New Surface Warfare Chief: Navy Still Determining LSC, Unmanned Solutions



Rear Adm. Gene Black, then commander of Carrier Strike Group 8, observes flight operations aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman last year. Black is the Navy's new surface warfare director. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Adelola Tinubu

The U.S. Navy's new surface warfare director said the sea service is still working on what it wants in a proposed large surface combatant and also what to do with the large unmanned surface vessels that the Navy plans to buy – or even if they would be fully unmanned.

For the large surface combatant (LSC), "it's a question of how much speed do you need? How much can you afford? How much are you willing to pay for it," Rear Adm. Gene Black said July 17.

"The things I know, I need a big sensor. I need big computing power, and I want a big [weapons] magazine. Beyond that, I don't know. It's going to be a fantastically capable ship. … It's going to be an expensive ship. We want to make sure we're coming in with the capability we need."

During a Surface Navy Association lunch, Black spoke at length about his previous job as commander of the Harry S. Truman carrier strike group, which made an historic voyage north of the

Arctic Circle to support the large NATO exercise Operation Trident Juncture, which included driving the task force into a Norwegian fjord.

Asked what he thought about the five large unmanned surface vehicles the Navy asked for in the fiscal 2020 defense budget, Black said: “If I had had an USV at my disposal, I would have pushed it out ahead of me, certainly when I was in the high north. It would give me sensors, eyes and connectivity way out in front of the strike group, and awareness of what was going on, so I can decide if I want to go in another direction or do something completely different.”

“We’re just now exploring that space,” he said, noting the recent establishment of a surface development squadron in California that will explore possible use of unmanned surface vessels.

“Candidly, we’re going to get some of those things, going to buy them,” and Black predicted “the young guys and gals in this room” would find ways to employ them that older officers like himself could not contemplate.

“Certainly not in the next couple years are we going to turn an unmanned vehicle loose from the West Coast and send it on a mission. There’s a lot of learning that has to go on. And we have to come to terms if they’ll be manned, unmanned or optionally manned. We’re working our way through all that, and we don’t have the answers to all that.”

Asked about the new frigate program, for which a contract is expected to be awarded soon, Black said only that “the program is going great.”

Black talked at length about the Truman deployment, which

was notable not only for operating in horrendous weather conditions north of
the Arctic Circle but also for its split deployment – in which it operated in
the Mediterranean Sea, returned to Norfolk, and then deployed again.

“The capabilities we’re bringing to sea these days [are] spectacular.
I can’t say much about it other than the investments we’ve made, the
investments we put into surface warfare strike” have produced a “return on
investments, probably 10 times over.”