The cumulative effect of this underfunding and poor execution has left the surface warships less modernized and less ready for combat operations.

**Expanding culture of micromanagement.** Concerns of micromanagement within the surface warfare community are alarming. Sailors’ concerns were two-fold. The first is that technology has empowered admirals and commodores to exercise greater, arguably unhealthy, levels of control over ship captains. The second was that this control drives a level of toxicity and lack of accountability and initiative in the Navy’s warfighting command hierarchy. Given the increasing likelihood that naval commands may be isolated or cut off from communications in a high-end

fight, creating undue dependence on higher headquarters for day-to-day direction could negatively impact future naval combat operations.

**Corrosive over-responsiveness to media culture.** Sailors believe that Navy leaders are excessively reactive to an unyielding U.S. news cycle, and are unable to distinguish between stories that demand a response and stories that do not. A pervasive sentiment is that Navy leaders have subverted the responsibilities of the chain of command to the pages of *Military.com* or the *Military Times*, and make punitive decisions based on negative news reports rather than the service’s own standards of discipline.

**Other themes that a majority of interviewees mentioned included:**

- The surface Navy wardroom has lost its focus on growing good ship-handlers;
- Sailors are distracted by a tsunami of administrative tasks not related to their ships’ lethality;
- The Navy is too small to accomplish all the missions with which it is tasked by senior civilian leaders and combatant commanders;
- Sailors and officers lack sufficient resiliency and are unprepared for the difficulties of combat, in part because their training has deemphasized persistent exposure to adversity.

The interviewees’ views of the fundamental causes of these problems varied, but one recurring theme was that the end of the Cold War marked an important inflection point for the culture of the surface fleet. The disappearance of a peer threat at sea, followed a decade later by the focus on significant land conflicts in the Middle East in which the surface Navy played only a peripheral role, “bent” the direction of the surface warfare culture and the Navy writ large. Unlike the ground and aviation combat forces across the services, the surface Navy had neither actual nor imminent confrontation with the accountability of violent conflict at scale. Moreover, the day-to-day operations of a surface fleet in peacetime—while still fraught with risk—are more forgiving than the day-to-day operations of the Navy’s own aviation or undersea communities, in the sense that fewer potential errors could lead to an immediate crisis or loss of life. As mentioned, this has also left the surface Navy as “last to the trough” in the expenditure of resources for training, maintenance, and operations.

*[I]n a situation where the surface Navy is losing personnel and ships absent interaction with an armed enemy, Navy leadership ought to be concerned as to how elements of their organization will perform when a capable enemy presents itself.*

The responsibility for fixing this crisis falls both to the Congress and senior civilian defense leadership. These problems were not created by the Navy alone and cannot be fixed by the Navy alone. Congress must provide the resources to sustain adequate platform capacity, maintenance, and training time. But in a situation where the surface Navy is losing personnel and ships absent interaction with an armed enemy, Navy leadership ought to be concerned as to how elements of their organization will perform when a capable enemy presents itself.

## FINDINGS

### INSUFFICIENT FOCUS ON WARFIGHTING

One of the most concerning and consistent observations amongst interviewees was that the surface Navy does not promote or advance surface ship warfighting in a meaningful way. Finding and sinking enemy fleets should be the principal purpose of a Navy. But many sailors found their leadership distracted, captive to bureaucratic excess, and rewarded for the successful execution of administrative functions rather than their skills as a warfighter. As one officer related, “the very difficult problem for an O-5 CO (Commanding Officer) is that he’s got 1,000 requirements pushed on him, many of which are administrative or operational...and so his real job is figuring out which requirements he’s just going to blow off...whether it be fixing a material issue or training or warfighting readiness. This has always been an issue for commanders. However, it has been exacerbated due to the absence of a peer threat for a generation and thus lacks an apparent operational imperative to support a commander’s decision to prioritize warfighting.”

There was considerable apprehension that the surface warfare community in particular lost a component of its fighting edge in the years following the end of the Cold War, and with China building and operating a competitive fleet, the lack of proper focus on warfighting was of deep concern to many interviewees. The need for a combat-focused fleet should be fully understood and advocated by every sailor. There is, as one mid-grade officer observed, questions as to “what's your purpose out here?...I don't really think there is a mindset there that the reason why the fleet exists is as a warfighting function...I didn't really feel that fighting spirit in the surface community.”

*“I didn't really feel that fighting spirit in the surface community.”*

Interviewers found this to be a common refrain. One recent destroyer captain lamented that, “where someone puts their time shows what their priorities are. And we've got so many messages about X, Y, Z appreciation month, or sexual assault prevention, or you name it. We don't even have close to that same level of emphasis on actual warfighting.”

