

# Chao, Buzby Conference With Maritime Industry Leaders Over COVID-19



The Henry J. Kaiser-class underway replenishment oiler USNS Yukon prepares to conduct a loading with the commercial tanker MT Empire State. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Patrick W. Menah Jr.

WASHINGTON – Transportation Secretary Elaine L. Chao and Maritime Administrator Mark H. Buzby held a teleconference with maritime industry leaders on April 2 to discuss the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the industry, according to an April 2 MARAD release.

Chao and Buzby discussed the crisis with chief executive officers, presidents and other senior officials of the industry.

“During the call, Secretary Chao voiced her support for the maritime industry and the challenges they face at this time,” the release said.

*Did you know there are about 70 civilian mariners aboard the USNS Comfort supporting the Navy doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals. Andrew Chen, chief mate, helps guide the ship from the bridge as it arrives in New York City. [pic.twitter.com/ED4Qu2IBJP](https://pic.twitter.com/ED4Qu2IBJP)*

*– DOT Maritime Administration (@DOTMARAD) [April 2, 2020](#)*

“Secretary Chao and Administrator Buzby briefed maritime industry partners on departmental activities concerning COVID-19 and provided industry leaders the opportunity to share their insights, questions and concerns with the secretary, [Department of Transportation], MARAD and other government interagency Partners. Topics discussed included the overall status of maritime industry operations, including personnel [staff/contractors], any disruptions, and [the outbreak’s] impact on the cargo movement in the U.S. and overseas.”

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## **Captain of COVID-19-Plagued Aircraft Carrier Relieved of Command**



Capt. Brett Crozier addresses the crew for the first time as commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt during a change-of-command ceremony in November on the ship's flight deck. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Sean Lynch

ARLINGTON, Va. – The commander of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt – whose letter to U.S. Navy brass about leadership's slow response to a coronavirus outbreak that endangered his crew was leaked to a San Francisco newspaper – has been relieved of his post.

Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly announced April 2 that the carrier's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, was being relieved of command of the ship, now docked in Guam, where nearly 100 Sailors tested positive for the novel coronavirus, COVID-19.

[See: New York, L.A. Hospital Ships Brace for Expected Wave of Patients](#)

In a hastily called press briefing, Modly said Crozier was not fired in retaliation for his letter but because the secretary had lost confidence in his leadership. Crozier "had allowed

the complexity of his challenge with the [COVID-19] breakout on the ship to overwhelm his ability to act professionally, when acting professionally was what was needed.”

On March 30, in a four-page letter to Navy leadership, Crozier said that his ship had inadequate space to isolate or quarantine Sailors in keeping with guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the Navy.

*Crozier “had allowed the complexity of his challenge with the [COVID-19] breakout on the ship to overwhelm his ability to act professionally, when acting professionally was what was needed.”*

*Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly*

“The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating,” Crozier wrote. He called for disembarking all but a token force of about 10% of the crew from the ship until all could be tested for the infection, isolated for the required 14 days and the ship adequately cleaned.

The letter was leaked to the San Francisco Chronicle, which published it two days later. The Chronicle article, which gained wide attention, included Crozier’s position that: “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset – our Sailors.”

Reaction to Crozier’s April 2 dismissal was swift from at least some leaders on Capitol Hill, where Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee – including its chairman, Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) – decried the move. “While Captain Crozier clearly went outside the chain of command,” the congressmen wrote in a statement, his dismissal “is a destabilizing move that will likely put our service members at greater risk and jeopardize our fleet’s readiness.”



Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Michael Lusk takes a swab sample for COVID-19 testing aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt on April 1 with the ship docked in Guam. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Dartañon D. De La Garza

At an April 1 press briefing at the Pentagon, Modly declined to say whether Crozier would be fired for going outside channels to draw attention to his ship's plight. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday also declined to comment on the fate of Crozier's command of the Theodore Roosevelt.

Modly noted that Crozier stayed within Navy channels by sending his letter up the chain of command and added that the special medical team which deployed to the Roosevelt echoed some of the captain's concerns.

