

Q&A: Rear Adm. Mark H. Buzby, Maritime Administrator



Rear Adm. Buzby, right, on the California State University Maritime Academy's Golden Bear Training Ship. Department of Transportation

Rear Adm. Mark H. Buzby was appointed by President Donald Trump and sworn in as Maritime Administrator on Aug. 8, 2017. Prior to his appointment, Buzby served as president of the National Defense Transportation Association, a position he has held since retiring from the U.S. Navy in 2013 with over 34 years of service.

A 1979 graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Buzby earned his Bachelor of Science in nautical science and U.S. Coast Guard 3rd Mate License. He was commissioned in the U.S. Navy in June 1979, is a graduate of the Joint Forces Staff College and holds master's degrees from the U.S. Naval War College and Salve Regina University in strategic studies and international relations, respectively.

Buzby commanded destroyer USS Carney (DDG 64), Destroyer Squadron 31, Surface Warfare Officers School Command and Joint Task Force Guantanamo Bay. As a junior officer, Buzby served in USS Connable (FF1056), USS Aries (PHM 5), USS Yorktown (CG 48), USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53) and USS Shiloh (CG 67), primarily in operations and combat systems billets. In 1985, he was the Atlantic Fleet Junior Officer Shiphandler of the Year.

Ashore, he served on staffs of U.S. 6th Fleet, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, the Navy staff and the Joint Staff. Buzby served as the commander of the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command from October 2009 to March 2013.

Buzby discussed the concerns of the Maritime Administration

(MARAD) on Sept. 28 with Senior Editor Richard R. Burgess. Excerpts follow. Check out the digital edition of the November issue of Seapower magazine [here](#).

What concerns do you have about the nation's sealift capabilities? Could the sealift force handle the cargo demand for a major conflict overseas?

BUZBY: My concerns are in the quantity of ships that we have, the reliability of the ships that we have and resilience of the force: in other words, the ability either repair it or to replace it if we need to due to combat loss. Theoretically, right now, we have the square footage required, about 19.2 or so million square feet, to meet the nation's sealift requirements – the most stressing requirements – to include the commercial merchant marine plus the government-owned sealift forces. Theoretically, we've got enough but that's before the first loss, that's before any breakdowns – a lot of qualifiers there. But I don't like living right on the edge. We need more depth on our bench than we have right now.

What can be done to strengthen the nation's sealift force?

BUZBY: The obvious answer is it needs to be enlarged across the board both on the commercial side and the government side. The commercial side gets driven by basically peacetime economics. Is there sufficient cargo for our commercial U.S.-flag merchant marine to carry? The more cargo that is available to carry equates to more ships. That's a good thing that adds into our sealift capacity. On the government side, it's a matter of ensuring we recapitalize our sealift forces in a timely manner. One would argue that we are not timely right now. The force that we have is aged and its reliability is becoming more questionable every year. Getting on with recapitalizing our government sealift ships, which we're working on, figuring out how to incentivize or to make more cargo available for the commercial side, making that playing field for our commercial entities more level in competition

with the foreign flag shipping are all parts of the solution.

What concerns do you have about the Ready Reserve Force in particular?

BUZBY: There are 61 government ships in the sealift force, 15 that the Military Sealift Command operates and the 46 that MARAD operates in the RRF. They're funded to be maintained at 85% readiness level and, unfortunately, we're not making that level and haven't for some time. That gets borne out in the turbo-activation tests that we do every year. We're seeing casualties coming up and just in the day-to-day maintenance of the ships. We're seeing it becoming increasingly difficult to keep the ships ready to go when the bell rings in the five-day readiness status. When you're looking at a 47-year-old ship, or older, with obsolescent equipment or the availability of mariners who could operate the equipment – I'm talking steam engineers in particular – or just the physical condition of the ship itself, it is just becoming more and more of a challenge and more expensive to maintain that fleet.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the U.S. Merchant Marine force?

BUZBY: It has definitely stressed it, like it has stressed all other modes of transportation. It has stressed the maritime transportation system significantly, but I would be quick to point out that [the force] has not faltered. Even though there have been greatly reduced cargoes and challenges in that respect, getting people tested and getting people certified to fill shipboard billets, the Merchant Marine has not faltered. We've continued to carry the goods for the nation and without the benefit of any grants or loans. Many of the other modes [of transportation] were the beneficiaries of lots of CARES Act funding to keep them viable and moving. Maritime hasn't got any of that.

