

Status of the Surface Force



ARLINGTON, Va. (Jan. 14, 2025) Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander, Naval Surface Forces, delivers a status of the force update at the Surface Navy Association's (SNA) 37th National Symposium. The symposium brings together joint experts and decision-makers in the military, industry, and Congress to discuss how the Surface Force is a critical element of national defense and security. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Claire M. Alfaro)
Surface Navy Association National Symposium, Jan. 14, 2025

Status of the Surface Force Address as delivered by Vice Admiral Brendan McLane:

I am very thankful and grateful to you the Surface Navy Association for all of the hard work that goes into making this phenomenal symposium a success. Every year, I walk away from this week in January thinking that the event could not have been better, and every year it just keeps getting better.

This is a credit to the entire SNA staff. Thanks to Admiral Hunt, Admiral Dave Hart, Captain Chris Bushnell, Julie Howard, Debbie Gary, and the entire SNA team for all the effort, planning, time, and energy it takes to put on such a fantastic event. Please join me thanking them.

Before I get started, I also want to thank Bryan McGrath...he has been our strategic advisor, he's been our corporate memory, if you think back how long that has been, and he's been my personal executive coach on the staff. I am very, very grateful to everything Bryan has done for SURFOR. He has been our center of gravity in the update to our strategy that I'll be talking to you about today. This is going to be his last SNA as part of the SURFPAC team, and I'm really gonna miss him. Please give him a big round of applause!

It does my heart good to look out into the audience and see so many uniforms. There is no better opportunity for conversation and exchange between industry and the fleet than SNA. I encourage all of you to, just like Admiral Hunt said, hit the booths, ask questions, talk to each other, gain more understanding by doing so. As an example, last year, I talked to Paul Smith, and he recommended I include industry in my weekly maintenance meetings. It's like a 90-minute meeting on Wednesday afternoon where we go through every maintenance availability that's going on West Coast, Hawaii, and Japan. My staff howled at this, and it took a bit to work out the legalities and logistics but we're doing exactly that, what Paul Smith suggested. I have to say the frequent interaction of industry to get that perspective is refreshing and good for team building. At the end of the day, we all want the same thing: maintenance finished on time and a more ready Surface Force. Thank you very much to Paul Smith.

I'm particularly excited to see so many Sailors from the fleet here, something we began intentionally encouraging several years ago, and now has become standard. I am excited to meet

you and hear from you this week.

In 1775, 250 years ago, the Second Continental Congress established what is now the United States Navy with “a swift vessel, to carry ten carriage guns, and a proportionable number of swivels, with eighty men, be fitted, with all possible dispatch, for a cruise of three months...” With this declaration, the Congress established the Navy with which we gained our independence. Now some of you within industry might argue that they weren’t really good at defining requirements! You might say that nothing has changed since then. Since then, our mission has certainly expanded and evolved significantly. But at the core, our mission and our spirit are the same, and at the heart of our warfighting spirit is the Surface Warfare Enterprise. So, it’s fitting that we kick off the 250th year here at SNA, and this year’s theme, Sharpen the Sword, challenges us to celebrate the momentous occasion by energizing ourselves like never before to be prepared to fight and win at sea.

CNO, in her NAVPLAN, charged us to ensure that 80% of our Force is Combat Surge Ready by 2027. Combat Surge Ready is defined as a ship that’s complete with Surface Warfare Advanced Tactical Training, or “SWATT,” and is ready to go. We have two years to achieve and sustain this into the future. Our 250 years of naval experience have passed on to us a treasure of massive accomplishments both to reassure us of what’s possible and to inspire us to achieve even greater goals.

Thanks to the vision of Roy Kitchener, we are already well on our way to increasing readiness. When he released our Competitive Edge strategy, he set our North Star to 75 Mission Capable ships. We have learned much in the pursuit of that for the last 3 years. We’ve learned a lot from the last year in the Red Sea, and from recent years of fleet experiments with directed energy weapons and with unmanned surface vessels, and

from our recent study of amphibious ship maintenance. All of this rapid learning has been applied to our update of the Competitive Edge strategy. Thanks to the hard work and collaboration with our Flags, retired and active, especially NAVSEA, SURFLANT, N96, and SWMDC, we have revised our roadmap to achieve and sustain 80% of our warships in a combat surge ready state by 2027.

