

# CNO Launches Inquiries Into Bonhomme Richard Blaze



The USS Bonhomme Richard sits scorched pierside at Naval Base San Diego on July 17, after four days of fire severely damaged the amphibious assault ship and investigations into the cause and procedures in battling the blaze got underway. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communications Specialist 3rd Class Jason Waite

ARLINGTON, Va. – Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday announced a series of investigations into the disastrous fire that severely damaged the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard in San Diego this week.

Following a July 17 tour of the damage aboard the ship, Gilday held a press conference in the afternoon to discuss the events and to praise the ship's crew and the hundreds of other firefighters from other vessels and fire departments that came to the aid of the Bonhomme Richard, the sixth ship of the Wasp class.

Gilday said there would be a safety investigation to determine the cause of the fire and any ancillary issues in the realm of safety. This investigation, to be conducted by Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA), will be kept confidential to allow for free flow of testimony.

A second investigation, also routine in such incidents, will be conducted by the Navy Criminal Investigative Service, to determine if the fire was caused by any malfeasance or criminal activity, the CNO announced.

Gilday said the Navy also will conduct a third investigation that will look into several echelons of command to determine if the correct procedures were in effect during the emergency, if the Navy reacted properly to the fire, and if measures should have been in place that were

not, among other factors.

“Make no mistake,” the CNO said. “We will follow the facts of what happened here. We will be honest with ourselves. We will get after it as a Navy.”

He also said the ship’s structure will be assessed, as will any mechanical and electrical damage, so the Navy can determine whether the amphib can be repaired. Experts from the ship’s builder, Huntington Ingalls Industries, will be involved in the assessment, as will those of NAVSEA and Norfolk Naval Shipyard.

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Gilday said four-star fleet commanders will send detailed messages to all ships in all fleets, mandating that within five days their commanding officers assess personnel training levels, see if equipment is adequately operable – “in terms of placement and in terms of numbers” – and to “red-team” their procedures “to make sure they’re adequate.”

“I am 100% confident that our defense industry can put this ship back to sea, but, having said that, the question is, ‘should we make that investment in a 22-year-old ship?” he said. “I’m not going to make any predictions until we take a look at all of the facts, and we follow the facts, and we can make a reasonable recommendation on the future steps.”

Gilday inspected the damage to the Bonhomme Richard down to four decks below the flight deck and up to the superstructure and spoke to many of the firefighters. He was told that the wind coming off the bay helped the fire spread out of control, up elevator shafts and into the ship’s exhaust stacks.

There also were a series of explosions – one of which could be heard 13 miles away – that led the ship's CO to withdraw firefighters for their safety. At one point, an explosion blew debris across the pier to another ship, Gilday said.

"I think that the situation was very tenuous," he said. "I think that the commanding officer made some very sound decisions in terms of how to attack the fire very deliberately."

The fires, which started on the morning of July 12, burned for four days. The amphib, which is based in San Diego, was being upgraded to operate F-35B Lightning II strike fighters, among other modernizations.