“There’s no curriculum,” said a former active-duty surface warfare officer and current reservist. “We'll spend hours and hours on drill weekends or other areas talking about like, ‘OK, what's the checklist you have to have in place? Do you have all your right uniforms?’ But there is no training like, ‘what is the current situation in China?’”

“What are the things the Chinese are concerned about? What are the things the Iranians are concerned about? [The] Intel folks know that, but like there's no general education about, ‘What are the wars we could fight, and how do we understand the context of these so we get in combat.’ We can have both the cultural and political understanding as well as the warfighting implications. And to me, if we're focused on the front-line warfighting, we should know the worst we're going into and what the greater context is. There's none of that right now.” While

this lack of attention on likely adversaries could well be a local problem rather than service-wide, it was a theme that manifested throughout the interview process.

*By weighing down sailors with non-combat related training and administrative burdens, both Congress and Navy leaders risk sending them into battle less prepared and less focused than their opponents.*

*“Sometimes I think we care more about whether we have enough diversity officers than if we’ll survive a fight with the Chinese navy.”*

Frustration with nonessential training was found to be overwhelming and not limited to the surface warfare community. Navy leaders have contributed to morass of requirements, but so have senior civilian defense leadership and Congress. While programs to encourage diversity, human sex trafficking prevention, suicide prevention, sexual assault prevention, and others are appropriate, they come with a cost. The non-combat curricula consume Navy resources, clog inboxes, create administrative quagmires, and monopolize precious training time. By weighing down sailors with non-combat related training and administrative burdens, both Congress and Navy leaders risk sending them into battle less prepared and less focused than their opponents.

Sailors increasingly see administrative and non-combat related training as the mission, rather than the mission itself. “Sometimes I think we care more about whether

we have enough diversity officers than if we’ll survive a fight with the Chinese navy,” lamented one lieutenant currently on active duty. “It’s criminal. They think my only value is as a black woman. But you cut our ship open with a missile and we’ll all bleed the same color.”

Just as concerning is the assertion by interviewees that, when combat lethality and ship fighting are emphasized, they are treated in a box-checking manner that can seem indistinguishable from non-combat related exercises. “The Navy treats warfighting readiness as a compliance issue,” said one career commander. “You might even use the term compliance-centered warfare as opposed to adversary-centered warfare or warfighter-centered warfare.”

One junior surface warfare officer, still on active duty, confessed “I don't think that the [surface community] see themselves as people who are engaged in a fight.”

Commander Bryan McGrath, a retired surface warfare officer who agreed to be interviewed on the record, notably dissented on the question of whether excess requirements were distracting sailors from their primary mission, and further rejected the notion that the Navy does not prioritize warfighting fundamentals.

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“[The ships] are very busy,” he said. “I think there are too few of them for what is being asked...The operational requirements squeeze out maintenance, they squeeze out some training.”

“When you're on the ship,” McGrath said, the “sexual assault and victim stuff, all that stuff just



seems like a burden. It just seems like it's never-ending...[But] the further I get from it, the more I understand why it's important and why there does have to be very clear signals sent to deck plate sailors that they're, you know, that issues that are important to them are important to leadership.”

A recently retired senior enlisted leader suggested that this dynamic was more a lack of proper prioritization. “I guarantee you every unit in the Navy is up to speed on their diversity training. I’m sorry that I can’t say the same of their ship handling training.”

Administrative excess is a common complaint that plagues all peacetime militaries and it is not unique to the surface Navy. But there was considerable apprehension that the surface warfare community in particular lost a component of its fighting edge in the years following the end of the Cold War. With China putting dozens of fighting warships in the water on an annual basis, the lack of proper focus on warfighting was of deep concern to many interviewees.

*“I’ve never heard anyone in any [congressional] testimony that I can think of that talks about actually winning...”*

One career surface warfare officer said, “I’ve never heard anyone in any [congressional] testimony that I can think of that talks about actually winning. And so that’s not to absolve the Navy of its responsibility, but it’s just stunning to me.” Another said, “lethality, I don't think, was touted or promoted, or a warrior culture. And maybe what’s more of a popular depiction was not promoted, I’d say innovation. It was not encouraged and generally frowned upon. And it was very much a put the check in the box and a very risk averse culture.”

## A DOMINANT AND PARALYZING ZERO DEFECT MENTALITY

A prevalent theme that emerged over the course of the interview process was a near universal disdain for the so-called “one mistake Navy,” the practice of treating certain errors with career termination and offering no opportunity for recovery. The general unwillingness to rehabilitate one-off mistakes, the disinclination to weigh errors against the totality of a naval career, and the practice of discipline-by-paperwork were broadly understood to be a drain on the Navy’s retention efforts.

