

Getting and Staying Tough: With Elements Borrowed from SEALs, a Navy Pilot Program Aims to Teach Sailors How to Perform Under Extreme Stress



Sailors assigned to the Blue crew of the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Maryland observe sea and anchor detail upon returning to the boat's homeport at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, Georgia. The Maryland is serving as a testbed for the Warrior Toughness program. U.S. Navy/Lt. Katherine Diener
The U.S. Navy wants Sailors to toughen up.

That's not to suggest Sailors lack in the toughness department. But working in today's Navy can be stressful, and Sailors need the tools to handle the burden. Soon they may get them – thanks to a program in its pilot stage, Warrior Toughness.

The 3-year-old program – confined to the crews of some Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, principally the USS Maryland – could one day be used all across the sea service.

Check out the digital edition of the April Seapower magazine [here](#).

Rear Adm. Michael D. Bernacchi, commander of Submarine Group 10, told *Seapower* that the program is a new approach to making sure Sailors are prepared for stressful jobs.

“What we were looking to do was to arm Sailors with additional tools to allow them to deal with stress so that they could perform better in stressful situations – both chronic and acute stress,” he said.

In creating the program, Bernacchi took lessons from the Navy SEALs, who are famous for their ability to adapt and even thrive in the most stressful situations imaginable.

“We wanted to adapt that to the general Sailor to give them more tools, whether that be standing the midwatch or dealing with a fire or whatever the case may be, you could respond well in any stressful situation and recall information,” he said.

Back to the Basics of Mind, Body, Soul

Bernacchi said there was nothing “new or magical” about the Warrior Toughness Program – it’s just about getting back to the basics of the mind, body, and soul and recognizing that they are all integral to the success of individuals.

“It’s about training your mind, understanding why it does the things that it does, making sure you’re in physical shape, understanding Navy core values – it’s a lot of different things, and we took a lot of it from the SEALs,” he said.

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Right now, the program is just being tested on submarines, where Sailors have to deal with a lot of chronic stress just from living in that environment. However, Bernacchi envisions developing a fleet version that could be used in individual units.

When it was first rolled out at Navy Recruit Training Command, some Sailors were a little bit hesitant to embrace the new way of approaching training, but eventually most were on board, he said.

“When we started it at boot camp, most people didn’t want to do it,” he said. “I remember it getting called ‘recruit yoga’ and all kinds of other things. But you saw a huge increase in the performance of divisions, and then people wanted it. That’s the same thing we’ve seen here [aboard submarines].”

But what does the Warrior Toughness program look like from a Sailor’s point of view? Master Chief Matthew Glisson, Sub Group 10’s engineering department master chief (EDMC) and the Warrior Toughness lead, said there are many components. “There are psychology and a mindfulness techniques,” he said. “We’ve got a breathing technique called ‘recalibrate’ ... where one learns to focus. The other benefit is that it lowers the heart rate.”



Capt. Seth Burton, commanding officer of the USS Florida, observes his crew’s performance during “angles and dangles” operation in the Mediterranean Sea. The Warrior Toughness program is being tested on submarines, where Sailors must deal with a lot of chronic stress just to live in cramped environments. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Drew Verbis

Another technique practiced in Warrior Toughness is the “body scan” – where a Sailor tenses as many muscles in their body as possible to find out where the tension is located. Then there’s “mental rehearsal,” where a Sailor envisions, in as much detail as possible, a stressful scenario and then rehearses what their immediate actions would be and where they can draw on certain tools to cope with and perform in that situation.

Four Pilot Programs on Four Subs – Then Off to Study the Data

Four pilot programs on four submarines will be up and running by the end of 2020, including the one that started on the USS Maryland last October. The next pilot will launch in April, and then another a month after. Once Warrior Toughness gathers enough data from the first three, the program will determine

which sub should get the fourth pilot. After the fourth, the program will examine the data, see what has been and what has not been successful, and then potentially create a larger program from it.

The program's exists because the Navy recognized that it hadn't ever focused on the issue of stress, Bernacchi said. "We have never in the Navy sat down and taught you, 'Hey, this is how you physically deal with stress,'" he said. "No one's ever taught me how to meditate before. No one's ever taught me, 'Hey, this is how chemistry in your brain works.' I've never had a psychologist sit there and explain to me that this is the chemical reaction when fear strikes, and this is how you counter it."

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Cmdr. Michael Paisant, commanding officer of the USS Maryland Gold crew, said the crew has already just about reached the "run" phase of "crawl-walk-run" with this program.

"We're still trying to figure out – specifically on board – how we're going to apply it," he said. "In the training cycle we just came out of, we found a lot of uses in the strategic and tactical warfare simulator training environment, and we were able to apply stress management and mindfulness exercises."

For example, during a portion of the training that involved piloting the submarine into ports, Sailors underwent breathing and mindfulness exercises as well as a visualization exercise as they went through each stage of the navigation process. The

crew is also looking at ways to apply Warrior Toughness in a maintenance environment and not just operationally.

Paisant acknowledged that some of the crew was skeptical of the program at first, but since it began he says there's been a lot of buy-in.



Sailors assigned to the Gold crew of Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine USS Maryland attend Warrior Toughness introductory training in the Trident Training Facility at Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, Georgia, last November. The Maryland Gold crew was the first to implement Warrior Toughness into their training. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ashley Berumen

"They initially may have thought it would be another thing added to their plate, which it is not," he said. "It's focused on the individual Sailor, and on being a better spouse, a better leader. I think they've seen the benefits of it, and I've had a lot of folks say, 'Hey, I do this all the time now. I do this in my personal life.' I think my crew has really embraced it."

Bernacchi hopes to see the program continue to evolve and eventually make all Sailors ready to protect the nation while dealing with any kind of stress – even the worst trauma imaginable. "When we take a missile hit to a carrier and lose 1,300 Sailors, are we going to be able to take a knee, gather ourselves, and then turn around and deliver the blow to kill the enemy who did that?" he said. "The answer is, we have to. But I don't want to wait. Throughout our history we've shown we can do that, but it takes time to adapt. It takes time to get over the shock.

"The next battle, because of the speed of weaponry and everything else, we may not have that time," he added. "So, I need to have Sailors who are ready to fight from the very second it goes off. And that's what this is about."