You will see our Competitive Edge 2.0, copies on the floor there, maintain the original framework and its five Lines of Effort, the identification of accountable officers, and the assignment of completion dates. Like any organization competing at the highest level, we update our strategy with the times and as we learn. This strategy provides the demand signal to our enterprise to think and act differently, taking advantage of our opportunities, and accelerating our quest for a more ready Surface Force.

So before we dive headlong into those important matters, I want to play a short video, a video appropriate to kick off 2025, the 250th Anniversary of our Warfighting Navy!

Our Sailors are the key to our warfighting advantage—our competitive edge. One of the shortcomings of the original Competitive Edge strategy was its insufficient emphasis on our Sailors, we are turning this around by concentrating on them as our key to sustained success at sea. Starting with Enlisted Leadership Development, we are moving out with a cultural renovation that produces a Surface Force with leaders who can assess, problem solve, innovate, and execute better than any strategic competitor. We've achieved much here already with Warrior Toughness and Get Real, Get Better and that fires me up for the work ahead.

One of our continued Get Real, Get Better moments is the 8,179 apprentice gaps that we have in our Surface Force. While we as a whole Navy have improved manning by making our recruiting

mission in 2024, and a big thanks here to Navy Recruiting and the Fleet's Every Sailor is A Recruiter program. It's going to take more years of this to fill all of our gaps at sea, especially gaps with Chief Petty Officers. What we're going to do is maximize the most of what we have is twofold. First, we get to peak personnel on a ship earlier because the bulk of our training comes through learning as teams during Basic, Advanced, and Integrated Phase events. So rather than wait to plus up manning before deployment, we will mass force at the beginning of Basic Phase.

The second way we're getting after our gaps at sea is with our Reserve Component to Sea Initiative, RC2SEA. This is our only way to bring in Sailors laterally. Yes, it takes on average 10 years to make a Chief! Unless, you bring one in from the Reserves. Thanks to my Deputy, Admiral Ted LeClair, who has energized RC2SEA by aligning volunteer Reserve Sailors to empty billets on surface ships. In FY24, 167 Reserve Sailors force-wide have filled long term orders on ships. More work to do in 2027 and beyond. Both of these efforts are big parts of our Competitive Edge 2.0 First Line of Effort strategy: develop the leader, warrior, mariner, and manager.

To make better managers, we are operationalizing our Get Real, Get Better mindset, skillsets, and toolsets in our Wardrooms, Chief's Messes, and into our work centers to methodically improve our standards with a bias for root cause analysis and transparency.

To make better warriors, SMWDC is refining our Surface Warfare Combat Training Continuum, or SWCTC. Think of what we've done for Mariner skills and apply that to warfighting. We are creating warfighting training paths that span the professional life of every tactical watch-stander from E1 to O6. This provides the ability to allow data-driven career insights to predict key insertion points for refresher training and updates.

To make better leaders, we are starting a new Command Master Chief coaching program, running a Chief Petty Officer Academy pilot program, and we have begun developing advanced engineering instructors—think Engineering WTIs—our first 8 AEIs graduated last month. I want to personally thank Force Master Chief Larry Lynch for spearheading these efforts and his continued leadership of our Force.

Retaining our talent is key to our readiness. PERS-4, led by Admiral Jeff Heames, are conducting data-informed engagements with every ship's triad. We started doing this in the Wardrooms to get after more department heads. What Jeff is doing now is providing a "punch list," by name, of Sailors our triads can engage with a pathway for a direct Detailer access which speeds up getting to 'yes' to stay Navy. Retaining talented SWO JOs is just as important. Officers like those on the screen – LT Scott Harris (ASWO and WTI) and LTJG Colton Grossheim (Single Longer Tour and COMMO) are signing their Department Head Retention Bonuses in the CO's Cabin of USS O'Kane with proud Strike Group Commander Adan Cruz looking on.

Those two Divos plus 273 more signed up for Department Head in 2024, representing a 98% increase over 2022. Please join me in applauding the efforts of our Chief of Navy Personnel Admiral Cheeseman, Admiral Heames, and Captain Francis and his PERS-41 Team to really improve things.

As we get after our personnel gaps, I couldn't be prouder of how the Sailors that we do have on board, are accomplishing the mission.

On the morning of 11 November 2024, Commander Matt Adams, Captain of USS Spruance—you saw him and his team in the video. Matt and his ship were transiting south through the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. His team defended against one of the most

complex attacks on Navy warships in decades. Matt and his team successfully engaged 3x ASBMs that were shot at a depressed trajectory, 3x ASCMs, and 7x one-way attack UAVs. Matt had prepared his team through endless drills to act decisively in the moment, just like Paul Rinn described.