"Let me emphasize that this is exactly what we want from our officers and our medical teams. We need a lot of transparency in this situation and we need that information to flow up

through the chain of command,” Modly said at the briefing.

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## New York, L.A. Hospital Ships See Few Patients But Brace for Expected Wave



Sailors practice patient transfer from the pier onto the hospital ship USNS Comfort as they prepare to admit patients in New York in support of the nation's COVID-19 response efforts. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sara Eshleman

ARLINGTON, Va. – Both commanders of medical operations on the two Military Sealift Command hospital ships sent to ease the load of non-coronavirus cases at hard-pressed local hospitals in Los Angeles and New York City said their staffs have

treated only a handful of patients so far.

Capt. John Rotruck, commander of the Medical Treatment Facility USNS Mercy in Los Angeles, and Capt. Patrick Amersbach, the Medical Treatment Facility USNS Comfort commander in New York, told an April 2 Pentagon press conference by phone that their vessels were rushed to both cities to be in place before hospitals were overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients so, as Rotruck said, “when capacity demand really increases, we’ll be ready.”

[See: Navy dismisses outspoken captain of the USS Theodore Roosevelt](#)

The Mercy, based in San Diego, reached L.A. on March 27 and received its first patient March 29. Since then, 15 patients have been transferred from local hospitals to the hospital ship. Five have been discharged and 10 others are still being treated on board.

That effective throughput showed the hospital ships could act as “a relief valve for local hospitals,” Rotruck said. Otherwise, if the ships filled up “we would be of little use to the local hospitals.” The Norfolk, Virginia-based Comfort set sail six days ahead of original plan on March 28 and reached New York two days later. Comfort staff have treated 30 people since April 1.



Lt. Cmdr. Nevin Yazici demonstrates how to properly fit an N95 respiratory protective device aboard the Comfort in New York. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sara Eshleman

“We were brought into New York City as quickly as possible,” Amersbach said, to “accept COVID-19-free patients to take pressure off local health systems before the wave hit.”

Both huge vessels can provide a full spectrum of services, including general surgeries, critical care and ward care for adults. That will allow local health care professionals to focus on treating COVID-19 patients and for shore-based hospitals to use their intensive care units and ventilators for threatening those patients. Neither ship is accepting obstetrics or pediatric patients, which the captains said would require more specialists and equipment than the ships have for their primary mission.



Aviation Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Justin Cosgrove participates in morning colors aboard the Comfort while the ship is moored in New York City in support of the nation's COVID-19 response efforts. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sara Eshleman

Rotruck said the cases doctors on the Mercy have treated ranged from traumatic accident injuries to gastrointestinal, heart and lung issues. In both cities, all patients are referred by local hospitals to a central command center for disposition and are screened and tested for COVID-19 before they can come aboard the ships.

Medical staff on the ships, who include Navy reservists as well as active-duty personnel, were screened for COVID-19 before they came on board and any new staff will have to self-isolate in New York or Los Angeles for 14 days before boarding either ship.

If higher authorities changed the ships' mission to treat COVID-19 patients, Rotruck speculated that Mercy would have to "transfer all the non-COVID-19 patients off the ship and

become a 100% COVID operation.” Amersbach said if the mission changed, all the Comfort’s beds would have to be reconfigured to keep those with the virus far apart from those not infected.

Rotruck said the apparent deliberate derailment of a railroad locomotive near the port area where the Mercy is berthed did not affect the ship’s staff, patients or services. “It happened well outside of our fence line,” said Rotruck, adding that the Navy and Defense Department will adjust force protection procedures if there are additional security concerns.

In New York City, where supplies of personal protection equipment (PPE) for local medical staff are running critically low, Amersbach said the Comfort hasn’t received any requests for supplies or equipment from hospitals, adding that such requests would be forwarded to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. “We currently have enough PPE, equipment and stores on board,” he said, “at least for the next couple of weeks, depending on how many patients we get aboard the ship.”

The two hospital ships aren’t the only Navy Department responses to the medical needs of the civilian population, acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly told a press briefing on April 1.