Former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman has framed this in an historical context, suggesting that none of the four key Admirals who led victorious fleets in World War II would have made it to the rank of Captain in today’s Navy. “Nimitz put his first command on the rocks,” Lehman said. “And Halsey was constantly getting into trouble for bending the rules or drinking too much...Ernie King was a womanizer and a heavy drinker. And Admiral Leahy may be the only one that might have made it through, but he had quite a few blots on his record as well.”

“But in each case, there was a critical mass of leadership in the Navy that recognized that these were very, very promising junior officers. And so, while they were punished for mistakes, they were kept in a career path. That’s not the case today. It’s just not done because it’s too dangerous for anybody that tries to help someone who has made a mistake.”

Lehman, though decades removed from his time as Secretary, channeled the sentiment of a vast majority of those interviewed. The Navy’s proclivity to end careers over certain mistakes was perceived less as an effective disciplinary tool and more as a drag on retention, lethality, and morale. One career sailor lamented a “toxic culture of commander responsibility” that has set upon the force.

“Commanders can no longer take risks in a way that they can have small failures, learn, and move forward,” and “Failures are terminal to people’s careers.”

The zero-defect Navy is perceived by sailors as an agent of careerism, a practice that attrits bold, combat-focused leaders in favor of more timid bureaucrats. One former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense who served as a surface warfare officer warned that this creates a harmful incentive structure in the Navy ranks.

“These are guys that are totally zero-risk,” he said of the surface warfare community. “Because they’re like, ‘Hey, I’m going to be the [commanding officer] for 15 months, why try to get [to] the battle? Why try to do really important boardings in the Middle East? I’m just going to make sure I’m talking to the admiral over the VTC (Video Tele-Conference) and [make] sure that he’s for it?’ And I just found that to be really sad.” The implication is clear; the independence of command has been eroded and commanding officers fear risk due to its adverse impact upon their careers.

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Despite sentiments that the Navy chases away top talent with an intolerant attitude towards error, there was some nuance about what this means in practice. Discipline is foundational to military

culture and this point did not escape those interviewed. Transgressions such as failures of integrity, sexual misconduct or assault, toxic leadership, drug use, racial bigotry, and technical ineptitude were all viewed as indisputably appropriate grounds for terminating a Navy career.

*“If zero-tolerance were in place when I was in the Navy,” said Secretary Lehman, who built the 600-ship navy as Secretary and went on to found a multibillion-dollar company, “I wouldn’t have made it past [Lieutenant] J.G.”*

However, isolated infractions such as an alcohol-related indiscretion, a poor choice of words with no malice or offense intended, a ship-board accident with no damage or injuries and no demonstrated neglect, and similar offenses are supposed career-ending faults that could instead be weighed in the context of an overall service record and provided with an opportunity for redemption. One officer noted the example of Captain Robert J. Kelly, a combat-tested aviator who ran the USS Enterprise aground in San Francisco Bay several decades ago but went on to earn 4 stars and command of the Pacific Fleet. It was a rare mercy in the early 1980s and unheard of today.

The general unwillingness to rehabilitate one-off mistakes, the disinclination to weigh errors against the totality of a naval career, and the practice of discipline-by-paperwork, were broadly understood to be a drain on the Navy’s retention efforts.

Interviewers were told that some of the best officers leave as Lieutenants, often for some of the top business and law schools in the country, even as they professed a desire to continue to serve.

“Goldman Sachs, Amazon, Apple, Google, whatever. All of these institutions of high performance and high excellence do circus flips trying to figure out how to cultivate and retain talent,” said one former naval officer who is now a senior leader at a major hedge fund’s philanthropic arm. “The Navy all but chases it out the door.”

Discipline is critical to all effective militaries and the Navy, as a whole, appears to apply discipline in a healthy and productive manner. But interviewers found no credible defense of the one-mistake Navy and its influence on officer careers in particular. The practice creates fear and apprehension in the fleet. It degrades lethality, atrophies talent, inhibits reenlistments, encourages careerism, and advances those that avoid risks and challenges up the ranks.

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## CORROSIVE OVER-RESPONSIVENESS TO MEDIA CULTURE

The “one-mistake” culture appears to be somewhat recent phenomena in Navy history and some suggested that today’s unyielding news environment could bear some of the blame for its rise.

Frustration among interviewees was palpable, with both the national press corps and the manner in which Navy leaders react to the press. “[Admirals] are supposed to lead us into battle but they hide in foxholes at the first sight of *Military.com* and the *Military Times*,” said one intelligence officer with disgust. “The reporters are in charge, not us.”



