

Historians Weigh In on 'Constellation' Name for Next Frigate



Cmdr. Kemi Elebute, center right, commanding officer of Navy Talent Acquisition Group Philadelphia, Chief Recruiter Master Chief Navy Counselor Stephen Callaghan, center left, future Sailors and local recruiters pose for a group photo in front of the museum ship USS Constellation, Historic Ships in Baltimore, during the virtual Maryland Fleet Week and Airshow Baltimore. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Diana Quinlan

ARLINGTON, Va. – The names of U.S. Navy ships, which often invoke tradition, also often invoke controversy, especially among naval historians and fans of naval history. The Oct. 7 naming of the first ship of the next-generation guided-missile frigate (FFG(X)), USS Constellation, by Navy Secretary Kenneth J. Braithwaite was well received but still has invited some lamentation.

The Navy puts great thought in selecting names for ships. Going back to World War II, for example, the Navy had an easily understood system. Battleships were named for states; heavy and light cruisers for cities; destroyers for Navy and Marine Corps heroes and individuals prominent to the sea services; submarines for sea creatures; and aircraft carriers for historic naval ships and battles.

The prevailing system changed over time. For example, the Polaris ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs), as a new type, were named for prominent Americans and foreign military personnel who aided America. Later, with battleships being phased out, state names were given to the Ohio-class SSBNs. State names also were given to the Virginia-class attack submarines and now the Columbia-class SSBN.

Increasingly, some standard name conventions were interrupted with aberrations, such as with the name of a politician who was noted for his support of maritime power.

Seapower collected some opinions from a few naval historians and analysts to get a sounding of the sentiment toward the name Constellation for the new frigate. Excerpts follow:

“Ships bearing the name Constellation have had storied careers and have proudly served the nation from the 18th century on. During the 1799-1800 Quasi War, Constellation won signal victories against French frigates L’Insurgente and La Vengeance. The sloop of war Constellation built in 1854 and now gracing Baltimore’s waterfront reminds visitors of the U.S. Navy in the age of sail. And finally, aircraft carrier USS Constellation (CV 64) distinguished herself in six combat deployments to the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam War. The name Constellation will be a welcome addition to the U.S. Navy of the 21st Century.”

—Edward J. Marolda, Ph.D., former director of Naval History (Acting)

“The news of the Navy’s naming a new ship with the honored name USS Constellation is indeed welcome. ... With this impressive historic record of service of three previous ships named USS Constellation, it is both fitting and proper to welcome the fourth ship of the name and a new class of frigates, with the designation USS Constellation (FFG 62) to continue the traditions of the naval service. “

—William S. Dudley, Ph.D., former director of Naval History and the U.S. Naval Historical Center (now Naval History and Heritage Command), 1995-2004.

“The first Constellation’s victory over L’Insurgente in the so-called Quasi-War with France is worthy of memorializing as are sister frigates United States, President, and Congress ...

maybe not so much Chesapeake! Of course, Constitution still remains in commission at Boston.”

–David Winkler, Ph.D., staff historian, Naval Historical Foundation

“Constellation is an encouraging change from the Navy’s all-too erratic record of naming ships. Let us hope that SECNAV continues the historic link to frigates with similar names for men-o-war.”

–Barrett Tillman, author and historian

“How have we named the last few hundred frigates/DEs/DEGs? ... Let’s keep that system that has served us well. The same for aircraft carriers ... traditionally destroyers were named for Medal of Honor winners, not carriers. Our naval leaders should preserve our naval history ... including the scheme for naming warships.”

–Norman Polmar, author and historian

“Constellation is a nice choice for the first U.S. Navy FFGX frigate. SECNAV Braithwaite also confirmed the FFG 62 hull number, which actually is what it should be, unlike DDG 1000, LCS1, SSN 21. The name has a long and proud U.S. Navy tradition. Not to be crabby, but I would have preferred sticking to the naming scheme long in use for destroyers and frigates – Naval and Marine heroes and people of significance. There are hundreds – thousands – of very deserving and inspiring heroes who have not been so commemorated.”

–Chris Cavas, naval historian and reporter