Scalable, modular, rapidly erectable shelters, known as Expeditionary Medical Facilities, were sent to temporary medical stations at convention centers in Dallas and New Orleans. Marine Corps Systems Command and the Naval Information Warfare Center, Pacific, were designing 3-D parts to assist the University of California-San Diego convert ventilators to handle multiple patients, Modly said.

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# Navy Picks HII to Provide Logistics Support for Surface Ships, Subs

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. – Huntington Ingalls Industries' Technical Solutions division was selected by the U.S. Navy to provide integrated logistics support (ILS) for the hull, mechanical and electrical (HM&E) systems and equipment installed on surface ships and submarines, the company announced in an April 1 release.

The indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract has a potential value of \$41 million over five years, if all options are exercised.

“We take great pride in providing our customers around the globe with multiple logistics products and services to help them achieve their missions,” said Brad Mason, president of Technical Solutions' Fleet Support business unit. “ILS development, maintenance and deployment to the warfighter is a critical part of how HII sustains our nation's fleet.”

The IDIQ contract was awarded by the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Philadelphia Division, which is responsible for all ILS work related to the HM&E systems and equipment installed on Navy surface ships and submarines. Under the direction of the Life Cycle Logistics & Readiness Division, HII will execute services related to technical, process and programmatic support for integrated logistics and technical documentation.

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# Navy, Coast Guard to Surge Drug-Interdiction Support to SOUTHCOM



Chief Hospital Corpsman Bianca McQueen briefs contractors on COVID-19 mitigation tactics on the flight deck of the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Detroit while in port in Key West, Florida. Detroit is deployed to the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility to help counter drug trafficking. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Anderson W. Branch

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy and Coast Guard will surge ships and aircraft to the U.S. Southern Command’s area of responsibility to counter increased cartel drug running amid the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump and Defense Department officials announced.

At an April 1 press briefing at the White House,

Trump announced that SOUTHCOM “will increase surveillance, disruption and seizures of drug shipments and provide additional support for eradication efforts, which are going on right now at a record pace.”

“We’re deploying additional Navy destroyers, [littoral] combat ships, aircraft and helicopters; Coast Guard cutters; and Air Force surveillance aircraft, doubling our capabilities in the region,” he added. “Very importantly, our forces are fully equipped with personnel protective equipment, and we’ve taken additional safety measures to ensure our troops remain healthy.”

*[#COVID19](#) will not stop the [@DeptofDefense](#) from protecting the American people from illegal drugs. At the direction of the [@POTUS](#), additional U.S. ships, aircraft, and security forces are underway to disrupt narcotics trafficking. [pic.twitter.com/BFTbxqcFGn](https://pic.twitter.com/BFTbxqcFGn)*

– Archive: Dr. Mark T. Esper (@EsperDoD) [April 1, 2020](#)

Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the briefing that “we came upon some intelligence some time ago that the drug cartels, as a result of COVID-19, were going to try to take advantage of the situation and try to infiltrate additional drugs into our country. As we know, 70,000 Americans die on an average annual basis to drugs. That’s unacceptable. We’re at war with COVID-19, we’re at war with terrorists, and we are at war with the drug cartels as well.”

“This is the United States military,” Milley added. “You will not penetrate this country. You will not get past Jump Street. You’re not going to come in here and kill additional Americans. And we will marshal whatever assets are required to prevent your entry into this country to kill Americans.”

Attending the briefing as well was Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who added: "This initiative is part of the administration's whole-of-government approach to combating the flow of illicit drugs into the United States and protecting the American people from their scourge."

Esper said the additional forces would "nearly double our capacity to conduct counter-narcotics operations in the region. Last year alone, United States Southern Command's operations resulted in the seizure of over 280 metric tons of drugs, much of which was designated for shipment to America."

*"This initiative is part of the administration's whole-of-government approach to combating the flow of illicit drugs into the United States and protecting the American people from their scourge."*

*Defense Secretary Mark Esper*

In a tweet that day, Esper posted a briefing slide listing in more detail the types of forces that would be surged into the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific areas off the coast of Central and South America.