*“The reporters  
are in charge,  
not us.”*

There is an undercurrent of fear in the surface fleet. Sailors described commanding officers who refused to delegate below the Department Head level for basic issues such as watch-bill development, for fear of ending up on the cover of the *Navy Times*. Another sailor described a Commanding Officer who was unwilling to have routine and essential leadership conversations with sailors about their port calls and off-duty experiences, in case any incriminating stories or UCMJ violations arose.

Interviewers observed a number of reactions to this institutional jumpiness around news media. The first is a loss of faith in the chain of command. In the wake of a damaging story, the senior ranks are perceived as quick to sacrifice junior personnel to preserve the credibility of the unit or the career of the senior leader in charge. Disciplinary decisions appear to be bent to the unsteady whims of public perception, not the Navy’s own standards and regulations. This was noticed during the disciplinary actions following the USS McCain and USS Fitzgerald incidents, where perception was that the military administered discipline based on public and Congressional outcry rather than the concrete root causes of both unique incidents.

Another reaction is senior leaders being unwilling to trust their subordinates during “risky” maneuvers, for fear that a subordinate’s mistake might derail the senior’s career. “COs would be quite risk-adverse,” one officer recalled, “they would have their senior department heads manning a lot of watches, especially on the bridge and things like that to make sure that nothing went wrong, because nobody wanted to end up in the media, and nobody wanted to end up on the cover of *Navy Times*.” He finished his statement with a telling observation that, in this day and age, this reaction was “totally understandable.”

The most concerning effect identified was an inversion of the chain of command itself. In an era of social media, text messaging, and email, it is easy for a disgruntled junior officer or sailor to grind their axe with targeted leaks. Many reporters publish their contact information in their bylines. Contacting a journalist is a simple task in the digital age, even for a teenage sailor. This ease of access, combined with the Navy’s proclivity, or at least perceived proclivity, to bend the knee when a reporter files a negative story, has instilled in junior officers and sailors a notion that they can effortlessly exercise power over their senior officers with unauthorized disclosures of internal military affairs.

Much of this is self-inflicted. The military, not just the Navy, has been slow to acknowledge the realities of new media. Commanders do not appear to understand that stories come in a flash and disappear just as quickly. It could potentially be a response to incidents during the sunset of the Cold War, when first the Iowa turret exploded and the Tailhook convention derailed several senior officer careers. One respondent recalled that when Admiral Jay Johnson became Chief of Naval Operations after the death of Admiral Mike Boorda, one of Johnson's top priorities was "to get Navy off the front page of the *Washington Post* and get Navy problems out of *Navy Times*...in fact, Jay would not even allow *Navy Times* reporters in the building." These were the events that defined the Navy in the 1990s, when many of today's senior leaders were in their formative years. It appears to have created systemwide anxieties today.

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These fears are often unwarranted. They do not reflect the new realities of mass media. News has changed drastically in the past 3 decades. Editorial standards for newsworthiness have loosened significantly, saturating audiences with empty calorie news—stories that have emotional appeal but are not particularly informative. Many news outlets, including defense news outlets, have shifted to tabloid models where stories are sensationalized and short-lived. The Navy has forgotten how to differentiate between stories that are ignorable and stories that demand corrective measures.

To wit, 30 years ago the newsworthiness of a Master Chief telling sailors to "clap like you're at a strip club" during a distinguished visitor tour would be questionable. But a reporter overheard those exact comments from the USS Harry Truman's Command Master Chief during a press availability last year. Despite there being no apparent news value in an NCO using mildly "salty" language with sailors, multiple media outlets disagreed. The comments ran across several national news services and a 30-year veteran of the Navy, who would have been an invaluable asset in a conflict at sea, resigned. In what would have normally been discipline via stern conversation from a higher officer, three decades of honorable service were instead ignobly ended.

The inability of senior Navy leaders to recognize that such a story was fleeting and trivial reinforced the perception that the Navy will not stand behind their own sailors when unfair or unfounded or, in this case, farcical stories make it to print. The trend has not gone unnoticed. It creates the impression in the lower ranks that Navy leaders are easily cowed by the press and will throw sailors to the wolves should their name appear in print. It further suggests a profound weakness in the senior rungs of the chain of command, advertising a critical vulnerability to sophisticated information operations conducted by foreign actors and all but inviting sailors with personal vendettas to leak damaging information.

Journalists are tasked with a difficult job that is vital to a healthy democracy. But their objective is to hold power to account, not to fight and win wars. When Navy leaders are perceived as serving the interests of their own reputations and not their own sailors, they risk an erosion of faith in the fleet's good order and discipline.

## UNDER-INVESTMENT IN SURFACE WARFARE OFFICER TRAINING

The investment in surface warfare officer training pales in comparison to investments in aviation and submarine communities. Compounding the under-investment, the surface Navy has “re-imagined” its officer training programs multiple times in the past 20 years, often seeking efficiencies (i.e. even smaller investments) and leaving the commanding officers with inconsistent, often ill-prepared wardrooms. No one would ever expect an aviator to land a plane on a flight deck or a submarine officer to dive the boat after a few weeks of reading content on 23 Compact Discs (CDs), but the Navy did exactly that with the surface warfare wardroom starting in 2003.

