

Geurts: Ramping up for Wartime Demands Increased Shipyard Efficiency During COVID Siege



Norfolk Naval Shipyard workers prepare to install a 2,400-pound pilgrim nut on a propeller of the aircraft carrier USS George H. W. Bush (CVN 77). George H.W. Bush is currently in Norfolk Naval Shipyard for its Docking Planned Incremental Availability. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Indra Beaufort

ARLINGTON, Va. – Planning for the unplanned before a crisis like COVID-19 helped the U.S. Navy continue ship maintenance and acquisition at a rapid pace despite the coronavirus pandemic, the service's top procurement official says.

"It has been fairly remarkable that we have not slowed down, in fact our operations are at an all-time high. We've never shut down a shipyard – private or public – for a day during COVID," James "Hondo" Geurts, the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, told an Atlantic Council webinar on leadership Dec. 16.

Much of that success stemmed from the resiliency of individual Sailors, shipbuilders and Marines. Geurts said, adding that having a resilient organization was also key. "You can plan for the unplanned," he said, "you can get in sets and reps and start building while you have the time to absorb the inefficiency of that learning."

When he came to the Navy from U.S. Special Operations Command three years ago, "we didn't have a good wartime plan on the acquisition side. We were very focused on being hyper-efficient in a peacetime mode," Geurts said.

The Navy was able to pivot quickly when COVID-19 struck, Geurts said, not because the service had been rehearsing for a pandemic, but because it had ramped up teams, procedures and tools to be more efficient in wartime and adapted the improvements to the coronavirus challenge.

Geurts doesn't want to see things roll back once the coronavirus crisis is over. The pandemic showed new ways to handle old problems and make ships more self-reliant, he said adding: "Success for us is not going back to where we were a year ago. That's failure."

Instead, "our focus now is taking all the hard lessons we've learned from the terrible challenges of COVID, how we continued to operate through that," and apply them to the future he said, adding "I think we are a stronger force than we were nine months ago."