Something that I think that gets lost in after action reports, news stories, and post-deployment briefs is the whole ship effort required in combat. On Spruance, it wasn't just the Sailors on the controlling stations on the Bridge and in CIC. Supply was on hand bringing everyone food on station. The Chaplain was roving, offering spiritual strength. Sailors literally did not want to turn over the watch, because they wanted to be in the seat to defend the ship. Even once off watch, they would come back to check on the next section. Truly a whole ship effort, everyone involved in the fight from the bottom of their hearts.

And Spruance wasn't content to just stop there. Their motto of "Launch the Attack," commits them to an excellence built on the solid foundation of constant improvement. That's why every tactician in the fleet can read their war diary on SMWDC's Collaboration at Sea site. Now every warship can learn and improve their own combat effectiveness from Spruance's experience.

This is what you can expect from a warship literally stacked with WTIs, to include the CO and the XO. Because this is the winning readiness model: the right leadership, stellar tacticians, and a warship built and sustained to fight and win at sea. This is our Sailors embodying the centuries-old legacy of Navy wins. This is sharpening the sword in action. And our sharp swords become our legacy.

We've had 26 ships so far operate in the Red Sea Weapons Engagement Zone, and thanks to the efforts of many in this room, we've rapidly learned a tremendous amount, allowing us

to better prepare the next deploying warships like the ones in NIMITZ CSG starting C2X next week. Last year, I told you the story of USS Carney. What it took our enterprise to bring her back from Rota, modernize her in Mayport, and prepare for employment in the Basic, Advanced, and Integrated Training Phases. And how on deployment not a minute was ever wasted, training and self-assessment continued everyday. CNY returned home safely this past Spring and all told, after a 235-day deployment, the ship was in 55 engagements and fired 71 missiles. The CO, Jeremy Robertson is now at SMWDC and working on SWATTs to advance our competitive edge of tactical development. He is truly investing his battle experience into our Sailors and Warships.

The fight in the Red Sea has tactically evolved. The first phase from the early outset of hostilities in October '23, saw largely inexpensive drones and cruise missiles shot at irregular intervals. Beginning in late Jan '24, we observed a marked escalation in the scale and complexity of enemy techniques and capabilities, with the employment of anti-ship ballistic missiles, and roving, one-way UAVs in pre-assigned kill boxes. We've sped-up our own learning and teaching so that our deploying ships are always prepared with the latest TTPs before they go over the horizon.

All of this is possible because SMWDC and our industry partners created a robust operational feedback loop. This used to require a ship to be pierside, physically removing the tapes and shipping them to Dahlgren. Now, after a battle, a warship sends off a large data package containing their detect to engage sequence over-the-air. This rapid data transfer is followed by expedient analysis at NSWC, Dahlgren, which is now running 24/7. Within 48 hours, they provide our Warfighters with rapid feedback on their engagement and actionable information for the whole Force on how to best counter the tactics and threats that we're having. This rapid learning is reinforced and spread by leaders like CDR Robertson, who

incorporate it into tactical education for our warships during SWATT and C2X. Our ships practice scenarios involving threat-profiles and kinematics informed by the latest real-world action. This operational, fully informed feedback loop continues to drive our competitive edge beyond the exercises, all the way into our schoolhouses at Surface Combat Systems Training Command and Surface Warfare Schools Command.

I'd like to spend a moment with you on what is often referred to as the "cost curve," or the relationship between the cost of the weapons the Houthis are firing and the cost of the missiles we are intercepting them with. There are several points worth making here.

First, none of our Commanding Officers are worried about the cost curve, nor should they be. They have other things to worry about, like what's for breakfast. The cost of the missile that they are going to shoot is not one of them.

Second, increasingly, more modest threats are being engaged with guns and electronic countermeasures and aircraft, both fixed wing and rotary. Proper threat assessment and operational feedback allow our Commanders to make the best tactical decisions. As an example of engaging with guns, take USS O'Kane for instance. O'Kane protected a merchant convoy against hostile UAVs and employed their 5-inch gun to successfully defeat the threat. This is their fo'c'sle on the morning after. I love this story because it was a whole ship effort. Off watch personnel, including 4 cross-trained Sonar Technicians and 3 junior Machinist Mates who happened to be lifting weights in Forward Pallet staging when shooting began, took the initiative and worked the early hours of the morning moving 5-inch shells from Deep Mag to refill the loader-drum. Volunteers pitching in on a working party led by a junior GM2 kept O'Kane seamlessly in the fight. Those are America's Warfighting Sailors.