From the mid-1970s until the early 2000s, officers selected for the surface warfare community uniformly reported to Newport, RI, for Surface Warfare Officer School Division Officer’s Course, a five-month syllabus that exposed a new officer to all aspects of shipboard life in classrooms, various laboratories and generalized and specific shipboard simulators, receiving instruction in leadership, engineering, weapon systems, ship handling, rules of the road, and basic naval task organizations. As one officer recounted, “schools training wasn’t just sitting in lectures. It required getting PQS (Personnel Qualification Standards) signed off and actually putting students through bridge simulators...”

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The surface warfare officer community has frequently been under pressure to look for efficiencies, both in resource allocation and time spent before entry to the Fleet. The aviation and submarine communities had no such pressures. It is estimated that getting an F-18E/F Hornet pilot from commissioning to the fleet squadron could cost as much as \$3 million to \$4 million dollars. Getting a SWO to the fleet in some of these plans was often less than \$30,000 or \$40,000, or roughly 1% as expensive. Submarine officer initial training is not as expensive as aviation training but it is a world away from 40k. In terms of timelines to the fleet, aviators take anywhere from 18 to 24 months in pipeline training, submarine officers take 18 to 21 months, while surface warfare officers have often considered 6 months in the pipeline excessive. The aviation and submarine communities have maintained these initial training paths for more than 40 years. At some point this lack of financial and bandwidth investment in initial surface warfare training was bound to introduce risk.

In 2003, the Navy surface warfare community, in its effort to become more efficient, eliminated the initial SWOSDOC training at Newport as well as many of the unit specific combat and engineering systems schools. New officers in this era reported to their ships, where they received 23 CDs from which they were expected to learn their jobs as they did them. As one officer remembered, “We gave ensigns boxes of CDs and told them to train themselves between watches, and that was a colossal failure.” It was noted by more than one interviewee that neither naval aviation nor submarines would ever consider having an officer show up at their first tour command less than fully qualified, but the surface warfare community did.



According to interviewees, this initiative was taken at the same time that the Navy, in another effort to find efficiencies, cut back underway steaming days for its ships from 28–36 days to as low as 10–12 days per quarter, decreasing overall crew size but increasing the size of the officer wardrooms. Officers who were supposed to report for a year of schooling reported to their first command instead. As one mid-grade retired officer remembered, “It was a nightmare for the more senior officers to manage that many clueless junior officers.” It was also a time when administrative burdens grew on commanding officers, decreasing the time they had to mentor junior officers. By shrinking the time available to train officers and NCOs in the fundamentals of warfighting, the Navy self-inflicted a crippling wound on its sailors that came absent Congressional meddling or political pressure.

*‘Qualify them anyway.’*

Unit pre-deployment qualification and certification requirements did not decrease. This resulted in underway training periods that became “a series of back-to-back events that exist only to ‘check the box’ and not really learn anything.” Some commanding officers attempted to push back against these pressures. One respondent related that he had informed his admiral that, “‘I’ve got people that I know for certain are not proficient in watch standing.’ And you know what they [told] me? ‘Qualify them anyway.’”

Simulators and artificial training environments were explored as an option for making up for decreased underway opportunities, but interviews suggest that bridge and combat system simulators, while still present, struggled to keep pace with the changing technological and threat environments as software and display modifications were sequenced into the fleet. The Navy simply did not allocate sufficient money to ensure that their training environments matched actual operational layouts in use. Further, simulators lack the pressure of real-world consequences, underscoring both the limitations of simulations and the importance of realistic, hands-on training.

The problems with the simulators and other training evolutions, especially the use of predictable and scripted and sequenced training drills, extended into engineering and combat systems underway. This effective “dumbing down” of the overall training experience onboard ships resulted in the wardroom and crew spending their time “studying to the test” rather than gaining actual knowledge, experience, and wisdom. A former commanding officer revealed that even recently, the “ATG [Afloat Training Group] brought in scripted, predictable training, again checklist process, but no deep understanding.” Division officer tours are often split into two ships, thus decreasing training opportunities as a qualified watch stander, reducing the ability to gain “seasoning” as ship-handlers.

There were also multiple mentions from interviewees that there was a significant cultural change in the surface warfare community in the late 1990s as the vertical launch system and the accompanying Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles were introduced into the life of the cruiser-destroyer Navy. Multiple respondents remarked that the community shifted its focus from being a “ship-handling” community to becoming a “land-attack” community as more training time and operationally deployed time was spent focused on preparing and positioning the ship for land

attack missions rather than training for ship-vs-ship and ship-vs-submarine warfare scenarios that had dominated the surface warfare culture and training syllabi in the past.