The list included Navy destroyers and littoral combat ships, Coast Guard cutters, Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and Air Force E-3 Sentry and E-8 Joint STARS surveillance aircraft. The destroyers and littoral combat ships carry MH-60 Seahawk helicopters, while some Coast Guard cutters carry MH-65 Dolphin helos.

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# Modly Announces First President of Naval Community College

WASHINGTON – Acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly has selected Randi Cosentino as the first president of the new U.S. Naval Community College.

Cosentino comes to the Department of the Navy from Guild Education, where she served as the chief academic officer. Guild Education works with major Fortune 500 companies like Disney and Walmart to provide college-level education and training to their workforces. Cosentino received her bachelor's degree and doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania and her master's in business from Harvard Business School.

“In today's complex global security environment, we need to provide world-class education to our enlisted force of Sailors and Marines,” Modly said. “Dr. Cosentino's experience as an educator and administrator working with some of our nation's largest private-sector employers will help ensure that all of our personnel have access to a top-notch education while serving our nation.”

The U.S. Naval Community College will partner with civilian universities and community colleges to provide enlisted Sailors and Marines an opportunity to earn an associate's degree online in high demand fields like cyber, IT and engineering.

The planned delivery model, which will rely primarily on high-quality civilian universities and community colleges with proven track records delivering strong positive outcomes, is very similar to that pioneered by Cosentino at Guild, which has been praised nationally for its cost-effectiveness

and high return on investment.

“I am honored to have the opportunity to serve our nation’s naval services and to lead this new institution, as it develops innovative and collaborative approaches to educating America’s Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen,” Cosentino said. “The need for critical thinking, analytical problem-solving, and effective communication skills that a college education provides has never been more important than it is in today’s rapidly changing world.

“I look forward to enhancing naval readiness by developing the intellectual foundations of our enlisted force.”

As president, Cosentino will be responsible for overseeing the daily operations for the Naval Community College, which will begin teaching its first cohort of students in a pilot program scheduled for January 2021. The pilot will focus on degree programs in IT, engineering and data science. The first cohort will consist of 500 to 600 enlisted service members from the Navy, Marine Corps and the Coast Guard.

“The U. S. Coast Guard is excited to partner with the Navy and Marine Corps in establishing the United States Naval Community College,” said Rear Adm. Brian K. Penoyer, the Coast Guard’s force readiness commander. “Our people are the key to providing a ready, relevant and responsive Coast Guard.”

“The Naval Community College will help us meet the strategic goal to sharpen the skills of the mission ready total workforce and will help position the Coast Guard to recruit and retain an inclusive and diverse workforce that reflects the American public we serve,” Penoyer continued. “We see the Naval Community College as the first step in building our Mission Ready Workforce for 2040 and beyond.”

Establishing the new community college is one of the primary objectives of Education for Seapower Strategy 2020, released earlier this year. The strategy called for creation of the

community college because of the growing demand for technical skills and creative problem solving in the Navy and Marine Corps.

The U.S. Naval Community College will be part of the newly formed Naval University System, which includes the Naval War College, Naval Postgraduate School, Marine Corps University, and the U.S. Naval Academy.

Cosentino will report to John Kroger, the Navy's chief learning officer. Joining Cosentino as chief of staff is Robert Kozloski, currently acting deputy chief learning officer for the Navy. Kozloski, who served as an enlisted Sailor and Marine Corps officer, has been one of the primary architects of the Naval Community College concept.

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## **COVID-19 Testing, Isolation Expand for Crew of Aircraft Carrier as Navy Dismisses Captain**



The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill transit the Philippine Sea on Feb. 29. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Sean Lynch  
ARLINGTON, Va. – U.S. Navy officials are scrambling to find accommodations on Guam to isolate thousands of Sailors from the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, the first – and, so far, only – deployed Navy ship to be caught up in the coronavirus outbreak.

