

Navy's Frigate Program Pushing Hard for 2026 Delivery of USS Constellation



Captain Kevin Smith responds to workforce pipeline question from Ann Tropea, Editor-in-Chief at Seapower. Photo Credit: Dan Goodrich

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. –The Navy is pressing full bore to ensure that its new guided-missile frigate joins the fleet on time, the ship's program manager said.

"We're pushing hard with our industry partners to deliver that ship in 2026," said Captain Kevin Smith, program manager, Constellation Class Frigate, speaking to an audience at the Navy League's Sea-Air-Space Expo in National Harbor. "A lot of hard work has gone into the design, the production readiness, and now we're actually building it up in Marinette, Wisconsin."

A frigate, in modern terminology, is "primarily an escort for high value units that don't have their own self-defense," Smith said. "It's also to help offset some of the work of the

large surface combatants like the cruisers and destroyers. It is a primary anti-submarine warfare platform, just like the FFG 7 [the Perry class frigates which have been decommissioned].”

“I am very happy with the performance we’re seeing thus far,” Smith said. “Obviously, we did change to a different variable to sonar a few years ago. ... The performance is astounding. ... Its integration with the [SQQ]-89 [antisubmarine warfare system] is going to be huge for the United States Navy and will be welcomed by the fleet.”

Smith also said the Aegis Baseline 10 combat system and the Enterprise Air Search Radar will give the new ship “a lot of capability.”

Fincantieri Partnership

The future USS Constellation (FFG 62) is one of three frigates under contract to Fincantieri’s Marinette Marine shipyard, the others being FFGs 63 and 64, under a 10-ship contract, including options. Smith said construction of FFG 62 will start soon and he expects the option for FFG 64 to be awarded this year as part of a four-ship buy.

The Navy worked with Fincantieri to design an advanced construction pilot, “to really exercise all of the capital improvements, all of their workflow processes, all of their instructions, all the way through the value stream ... from materials planning and getting the work orders to the workforce, making sure all those are understood.”

The frigate’s Aegis Combat System and SPY-6 Enterprise Air Search Radar are being integrated at the Lockheed Martin test lab in Moorestown, New Jersey, and at Wallops Island, Virginia. The propulsion plant and machinery control systems will be tested at a land-based test site in Philadelphia.

Need for Skilled Workforce

Smith said the Navy is working closely with Marinette Marine in strengthening the company's supply chain and develop and retain its skilled work force "to make sure we have a good strong industrial base workforce to build these frigates for the next decade and decades to come. We need that as part of our industrial base risk reduction."

The program manager also discussed the challenges of recruiting a skilled work force, in response to a question from Seapower.

"How do you build a community that people want to live and grow and raise families and be shipbuilders?" he asked rhetorically. "We have people on our staff that have experience in that. The other part is working with Marinette on how we can really build the workforce. There's training, there's investments on how they can get people to come work and stay and then be retained."

"Some shipbuilding people come out of high school ... and they stay there a year, maybe two," Smith said. "But if they don't make it past two years, they're not going to stay. So how do we get people to stay for longer than a year or two? And how do we how do we really get them excited about shipbuilding?"

"You may read about some of the things Colombia [the Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarine program] is doing," continued Smith. "We're looking at doing the same exact thing ... to think about Wisconsin ... There's other jobs out there that maybe are better ... but we're working on a lot of those things with the company and kind of coaching them with some of this funding we got from Congress. The big message here is I would predict that this company is going to be around for a long time and we need to get into the shipbuilding business long term as far as a prime and then we'll be able to count on them for decades."