

COVID-19 Shows Importance of Ship Self-Sufficiency at Sea, Surface Force Chief Says



Sailors aboard the guided-missile cruiser USS San Jacinto handle line as the ship moors in Naval Station Norfolk after a regularly scheduled deployment. The ship was away from port for more than 200 days. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Colbey Livingston

ARLINGTON, Va. – One lesson learned from the challenge of the novel coronavirus pandemic is that U.S. Navy ships and their crews need to be self-reliant and work with the equipment and skills on hand, the commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic said, noting the unexpected 200-plus days the guided-missile cruiser USS San Jacinto spent at sea.

“From an equipment perspective, if there’s any silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s Sailor self-sufficiency in our ability to maintain our equipment at a higher level,” Rear Adm. Brad Cooper told the Surface Navy Association’s 1st Virtual Waterfront Symposium.

He noted the 32-year-old San Jacinto, escort to the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, was away from port for more than 200 days. “That’s an unimaginable number,” Cooper said during a live-streamed question-and-answer session on Aug. 25.

COVID-19 “has forced us to be a lot more self-sufficient,” he said, adding “and boy were they self-sufficient.”

Both ships left Norfolk Naval Station on Jan. 17 for the carrier strike group’s composite training unit exercise and follow-on deployment. They did not return to Norfolk until Aug. 9, partly to escape the spread of COVID-19 – which sidelined the carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt for months – but also to maintain maritime stability and security, deter

aggression and defend U.S. and allies' interests in the 5th and 6th Fleets' areas of operations.

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Uncertainty posed by COVID-19 also showed the need to change from a Monday through Friday initial training schedule, Cooper said. Earlier this year, Surface Naval Force Atlantic shifted to a pilot program, Afloat Training Groups (ATG) Rodeo, where three ships stayed out at sea conducting drills, planning exercises, executing them and debriefing for three uninterrupted weeks, instead of coming back to on the weekends.

"As we look to the future, that's the model we're going to use in the Surface Force in both [Atlantic and Pacific] fleets," Cooper said. Six ships coming out of maintenance and going into basic phase in the next few months are going to follow that training procedure, Cooper said.

He said leaders in the fleet must have "exquisite knowledge" of the condition of their equipment to meet Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday's top priority: operational readiness. But they also need to know their crew members even better to meet their No. 1 priority: People. A key component to that is training, he said.

A day after the massive July fire that seriously damaged the assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard pier-side in San Diego, Cooper explained, he sent guidance to his commanders to do "a gut check" that their firefighting kill chain is "fully intact and you know how to exercise it down to the weakest link."

When something happens, Cooper said, every single member of a

ship's fire party "has to know, where do they go, what's the status of the equipment and what's their responsibility."