A retired mid-grade officer remembered, “all we cared about was launching Tomahawk missiles. And that kind of support of the ground offensive took precedent over everything else...solely concentrating on the deep strike inland...instead of fighting your ship at sea.” Another officer remembered the moment when he shockingly realized, “Oh my God, we've become the land attack Navy. Nobody is going to kill ships in a war.”

Two areas of training and education that did remain robust were AEGIS air defense training and damage control and firefighting. The AEGIS training was universally praised by interviewees and produced a mission set where officers felt well prepared. It was noted by some interviewees that AEGIS had strong funding as it draws on a mix of Missile Defense Agency and Navy funds.



*“[A]ll we  
cared about  
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Tomahawk  
missiles...”*

Nearly every respondent, both in the pre-2003 and post-2003 eras attested to the fact that initial basic firefighting and damage control training as well as frequent refresher training in these essential skills was both prioritized and accomplished as required. Many respondents offered sentiments similar to one officer who stated that the Navy was “very intent on damage control and fire-fighting training [that was] crucial to day-to-day operations.” One important insight was that fire-fighting and damage control simulators had continuously evolved over the past generation to “become very advanced. We developed the use of ones that you could set off fires and contain the smoke and clean the air.” The degree to which the crews of both the USS McCain and the USS Fitzgerald were able to stabilize and counter the serious flooding that occurred following their separate collisions suggest that this is true. While Congress still waits for the full account of the origins of the USS Bonhomme Richard fire, the Navy’s focus on damage control can largely be praised as an example of how proper prioritization of essential training can yield effective results.

The Navy has recently reorganized its division officer training once again and fortunately many of the changes seek to correct the concerns voiced by the interviewees. The Basic Division Officer Course (DOC) of 9 weeks will be augmented by a 4-week Junior Officer of the Deck course. This is then followed by 5 more weeks of Advanced DOC in between the first and second tours as well as specialized training for the second tour assignment. In theory, a continuum of Maritime Warfare training for surface warfare officers will be integrated across both DOC courses, Department Head School and CO/XO training. There are two keys to the potential success of this effort. Investment, in that the Navy invites risk by going cheap on the trainers, the time allotted for training, or the personnel needed to run the trainers. And persistence, where the Navy could avoid past errors by simply adhering to their training program rather than changing it every few years.



## POORLY RESOURCED AND EXECUTED SURFACE SHIP MAINTENANCE PROGRAM

The 2010 VADM Philip Balisle Report on Surface Force Readiness highlighted a number of manpower, maintenance, training, and readiness issues plaguing the surface warfare enterprise. One of the most damning was the inability or unwillingness of the Navy to properly fund the planning, conduct, and execution of the surface ship maintenance program. Despite ten years of corrective Navy actions, nearly every interviewee had a story of a cancelled, delayed, or drastically reduced major maintenance availability. Often, this was identified as a problem driven by senior civilian leadership and combatant commanders who consistently accepted the “maintenance risk” to squeeze an extra month or two out of a deployment. But this was also seen as a failure in manning and training by the surface community to assess material conditions, develop maintenance work packages, and supervise maintenance execution. Finally, there was an overwhelming perception that the surface Navy remains the “billpayer” as aviation and submarine nuclear maintenance packages were seen as too risky to underfund. Surface ship maintenance packages are perceived as “bare bones” and unable to absorb growth. The cumulative effect of this underfunding and poor execution has left the surface warships less modernized and less ready for combat operations.

*Despite ten years of corrective Navy actions, nearly every interviewee had a story of a cancelled, delayed or drastically reduced major maintenance availability.*

The issue of insufficient funding and an unwillingness to commit to appropriate maintenance budgets has severe collateral effects. Said one officer, “If you have budget X and you only do whatever maintenance that is required that you can do under budget X, then you have all the rest of the stuff that you had to descope because you're limited by the budget. And then that just creates a bow wave because what's the second and third order effects to deferring that maintenance? You end up with, for instance, on a cruiser where...we knew that the fuel tank tops in one of the machinery spaces, that if we did the ultrasonic testing (UT) on that space, that then the safety requirements would require us to replace the tank tops. We didn't have the budgets to do the tank tops, so we didn't do the UT. And then it wasn't until we went into the shipyard and we

were doing the required cleaning of the tanks, which that was a requirement under the package, then all of a sudden, one of the shipyard workers goes up and goes, ‘Oh, I see sunlight through this tank top.’ Well, now you're forced to do the UT. So now you're forced to re-scope the work. So now you're forced to cram more work into a yard package that you should have had planned in the first place.”

