Navy Fights Fire From the Air After Explosion Aboard USS Bonhomme Richard



A helicopter combats a fire aboard the USS Bonhomme Richard. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Christina Ross

ARLINGTON, Va. – In what may be a first, the U.S. Navy is using water carried by helicopters to combat a shipboard fire.

At least two MH-60S helicopters assigned to Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 3 have hoisted water in large buckets on their external hoists to assist the firefighters who are working to extinguish the blaze on the Wasp-class amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard at Naval Base San Diego. The helicopters began their runs at 10:30 p.m. Pacific time on July 12.

Firefighting efforts on the ship were ongoing as of 6:30 a.m. Pacific time on July 13, according to a release from commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet.

According to a photo taken about 7 p.m Pacific Time by Civilian Mariner Denis Bondarenko and posted by the blogger CMDR Salamander, the fire had spread to the island superstructure and the ship's mast had tilted.

At latest report, "57 personnel, both U.S. Navy Sailors and civilians, have been treated for minor injuries, including heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation," the release said. "Of those, five remain hospitalized for observation and are currently in stable condition."

The civilians treated included fighters from Federal Fire San Diego Division at Naval Base San Diego.

As reported on National Public Radio, Rear Adm. Philip Sobeck, commander of Expeditionary Strike Group 3, said during a local press conference on the morning of July 13 that the ship had no ammunition on board but that he was concerned about the large amount of fuel on the ship.

“The superstructure and the upper decks continue to burn and have sustained damage,” Sobeck said. “The forward mast has collapsed, and the ship is listing. However, dewatering is in process and we’re keeping a good balance.”



Sailors aboard the Bonhomme Richard converse about a fire aboard the ship at Naval Station San Diego on July 12. Local, base and shipboard firefighters responded. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Jason Kofonow

“Currently there are two firefighting teams fighting the fire aboard the ship,” Federal Fire San Diego Division Chief Rob Bondurant said in a Navy release. “Federal Fire is rotating their crews aboard the ship with U.S. Navy firefighting crews from the waterfront to fight the fire in order to find the seat of the fire and extinguish it. Also, Navy Region Southwest tugs are continuously combatting the fire from the bay.”

The fire broke out at about 8:30 a.m. Pacific time on July 12 while the Bonhomme Richard was pierside at Naval Base San Diego for a maintenance availability. CNN and other media outlets were reporting that the blaze resulted from an explosion, but the Navy has not confirmed that information. About 160 Sailors of the crew of approximately 1,000 were on board at the time, according to the Navy.

Two destroyers berthed nearby, the USS Fitzgerald and the USS Russell, were moved to other piers after the fire broke out. All Navy ships in port were directed to provide fire parties to assist the firefighting efforts aboard the Bonhomme Richard.

> *“We are grateful for the quick and immediate response of local, base, and shipboard firefighters aboard USS Bonhomme Richard. Our thoughts and prayers are with our BHR Sailors, their families, and our emergency responders who continue to fight the fire. Godspeed.”*
>
> *Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday*

“Today, we suffered a terrible tragedy aboard USS Bonhomme Richard when a fire broke out aboard the ship while in port San Diego,” Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said in a release.

“At this point, 17 Sailors and four civilians are being treated for non-life-threatening injuries at a local hospital. The remainder of the crew is accounted for. We are grateful for the quick and immediate response of local, base, and shipboard firefighters aboard USS Bonhomme Richard. Our thoughts and prayers are with our BHR Sailors, their families, and our emergency responders who continue to fight the fire. Godspeed.”

Navy helicopters based at Naval Air Station North Island, California, have been used before to combat wildfires in Southern California.

Port of San Diego Harbor Police Department boats combat the fire on board the USS Bonhomme Richard at Naval Base San Diego on July 12. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Christina Ross