Meanwhile, media widely reported on April 2 that the Navy had dismissed the commanding officer of the carrier for speaking out about the Navy's response to the outbreak aboard his ship.

Nearly 1,000 of the 4,865 Sailors that the Theodore Roosevelt got underway with in January are off the ship and being isolated on Guam, acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly told a Pentagon press briefing on April 1. Officials hoped to have about 2,700 off the carrier in the next couple of days, he said. Less than 100 of the Sailors have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, and none have been

hospitalized, Modly said.

[See: Ship Construction Ongoing, Repairs Continuing Amid Outbreak](#)

The entire ship's company will not be evacuated all at once for security reasons, Modly stressed.

"We cannot and will not remove all the Sailors off the ship," he said, adding that except for size, the 1,092-foot-long Roosevelt is not like a cruise ship. "The ship has weapons, munitions, expensive airplanes and a nuclear reactor," he noted.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said about 1,000 Sailors would be needed to handle maintenance and security as well as for cleaning and disinfecting the huge vessel. Gilday said healthy Sailors, after 14 days of quarantine, could rotate to the Roosevelt, replacing those still working on board.

The Navy is looking beyond its own properties and other Defense Department facilities on Guam to house Sailors taken off the ship for testing, isolation or quarantine. Modly said officials are working with Guam's governor to free up hotel space there.

*We obtained 4-page letter by Capt. Brett Crozier, a Santa Rosa native, where he pleads for isolation equipment allowing his crew to self-isolate.*

*"If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset – our Sailors."*<https://t.co/dW7giW07PL> [pic.twitter.com/SCjPWF0icK](https://pic.twitter.com/SCjPWF0icK)

*– Matthias Gafni (@mgafni) [March 31, 2020](#)*

Once Sailors are tested they will either be isolated for 14

days if they test negative for COVID-19 or quarantined if they test positive for the virus, which has sickened 927,986 around the world and killed more than 46,000 people, including more than 4,700 in the United States.

As of April 1, 1,273 Roosevelt Sailors, about 24% of the crew, have been tested for COVID-19. Only 93 tested positive. Of those, 86 showed symptoms, while the other seven did not. Another 593 tested negative. Not all test results have returned, Modly said.

Officials said they still don't know how the disease was brought on board. The Roosevelt's last port of call – 15 days before the first three Sailors tested positive for COVID-19 – was Da Nang, Vietnam, in January when the World Health Organization reported only 16 cases in the country, all far to the north in Hanoi. Modly noted that aircrews were flying on and off the carrier and before it deployed most of the crew was on holiday leave. The ship also visited Guam in February. "Understanding exactly who patient zero is, is probably going to be an impossible task," Gilday said.



Capt. Brett Crozier, now the former commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, gives remarks during

an all-hands call on the ship's flight deck in December. Crozier, in a letter sent up the Navy's chain of command, pleaded for help to stem the COVID-19 outbreak on his ship. The letter was leaked to a San Francisco newspaper. Crozier was dismissed from his post on April 2. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Alexander Williams

*"Let me emphasize that [Crozier's letter] is exactly what we want from our officers and our medical teams. We need a lot of transparency in this situation, and we need that information to flow up through the chain of command."*

*Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly*

In a March 30 letter to Navy leadership, the carrier's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, said his ship had inadequate space to isolate or quarantine Sailors in keeping with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and the Navy. "The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating," Crozier wrote. He called for disembarking all but a token force of about 10% of the crew from the ship until all could be tested for infection, isolated for the required 14 days and the ship adequately cleaned.

The letter was leaked to the San Francisco Chronicle, which published it two days later, on March 31. The article, which gained wide media attention, included Crozier's position that: "We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset – our Sailors."



Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Adrian Noceda takes a sample for testing aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt on March 27. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Kaylianna Genier

Modly said the captain sent his letter through channels up the chain of command. The acting Navy secretary said that the special medical team that deployed with the Roosevelt is concerned about the same problem Crozier cited, not having enough space aboard for isolation measures, Modly said.