One of the biggest drivers of maintenance challenges clearly happens outside of traditional Navy leadership control. The decision to extend a ship on deployment almost always impacts surface ship maintenance availabilities, which traditionally follow immediately after the ship’s return from deployment. The decision on whether to extend a ship’s deployment lies with the Secretary of Defense, and thus this is a problem that can be resolved without legislation.

These operational extensions cause a host of problems, including changes to shipyard maintenance schedules (which are often balancing 4-8 ships in maintenance at a time), increases

in the size of the extended ship's maintenance package (i.e. more things break the longer a ship is at sea and partially broken things get worse), backend scheduling problems (i.e. ship wide training programs), and personnel management issues (transfers, retirements). These operational extensions are frequent (20 plus surface ships a year). If the "risk to maintenance" is part of the senior Defense Department and Combatant Command decision making process, it is clearly not heavily weighted. The impact of this neglect has a direct, negative impact on personnel.

## CULTURE OF MICROMANAGEMENT

The scientific effects of micromanagement on workforces are well documented. They include low employee morale, high turnover, reduction of productivity and generalized job dissatisfaction. Concerns of micromanagement within the surface warfare community were alarming. Sailors' worries were two-fold. The first is that technology has empowered admirals and other senior leaders to exercise greater, arguably unhealthy, levels of control over ship captains. The second was that this control drives a lack of accountability and initiative in the Navy's warfighting command hierarchy.

An active-duty surface warfare officer with over 15 years of sea duty witnessed this trend evolve over nearly 3 decades in the Navy. We are "holding back more of that autonomy and probably accelerating those cultural tendencies that are creating officers that are less confident and less competent and less comfortable exercising command," he said.

Another active-duty ship's captain said of a recent deployment to the Middle East, "I think it was [10-15] times we escorted ships back and forth through the Strait of Hormuz. And every single time I knew in the back of my head that there were people – that there were admirals that were literally watching the cameras on my ship second guessing every single thing I did instead of trusting [their] commanders."

One active-duty surface warfare officer, with a decade of sea time, likened this to a "10,000-mile screwdriver," with Navy leaders increasingly able to peer into the operational decisions of captains and commanders from the comfort of terrestrial headquarters. There was deeper concern that these practices are worsening with technologic advances.

"Ducks pick ducks," said another, recently retired, career surface warfare officer. "So now those admirals that we have and that were in charge were successful being micromanaged. And so now they view [micromanagement] as success."

One former active-duty officer and current reservist who served on carriers suggested that advances in data science have made it easier for senior leaders to reach down and interfere with the daily operations of a deployed warship.

"I think that there used to be this mindset that either the skipper of the ship, or commanding officer of a squadron, you know, he had the ability to shape the culture of their organization in a way they wanted to do it," he said.

"But now there's far more reporting metrics where the commanding officer of ship is basically just a department head for the destroyer [squadron] commodore who's always checking up on

*"[We are] holding back more of that autonomy and probably accelerating those cultural tendencies that are creating officers that are less confident and less competent and less comfortable exercising command..."*

him. And, you know, commodore of the destroyer [squadron] is now the department head of the admiral, who is very interested in the day-to-day activities.”

“And so, this level of micromanagement just flows up. And, again, it's evolved for a reason. You want to have metrics. You want to track things. And so, the command autonomy that people aspire to is no longer one that is what it might have been in the past.”

Micromanagement is a term that can be misused. But it is fair to note that the United States Navy has several centuries of sound experience growing warship captains who have been wholly autonomous and independent in commanding their vessels. The ability to communicate instantly with deployed ships is a relatively new development in the Navy’s 245-year history. This is generally unique to surface Navy as submarines still have a more limited and less persistent communications path with higher headquarters and pilots in combat have almost none. The “1000-mile screwdriver” is, for now, a primarily surface warfare officer concern.

It is unclear what the use of these technologic advances for increased management and oversight means for a future conflict. But given the rise in electronic warfare and jamming, and the expectations that Navy ships may be isolated and have communications with higher headquarters cut-off in a high-end fight, it is reasonable to assume that creating a dependence on higher headquarters for direction and guidance could negatively impact future naval combat operations.

*[I]nterviewees reflected concerns that the Navy has deemphasized the development of risk analysis skills, creating officers and NCOs in danger of paralysis in a high intensity conflict.*

Micromanagement can have a stigmatizing effect on developing risk management and decision-making skills and interviewees expressed concern that the Navy has deemphasized the development of risk analysis skills, creating officers and NCOs in danger of paralysis in a high intensity conflict. It is not uncommon for peacetime militaries to struggle with the concept of risk. In 1943, thirty percent of U.S. submarine commanders operating in the Pacific were relieved for cause. Peacetime training had bred cautious leaders, unable to go off script or take the fight to the enemy.

