

Geurts: Navy Acquisition Pivoted Rapidly to Face the Pandemic



Machinist's Mate 3rd Class Gage Bounds, assigned to the engineering department aboard the aircraft carrier USS George Washington, grinds a door to prepare it for welding at Newport News Shipyard. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Robert Stamer

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy's top procurement official said he seeks to maintain the agility and efficiencies garnered by the Navy's acquisition and repair workforce and procedures long after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

The pandemic is a "really good test of resilience and how dynamic your organization is," said James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, who spoke on July 15 during a webinar, NatSec 2020: Coronavirus and Beyond, co-sponsored by the Navy League of the United States, the Association of the United States Army and Government Matters.

"What we've been working on for the last couple years of decentralizing, differentializing, digitizing the work and developing talent, in hindsight, is very important," Geurts said in response to questions from the Navy League's executive director, Mike Stevens. "It gave us a really sound foundation to pivot. I've been really impressed how fast we've been able to pivot. The Navy, at least in acquisition channels, has been accelerating through the crisis."

Geurts said the Navy is about 37% ahead in contract awards this year compared with the same period in 2019 and twice what was done by this time in 2018 – having awarded

an additional \$30 billion to \$35 billion in contracts in motion in the middle of the crisis. He said the effort created stability and freed up bandwidth to deal with things that pop up.

The pandemic is a “really good test of resilience and how dynamic your organization is.”

James F. Geurts, assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition

He said the pandemic has “re-taught us the value of resilience as the core attribute to an organization.”

The assistant secretary said the Navy had been planning how to surge in the event of a security crisis and, when the pandemic hit, the “art of planning for a crisis allowed us to pivot in a really strong way.”

He credited “empowering the workforce by massively decentralizing” as a key to success, “showing the workforce that, ‘Hey, we trust you, your decision-making, we’re going to empower you to make decisions.’”

Geurts said he wants to preserve the momentum developed by his workforce beyond the pandemic.

“Going back to where we were, as good as that was, is mission failure,” he said. “The fact that we were able to get 37% more efficiency in a crisis, I want to capture that efficiency ... so that we’ve got both performance improvement and more resilience as we go forward. ... We should get better at leading through disruption.”

Geurts said no shipyards or repair yards – public or private – have been shut down during the pandemic.

“To think that we had 100,000-plus shipyard workers continuously operating through the crisis is a pretty

remarkable state of leadership," he said. "We've had some delays, some disruption, some loss of productive work hours – which we're going to have to manage our way through, and we're working our way through that – but we never got to the point where we had to completely shut down."

The Navy recently mobilized 1,600 Reservists to shore up the shipyards during the pandemic. And Geurts noted that the Navy has not slowed down its deployments or overseas presence during the pandemic.