Citing Crozier's letter, Modly said: "Let me emphasize that this is exactly what we want from our officers and our medical teams. We need a lot of transparency in this situation, and we need that information to flow up through the chain of command." He said he didn't know how the letter leaked to the San Francisco newspaper and probably never would.

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# Navy Surface Forces, Army Attack Helicopters Conduct Ops in Arabian Gulf



AH-64 Apache helicopters operate with the expeditionary sea base USS Lewis B. Puller during a joint naval and air integration operation on March 27. U.S. Army/Spc. Cody Rich PERSIAN GULF – U.S. Navy expeditionary landing base ship USS Lewis B. Puller has been conducting joint naval and air integration operations with U.S. Army AH-64E Apache attack helicopters assigned to Army Central Command's Task Force Saber throughout March, according to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (USNAVCENT) public affairs.

The operations, which are designed to enhance the capabilities of U.S. forces to respond to surface threats, have involved Puller performing as a landing base platform for the Apaches, while Cyclone class Patrol Coastal ships select simulated

targets for them to engage. The guided-missile destroyer USS Paul Hamilton also participated in the joint operations.

“The integration of U.S. Army air weapons teams with other joint fires into the maritime environment greatly enhances our ability to expand reconnaissance and attack capability,” said Capt. Peter Mirisola, commander of Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 50/Commander, Combined Task Force (CTF) 55. “The Apaches, in coordination with our surface ships, allow us to hold an adversary at high risk at extended ranges. Combined with other joint fires, these aircraft significantly increase the precision lethality of our joint maritime forces.”

Similar integration operations with Special Operations assets were conducted in the Arabian Gulf between U.S. naval forces and MH-6M Little Bird helicopters during Operation Earnest Will from 1987 to 1988.

More recently, USNAVCENT surface forces also conducted joint naval and air integration operations with AC-130W Stinger II gunships, assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command Central, on March 8 and March 9.

“Working with USARCENT forces represents another key capability in our ongoing integration of naval and air assets across our joint and coalition force to ensure maritime superiority,” said Vice Adm. Jim Malloy, commander of USNAVCENT/U.S. 5th Fleet. “This kind of cross-domain integration allows us to maintain highly lethal and effective defensive capabilities, regardless of what platforms are operating in theater.”

DESRON 50/CTF 55 conducts maritime security operations in support of regional security and stability. Its responsibilities include planning and executing a robust regional engagement program with coalition forces from regional partners and allied navies who operate and deploy to the Arabian Gulf.

The U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. The expanse is comprised of 20 countries and includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the southern tip of Yemen.

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## **New NOAA Program to Support, Expand Agency's Use of Unmanned Systems**

SILVER SPRING, Md. – The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is establishing a new Unmanned Systems Operations Program to support the rapidly expanding use of these systems across the agency, according to a NOAA release.

The new program will promote the safe, efficient and economical operation of unmanned systems (UxS) that NOAA uses to collect high-quality environmental data for the agency's science, products and services.

“Unmanned airborne and maritime systems are transforming how we conduct earth science at NOAA,” said retired Navy Rear Adm. Timothy Gallaudet, NOAA's deputy administrator. “Our new unmanned systems operations program will help us dramatically increase the application and use of these technologies in every NOAA mission area.”

Unmanned systems are sensor-equipped vehicles that operate autonomously or are remotely piloted. NOAA uses them for

seafloor and habitat mapping, ocean exploration, marine mammal and fishery stock assessments, emergency response and at-sea observations that improve forecasting of extreme events, such as harmful algal blooms and hypoxia.

While the use of UxS is not new to NOAA – agency scientists have been experimenting with and using unmanned systems for decades – the recent increase in the availability of highly capable UxS has brought a corresponding increase in their innovative use as a force multiplier for many NOAA programs. NOAA’s use of small unmanned aircraft for science missions has increased more than tenfold since 2012.

The Unmanned Systems Operations Program is being established within NOAA’s Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO), which operates, manages and maintains the agency’s fleet of ships and aircraft and oversees NOAA’s diving and small boat safety programs. Its services will include training, cybersecurity, acquisition and other expert support to ensure safe, cost-effective operations across the agency.