A large number of officers and sailors interviewed expressed the sentiment that the Navy does not place value in appropriate risk-taking, does not train leaders in appropriate levels of risk, and does not reward leaders who take appropriate risk. The preponderance of focus is placed on meeting administrative requirements. One surface warfare officer lamented, “there’s always this underlying administrative concern that’s looming over the fleet, and I don’t think it’s because people don’t think tactics are important. I just think that’s not the thing that we spend our days being told is important.”

Apprehension about risk aversion was most pronounced in surface warfare communities interviewed. Some success stories were found in the Navy submarine and aviation communities. One mid-grade officer (CVN-qualified naval aviator), referenced a late-2000s decision by leadership to train for more night-vision-goggle (NVG) assisted strafing missions in support of ground forces in Afghanistan. He said that training in the mountains of Nevada with NVGs was

very high-risk, but such training was necessary due to the demand of the overseas' missions at that time. The aviator posited, "[I]s there a way you could train to [a mission] where you're actually running surface ships nearer to each other than what would normally happen in the San Diego training area? Maybe...but I don't necessarily see that as a cultural ethos [in the fleet]."

Interviewees concluded that the surface force has not adjusted to the realities brought on by the reemergence of peer competitor like China. The surface Navy has experienced decades without a competent, well equipped, and disciplined opponent to train against. One interviewee said with frustration, "I think we have trouble doing risk analysis and saying, 'is this risk worth it or not?' More often than not we just say, I'm afraid of losing my job, so I'm not going to take any risk."

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Some of these issues have been raised in other formats, including the 2010 VADM Phillip Balisle Report on Surface Force Readiness and GAO reports on surface warfare readiness. This review is not positioned to offer a comprehensive solution to all of the issues raised in the review. But Congress should leverage their funding and oversight tools to demand eight simple reforms from Navy leaders:

- 1 – Prioritize warfighting. Pay to develop, host, and utilize high end, multi-mission, warfighting training tools for ship crews. Once a ship is ready for deployment, administrative training should be deprioritized by the ship’s captain. Foster in the surface warfare community a better focus on the Navy’s core mission of fighting and winning on the high seas.
- 2 – Encourage risk taking. Develop and conduct experimental wargaming capabilities at all fleet concentration area where warfighters can develop new tactics and experiment through failure.
- 3 – Pick a surface warfare officer training and development path, then ensure it has significant and sufficient resources assigned to it, and then stick with it for a half a decade or more. Identify ways to increase bridge time for surface warfare officers.
- 4 – Develop a rigorous operational-strategic warfighting course (in XO/CO pipeline) with a combat focus on the integration of surface naval capabilities to achieve strategic end states.
- 5 – Publish the annual surface Navy maintenance scheduling and funding plan and then provide a report card to Congress at the end of the year with each delay/change in funding explained (as a factor of risk accrued). Secretary of the Navy or Chief of Naval Operations should assume responsibility and ownership of the plan.
- 6 – Get politics and media out of the wardroom. Renew the Navy’s noble tradition of remaining out of politics. Limit social media accounts and activities by Navy officials, discourage use of toxic platforms by sailors, remove all political and sociological topics from Professional Military Education and replace them with essential warfighting courseware. Modernize public affairs training.
- 7 – Institute a service-level review to place non-combat training in accession pipelines and out of warfighting environments, and to assess and reduce bureaucratic and administrative functions assigned to warfighters on deployment. Empower commanders to make judgments on prioritization of training and support them in their decision.
- 8 – Eliminate distractions. Institute a review to identify and reduce bureaucratic excess, non-essential communications, and unnecessary administrative burdens. Aim to create white space on calendars that can instead be used for training, doctrine, and warfighting fundamentals.

*The sailors interviewed for this report do not believe the Navy prioritizes fighting and winning because Navy leaders do not talk about fighting and winning.*

A major peer-level conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will likely play out largely in the naval theaters of operations; unlike the surface Navy's last major war, which concluded 76 years ago, such a conflict will likely proceed swiftly and not permit significant time for organizational learning once it is underway. U.S. national security depends upon the surface Navy being an effective team. The most important step Navy leaders can take is to prioritize, above all else, warfighting and lethality. Their paramount responsibility to fight and win on the seas must be communicated by senior commanders, in wardrooms, over email, in meetings, and most important, to the American people.

The sailors interviewed for this report do not believe the Navy prioritizes fighting and winning because Navy leaders do not talk about fighting and winning. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis said in testimony that "the United States does not have a preordained right to victory on the battlefield." Unless changes are made, the Navy risks losing the next major conflict.