Also on the topic of the cost curve, in collaboration with our teammates at Integrated Warfare Systems and the Rapid Capabilities Office, our destroyers have tested several new C-UAS systems, each bringing unique tactical capabilities to the fight. Through an accelerated capability introduction process, to include onboard testing and training alongside development of enhanced tactics, techniques and procedures, I expect several of these systems to be deployed soon. As technical maturity increases, I'm confident we'll have even more cost-effective systems available in the counter unmanned systems fight across the entire force.

I stood here last year and said that I was not satisfied with our progress on directed energy. And after a year of repairs, fleet experiments, site visits, and lots of learning, I am still dissatisfied. I want to instill a greater sense of urgency and I intend to continue to advocate strongly for the resources necessary to overcome some of these hard, technical challenges like atmospheric turbulence, track targeting, clutter conditions, saturation attacks, and beam control. All of which Preble, here in the picture you can see her HELIOS. Lasers like this, high powered microwaves are the way of the future because they will augment a ship defense with an unlimited magazine.

One lesson we've learned here is that we need to remove the burden that at-sea testing on our operational warships. Perhaps this is counter-intuitive but, we can move faster in fleet introduction with land-based testing. High-Powered Microwave is showing promise in development at Dahlgren, where we can test without synchronizing a ship's schedule. Containerized launchers and virtualized combat systems also enable rapid testing with minimal impact to operational warships. To this end, I would like to see dedicated investment in more land-based testing infrastructure. This would allow system maturation and would absorb the lion's share of development prior to at-sea testing

requirements.

Equally as important as the Red Sea, our Sailors are standing the watch in the eastern Mediterranean ready to defend Israel against ballistic missile threat. First in April, Carney and Arleigh Burke combined to destroy more than 80 one-way attack UAVs and at least six ballistic missiles, which include the first employment of the SM-3 in combat. Then in October, Bulkeley and Cole fired interceptors against a barrage of more than 200 Iranian ballistic missiles. This is a mission that the Navy has been rehearsing for over a decade. When I think of how many crews and how many ships it has taken to be prepared for that moment—literally hitting a bullet with a bullet—I realize that even though probably to everybody here it has become a routine thing, it is no less impressive. I'm proud that all that hard work by so many ships and crews and how it paid off when the moment came.

When not in combat, our Surface Warriors are leading the way in safety of life at sea and humanitarian assistance. In August, William P Lawrence DDG 110, headed directly into the path of Hurricane Gilma in order to save a mother and her 7 year-old daughter adrift in a sailboat 925 miles off the coast of Hawaii. The sailing vessel's master, who was the only one aboard who knew how to sail, had passed away in an accident. The Coast Guard had received a distress alert from the boat's emergency position beacon and asked the Navy to help. Willy P was ready to go and raced for 36 hours at 24kts directly towards the hurricane to close the speed of the sailboat. When they got there, the seas were already up to 8 to 10 ft, the ship could see that the hurricane was not far off. They courageously launched their RHIB and thanks to the great proficiency of the Coxswain, Seaman Michael Hunter, whom you can almost see in this picture, they saved both on board plus their cat and turtle[BM1]. They had only a short window before the seas and the hurricane would swallow them up, so I applaud the great engineers on William P Lawrence, answering

all bells to make best speed back to the safe harbor of Hawaii. Thanks to the quick action of those courageous Sailors, two people were saved...and their pets, too.

One story that did not get the attention it deserved in '24 was our Naval Beach Group One Sailors in the Gaza Relief Mission, Operation Neptune Solace. They employed the Joint Logistics Over-The-Shore capability—think floating pier, to flow humanitarian aid to Gaza. Heavy weather presented many challenges, and the pier was repaired and redeployed multiple times. Our Sailors delivered 28,884,843 pounds of food and aid. This was the second largest humanitarian mission conducted by the US military, exceeded only by the Berlin Airlift in 1948. This was a truly remarkable accomplishment!

On the other side of the globe, USS Boxer with embarked Marines from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit provided tons of American aid to the Northern Philippines. With their MV-22 Ospreys, they helped access Basco, an island on the north side of the Luzon Strait that had been ravaged by a typhoon. These stories highlight the exceptional work our Sailors and Marines are accomplishing and are truly illustrative of the world-wide coverage of our warfighting team.

