Industry Offers Alternatives to Achieve 38 Amphibious Warships, Recapitalize MSC Fleet

QUANTICO, Va. – Three of the Navy's biggest shipbuilders offered alternative plans they said would enable the Navy to get the 38 amphibious warships it needs and to recapitalize the Military Sealift Command's (MSC) ancient fleet faster and cheaper than what the Navy now plans.

Their proposals included moving up construction starts for the two newest classes of amphibious ships, to avoid creating a cold shipyard, to gain the efficiency of block buys, and to drop the concept of a single common hull design to replace all of MSC's widely different ship classes and instead adapt several of the amphibious and auxiliary ships currently being built.

Speaking Aug. 9 at the closing day of the Seabasing Operational Advisory Group's 2018 session, the officials from Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII), General Dynamics NASSCO and Austal also agreed that the U.S. shipbuilding industrial base is capable and ready to make the major increase in construction that would be necessary for the Navy to reach its goal of a 355-ship fleet.

They were joined in that view by Jeff LeLeux representing Swiftships, which builds a variety of patrol craft and has the contract for the Landing Craft Utility 1700, formerly called the ship-to-shore connector program.

Congress and others have expressed concern that the industry could not ramp up production enough to help the Navy reach its 355-ship goal.

Jon Padfield of HII said the “amphibious ship availability doesn’t seem to be getting any better and may be getting worse,” despite the Navy’s commitment to meeting the long-standing requirement for 38 amphibs.

To avoid making the situation even worse, the Navy should accelerate construction start on LHA-9, the fourth in the America-class amphibious assault ships, and the LPD-17 Flight II replacements for the aged Dock Landing Ships, Padfield said.

The first three America-class LHAs are operational, being built or set to start construction next year, he said. But there is a multi-year gap between construction of LHA-8 and the planned start for LHA-9, which would force HII to close the line. “In order to keep the production line hot and to get to 38, we need to accelerate LHA-9,” Padfield said.

He also said the Navy could save money by moving up production of LPD-31 and 32, the second and third of the Flight II ships, formerly called LX(R).

General Dynamic’s Tom Wetherald and Austal’s Larry Ryder criticized the Navy’s proposed Common Hull, Auxiliary Multi-purpose Platform (CHAMP) concept to replace MSC’s fleet, which includes maritime prepositioning (MPS), strategic sealift, crane, Marine Corps aviation maintenance, submarine tenders, command and hospital ships.

Wetherald said the CHAMP concept made sense for the large MPS ships, but suggested the expeditionary transport dock and expeditionary seabase ships that NASSCO builds would be better fits for other types. He joined Ryder in proposing variations of Austal’s expeditionary fast transports as more reasonable forms for other MSC ships.

They also proposed the LPD class as a better platform for some of those auxiliary ships than the CHAMP idea, to which Padfield nodded agreement.

Later in the day, two MSC officials highlighted the problems the command has with its outdated fleet, most of which are steam-powered, which are difficult to maintain and take larger crews to operate. But they indicated they had not been involved in creating the CHAMP concept.