“With the creation of this new program, we will be better positioned to transition these technologies into operational platforms that will gather critical environmental data every American relies upon,” said Rear Adm. Michael J. Silah, director of the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps and OMAO.

The new program will be housed at two locations. The NOAA Aircraft Operations Center in Lakeland, Florida, will continue to support the agency’s unmanned aircraft activities. A new facility being built by the Mississippi State Port Authority in partnership with the University of Southern Mississippi in Gulfport, Mississippi, will support unmanned maritime systems.

NOAA received \$12.7 million from Congress in fiscal year 2020 to improve and expand UxS operations across the agency, including the creation of the new program – a key goal of

NOAA's recently released Unmanned Systems Strategy. The program will also help meet the objectives of the Commercial Engagement Through Ocean Technology Act of 2018, which requires NOAA to coordinate research, assess and acquire unmanned marine systems with the U.S. Navy, other federal agencies, industry and academia.

NOAA is partnering with the Navy this year to evaluate new UxS technologies for ocean science applications through the Advanced Naval Technology Exercise (ANTX) program. Now in its fifth year, ANTX enables scientists and engineers to participate in the testing and assessment of experimental technologies that can support missions of both agencies. During the exercise, dozens of new systems are tested and demonstrated to help inform government and private sector investment decisions.

NOAA is also exploring the use of artificial intelligence in combination with UxS to collect and analyze large volumes of scientific data. NOAA recently released the NOAA Artificial Intelligence Strategy in conjunction with the Unmanned Systems Strategy.

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**Geurts: Ship Construction Ongoing, Repairs Continuing Amid COVID-19 Outbreak**



Earl Cobbs of Newport News, Virginia, grinds a bulkhead in the hangar bay aboard the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis in Norfolk during the carrier's refueling and complex overhaul. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Joshua L. Leonard

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy is continuing to build and repair ships amid the COVID-19 pandemic but also is looking ahead to position itself to accelerate as the nation recovers from the pandemic, the service's top acquisition official said.

The repair yards are "continuing to get the work done," James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, said during an April 1 teleconference with media.

"We'll see some challenges," Geurts said, but noted that his office is focused on "one or two steps down the road" and on "how to accelerate out of recovery" to maintain the readiness of the fleet.

[See: COVID-19 Testing, Isolation Expand for Crew of Aircraft Carrier](#)

He said that 95% to 98% of the Navy's acquisition work force is teleworking and that he "was not seeing a drop-off in performance."

The assistant secretary reiterated his focus on three lines of operation:

- The health of the defense industrial work force, including the government work force and its industrial partners such as prime contractors, subcontractors, small suppliers and individuals.
- Ensuring the health of the industrial base.
- Ensuring warfighting readiness of the Navy and U.S. Marine Corps.

"We haven't slowed down," he said, and that the work force "is continuing to press hard."

Geurts said he continues to see some tightening in the supply chain and that his workforce is continually reassessing measures to work out the challenges. He lately is focusing attention on the transportation and distribution networks to monitor potential disruptions in the supply chain.

Geurts has been pressing to get contracts issued earlier than normal to assure the shipbuilders and repair yards and their suppliers that "work is coming."

He pointed out that awarding contracts two months early has the advantage of getting planning and work started early; "creating some resiliency" as challenges arise; and making possible an acceleration of the post-pandemic recovery.

He said that contracts awarded recently included those for two Navajo-class towing, salvage and rescue ships; 18 P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, the AIM-9X Sidewinder air-to-air

missile, berthing barges and patrol boats, and that contracts were imminent for a Block II San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship and for the new class of utility landing craft.

He also said he has yet to see the impact of the pandemic on the next-generation frigate program.

Geurts also pointed to the upcoming April commissionings of the Virginia-class attack submarines Delaware and Vermont and the upcoming combat systems completion of the guided-missile cruiser USS Zumwalt as evidence that the Navy's acquisition of ships is not slowing down.