In support of these efforts, we've had considerable success from the ADCON side of the Surface Warfare Enterprise. Our goal is clear- generate the warships, crews, concepts, and capabilities to fight and win at sea. Admiral Downey and I are committed to significantly reducing the Days of Maintenance Delay across the force. Considerable learning, discipline, and partnership with industry have already contributed to raising maintenance on-time completion rates to 65% in FY24. This has reduced days of maintenance delay down to 2,633 days. This is a 62% drop since 2019! Significant and impressive but we still have lots of work to do to drive it down to zero by 2027.

Especially with Amphibious Warship maintenance availabilities.

Since 2018, of the 25 Amphibious Ready Groups/Marine Expeditionary Units who deployed, 38% were delayed due to amphib maintenance availabilities not finishing on time. Those availability delays resulted in the loss of 400 operational days at sea.

In response to this, I launched a 90-day amphibious maintenance review with Vice Admiral Jim Downey last Spring. The learning from this process has been significant and we are executing the recommendations which include the designation of Signature Availabilities for Big Decks that will accelerate our planning and contract award milestones, which will improve procurement timelines, strengthen partnerships throughout the enterprise, and lead to workload stability for our industrial base. Initiatives like that reinforce efforts codified in our Competitive Edge strategy second LOE, Produce More Ready Ships.

Also, on the material front of Competitive Edge's LOE 2 are more data-driven initiatives to improve our readiness. NAVSUP has been laser focused on shifting our logistics approach from "just in time" to "just in case." This "just in case" approach is not a luxury, it's about having the parts onboard we know we will need to maintain full redundancy for sustained operations at sea; as well as the parts critical to self-sustain in a fight to overcome battle damage. NAVSUP has invested \$1.4B in surface material and removed COSAL modeling constraints. This is paving the way for targeted investments in critical system materials, making sure we can get more ready players on the field and sustain them over the horizon. Ships combat surge ready works best when it's at full redundancy.

One capability that we have significantly advanced in our 3rd LOE of our strategy is the integration of unmanned vessels into the fleet. Bill Daly will spend a good bit of time on this in his speech later, but as far as Type Commander

concerns go, I am very optimistic that the things we've already started have put us on an excellent position to integrate this incredible capability rapidly into the fleet. Standing up USVRON-3 out of hide last May was a big win for us. You'd think the automation would be the hardest part—and that's hard, no doubt, but launching USVs from an Independence Class Mission Bay isn't exactly easy either, especially the first time you try it. BZ to USS Manchester and USS Comstock for being the first ships to experiment with this.

Over the past year alone, Fleet Operators have worked hand-in-hand with the Program Office, Warfare Centers, and Industry partners conducting rapid testing and experimentation as we drive to develop and operationalize Surface Force Robotics Autonomous Systems. Sailors participated in War Games, conducted on-the-water testing, and incorporated USVs into experiments.

Through the work of our exceptional Sailors, our future force is coming into greater focus and clarity. Hybrid and autonomous, coupled with some of the most advanced combat systems in the history of warfare, championed by America's Warfighting Sailors, Surface Warfare provides the competitive edge needed to deliver warfighting advantage whenever and wherever needed. Look no further than some of our advances with DDG FLT IIIs joining the Fleet with SPY-6, SEWIP BLK III, and AEGIS Baseline 10. As you can see USS Chosin here successfully testing our new transferable re-load at sea method.

250 years of our Navy is a major milestone and like many waypoints that mark our history, they occur at a moment of change, conflict, and crisis. These waypoints reassure us that we've navigated shoal water in the past but also warm us up for the hard work ahead, hard work that demands we leverage our enterprise fully, generating combat ready warships who will lead in the future fight. There is no substitute for

combat effectiveness on the first day of combat or the thousandth day.

An effective force is a ready force, predicated on full redundancy, self-sufficiency, and brilliant execution of our tactics. We must carry forward the spirit of 250 years of rich naval legacy. Many things have changed since the early days of our Nation but the centrality of the maritime domain in the American and Global consciousness remains. Protecting our sea lanes globally remains a ubiquitous and enduring challenge. The sun never sets on our Force. Our readiness is the firmament that will enable our Surface Force to fight and win at sea. Competitive Edge 2.0 is how we will be more ready. Let's all re-commit to sharpening our swords for the next 250 years.

Thank you for your time this afternoon and I look forward to hearing your questions.