Navy, Marines Say Readiness Improving in Pacific After Fatal Air, Sea Crashes

WASHINGTON –
Stating that command readiness is their top priority, senior U.S. Navy and Marine Corps leaders told Congress they are improving manning, training and maintenance procedures in the wake of three fatal sea and air accidents.

In a joint hearing on Feb. 5, the House Armed Services subcommittees on seapower and readiness queried commanders about progress in eliminating readiness issues in the 7th Fleet area of operations that were largely blamed for a spate of mishaps that lead to the deaths of 17 Sailors in 2017 and six Marines in 2018. Subsequent accident investigations by the Navy and Marine Corps uncovered a dangerous gap between increased operational tempo in the Asia Pacific region and inadequate training, maintenance and manpower practices.

"It is imperative that the Navy and Marine Corps get this right and balance these high operational desires with requisite systems and needs," Seapower Subcommittee Chairman Joe Courtney (D-Conn.) said at the hearing's start.

“There is one unified standard for ensuring readiness. Our manning, training and equipping objectives are unambiguous. We only deploy ships that have the required manning, are fully certified and have the necessary material readiness in place,” Vice Adm. Richard A. Brown, commander of Naval Surface Forces and the U.S. Pacific Fleet, told lawmakers.

There were several serious – in two cases, fatal – mishaps involving Navy ships in 2017. In June 2017, the destroyer USS Fitzgerald collided with a Philippine-flagged containership near Japan, severely damaging the ship and killing seven crewmen. In August 2017, another destroyer, the USS McCain, collided with a civilian oil and chemical tanker near the Strait of Malacca, killing 10 more Sailors.

Investigators found both accidents were avoidable. The commander of 7th Fleet was relieved as were several officers and senior enlisted on the two ships. The Pacific Fleet commander took early retirement.

The hearing came two days after the USS Fitzgerald returned to sea for testing of onboard systems following nearly two years of repairs and modernization. An audit report released Feb. 4 by the Defense Department’s Inspector General found training deficiencies in as many as nine of 12 Arleigh-Burke class destroyers, to which

both the Fitzgerald and McCain belong, reviewed by the IG office. The report recommended that U.S. Fleet Forces Command direct destroyers with outstanding training requirements to complete them immediately or as soon as the mission allows.

Marine Corps manning and training practices also came under scrutiny in December 2018 after a Marine F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter collided with a KC-130J aerial refueling tanker during a training exercise 50 miles off the coast of Japan. Six Marines died in that incident. Both aircraft were based at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

Investigators determined the fighter pilot's inexperience in conducting nighttime aerial refueling contributed to the collision, but also cited inadequate oversight of squadron training and operations and an "unprofessional command climate." Four Marine officers and the Super Hornet squadron commander at Iwakuni were relieved.

"My focus continues to be readiness for combat," Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Rudder, deputy commandant for aviation, told the House panel. "We are still modernizing and, most importantly, we are focusing on the maintainer, those Marines and Sailors who work on our aircraft."

The probe isn’t over, he said, noting that Marine leadership appointed “a consolidated disposition authority to further review the findings of the command investigation of this mishap.” The CDA is the independent senior commander who will review the investigation and could order further inquiry and, or, administrative or disciplinary actions.