

NAVSEA Commander: Bullish on Ford Aircraft Carrier; Columbia Submarine "On Track"

WASHINGTON – Despite the continuing problems with some of the advanced technology systems and the extensive overruns in cost and schedule with the next-generation aircraft carrier, “15, 20 years from now, we’re going to be very happy we have that Ford class carrier around. It’s an amazing platform that can do incredible things,” the Navy’s top shipbuilding official said Feb. 19.

“I’m very bullish on [Gerald R.] Ford. We will work our way through the technology challenges we have with that ship” and will have overcome those challenges for the next ships in the class, VADM. Thomas J. Moore, commander Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) said.

Moore also said the first Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarine is “on track” to meet the critical 2031 operational date to replace the aged Ohio-class boats in the strategic nuclear deterrence mission, but he is concerned about the potential impact the high cost of the 12 Columbias could have on other shipbuilding programs.

And Moore said increasing the capacity and performance of the private ship repair yards in order to keep existing ships in service longer, which could be key to reaching the goal of a 355-ship fleet, “is the number one challenge that I have in NAVSEA right now.”

Moore spent a large part of a breakfast session with the Defense Writers Group answering questions about the Gerald R. Ford, the first of a dramatically redesigned class of nuclear-powered carriers, which has become an example of the problems of attempting too much innovation in a single step.

"This is a completely new ship in almost every aspect beside the design, the shape of the hull. A lot of learning is going on there," Moore said.

The admiral said the criticism that the Navy attempted too many technology leaps with Ford, designated CVN 78, was "probably a fair assessment. The original plan was not to put all the technology on the first ship, but to build it in stages... We probably bit off an awful lot on Ford, and we see the net result of that."

Some of the biggest problems that are still being resolved were with the Electro-magnetic Launching System (EMALS) that replaced the traditional steam catapults, the Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG) in place of the hydraulically restrained system, and the Advanced Weapons Elevators.

Although the Pentagon's operational test director faulted the performance of the first two systems in a recent report, Moore said: "We did more (aircraft) launches and recoveries than we had planned – almost double – during the shakedown

period. And the components of those systems got better as we learned how to operate them... So I'm not at all concerned that EMALS and AAG will ring out the technical issues and the reliability will go up."

The Navy certified the first of the 11-planned weapons elevators in December, 18 months after accepting the Ford from Newport News Shipbuilding. Moore said the second one would be accepted "shortly," and the goal was to have them all installed and tested before Ford finishes an extended yard period this summer.

The main problem was with software for the sophisticated electronic control systems, he said. NAVSEA has recognized that it made a mistake in not creating a land-based test facility to work out problems with the elevators, as it did with EMALS and AAG, and now is building that test site.

The Navy's top procurement priority is the Columbia SSBN to replace the Ohio class subs that provide 60 percent of the nation's strategic deterrence capabilities and are considered the most survivable element. Despite a problem with faulty welding on the missile tubes, Moore said, "we're still on track to deliver the ship on time to start its first patrol" in 2031.

He said Electric Boat is "well on its way" to building the first hull and the powerful electric motor that will drive the sub is being tested at a facility in Philadelphia.

Key members of the congressional seapower panels have expressed concern that the estimated \$7 billion cost of the Columbia boats will eat up a large share of the annual shipbuilding account when they go into serial production, starting in 2026.

To avoid that, they created the National Sea-based Deterrence Fund to pay for Columbia. But the Pentagon has not been putting money into the separate fund.

Moore said NAVSEA is a supporter of the Deterrence Fund and noted that when serial production of the Columbia's start, the Navy also will be building the Flight III DDGs and the new frigates, starting the future surface combatants and committed to a two-ship buy for the aircraft carriers. "It's an aggressive shipbuilding program and clearly the cost of the Columbia on top of that is a challenge."

Moore explained that the Navy has determined that it cannot reach its 355-ship goal just by new construction and is working on keeping its existing warships in service for at least 45 years, rather than the normal 30 years. But key to that is regular and on-time maintenance, which is handicapped by the lack of capacity in the private repair yards. Designing policies that will give the private yards the predictability needed to maintain an adequate workforce and improve their

facilities is a priority, he said.