

Shipbuilding Starting to Come Out of 'Readiness Divot,' Navy Vice Admiral Tells Audience



Rear Adm. Casper Donovan of the Royal Canadian Navy (right), a panelist at the "Future of Shipbuilding" program at Sea-Air-Space. Chuck Fazio

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – U.S and Canadian sea service officers and industry leaders looked forward to more seamless coordination and better times for shipbuilding, which one U.S. Navy vice admiral said was just recently emerging from a "readiness divot."

"We'd flirted dangerously, we had been shrinking the Navy for 40-plus years," said Vice. Adm. William Merz, a panelist in "The Future of Shipbuilding" program here at Sea-Air-Space on May 7.

Fellow speaker Rear Adm. Casper Donovan of the Royal Canadian Navy brought insight into Canada's 20-year shipbuilding program. "It's a great time to be in shipbuilding. For the first time, we have a long-term shipbuilding strategy," Donovan remarked of Canada's approach.

Could Canada be setting an example for its neighbors to the south in the U.S. sea services, who are still dealing with the effects of automatic spending cuts under budget sequestration? That word – sequestration – came up a lot during the hour-long discussion.



U.S. Coast Guard Rear Adm. Douglas Schofield (left) and Steve Eckberg of General Dynamics NASSCO at the shipbuilding discussion. Chuck Fazio

But fiscal years 2019 and 2020 seem to be helping the U.S. Navy turn the corner, Merz said. The 2020 shipbuilding plan that is “now on the streets” stresses adaptability, efficiency and agility and includes funding for the Navy’s purchase of two Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers, CVNs 80 and 81, and funding for the Columbia class of nuclear submarines, among several programs.

“We *will* pay for Columbia class, a very expensive ship,” Merz added.

The shipbuilding news is also better for the U.S. Coast Guard, of course, with its 6/3/1 cutter construction strategy well underway, which fits under the National Defense Strategy, said another panelist, Coast Guard Rear Adm. Douglas Schofield.

“We’re finally recapitalizing a good portion of the Coast Guard fleet,” Schofield told the audience for the panel discussion, which was moderated by Matt Paxton, president of the Shipbuilders Council of America, and included Steve Eckberg of General Dynamics NASSCO.

“The partnership with industry is now more important than ever.”

Coast Guard Rear Adm. Douglas Schofield

The Coast Guard’s Schofield highlighted the construction of

new station boats, the new fast-response cutters, the delivery of the eighth national security cutter, the start of construction on the first Heritage-class offshore patrol cutter and the new contract to build three new polar security cutters for the Arctic, [an area of renewed focus for the Coast Guard](#).

“The partnership with industry is now more important than ever,” he said.

All panelists agreed that the “boom/bust” cycle hurts shipyards and private industry, because when the yards stand down from military ship construction, it’s very hard to engage them again. They go out of business or move on the construction of civilian-sector vessels.