Meanwhile, we've managed to keep the ships sailing and figured

out how to keep the crews healthy and maintain a healthy shipboard environment. We've put the mitigations in place to keep the ships healthy and operational. And that continues today. I'm really proud of this industry and how all the players – shipping companies, unions, the government – all came together to make that happen. It's a real positive story, a positive chapter in our merchant marine's history.

What role does MARAD have in physical and cybersecurity of the U.S.-flag merchant fleet?

BUZBY: We kind of stepped in and helped out with physical security during the period a few years ago when piracy was a serious threat. That has been pretty much mitigated. Now, it really, truly is the cybersecurity threat. Just literally yesterday, CMA CGM [a worldwide shipping group] of which APL – one of our Maritime Security Program carriers – is a part, had a major ransomware cyberattack against them. Just before this interview, I was talking with the president of APL, discussing the mitigations they're having to put in place to remain operational. They are fighting through, and I am afraid that this is going to become a more common occurrence in the future, whether done by criminal actors or as part of a national-level cyberattack by a potential adversary.

Later this week, I'll be talking to an industry group being sponsored by NMIO, the National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office, talking about what we need to do and how to strengthen the posture of our operating forces out there because a lot of what goes on still could be mitigated to a large extent just by having up-to-date patched programs for the systems that are on the ship, plus just good hygiene practices by the operators and by the crews. Systems often have to be used by many users and crews cycle on and off and lots of times get a little lax on passwords and other security measures. We're doing our best to try and get that word out and help people understand the need to have good cyber defenses just like they have good strong physical security on

their ships.

What role does MARAD have in supporting the U.S. port facilities in modernizing and in increasing their capacity?

BUZBY: We are very much involved, especially since of all those commercial ports that are spread around our country, 16 of which are designated as strategic ports, which we would use to load military equipment in any kind of a deployment and follow-on sustainment of those forces. We pay attention to all the ports but those 16 in particular to ensure that they have all of the intermodal connections necessary to handle modern rail connections, modern road connections, marine highway connections to not only support our military movements, but also, to remain viable commercially. Our ports are this country's economic gateways. Our economy flows through our seaports and, to a lesser extent, our airports, but certainly the vast majority of goods that come and go out of this country come through our ports. They are absolutely vital.

We've begun to make some strong investments in our ports. We have awarded BUILD grants and INFRA-grants that have benefitted ports over the years. In 2019 and 2020 we have dedicated port infrastructure development grants – \$297 million and \$225 million, respectively – that are all focused directly on port improvement and port development.

What is the status of the National Security Multi-Mission Vessel (NSMV)? Which maritime academy will receive the first one?

BUZBY: The builder has been chosen: Philly Shipyard in Philadelphia. We are well down the road in getting the final design completed. TOTE Services, our vessel construction manager, is doing a tremendous job of managing the build of the class – the "State Class." We expect the first ship to begin fabrication in December. When complete in early 2023, it will go to the State University of New York Maritime College

in Fort Schuyler. The second ship, about eight months behind the first, will be going up to Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

Will one NMSV be assigned to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy?

BUZBY: No. At Kings Point, we train our midshipmen by sending them to sea in the active Merchant Marine. Rather than using a school ship for their training, USMMA's training model sends Cadets to sea for four to eight months on all types of vessels in our regular commercial merchant vessel fleet, as well as Military Sealift Command and U.S. Navy vessels. That's not to say that some Kings Pointers might end up on a training ship, if they have to make up some days or something like that, but primarily the school ships are going to the state maritime academies. We do maintain a 176-foot training vessel at the Academy, the T/V Kings Pointer, which is used for ship handling and navigation training.



Adm. Buzby visits the SS Flickertail State, a crane ship in ready reserve for the U.S. Navy, stationed at Newport News, Virginia. Department of Transportation

What is your assessment of the preparedness of the graduates of your alma mater, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, to meet the challenges of the future?

BUZBY: I have absolutely tremendous faith in the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy's ability to prepare world-class mariners. I could not compete with the quality of midshipmen that are there these days who are preparing for their maritime careers. They are just so smart in grasping and understanding technology and anxious to get out there and become a part of the industry.

Amidst the COVID crisis, the academy has done a tremendous job in remaining operational and remaining safe. They were able to graduate the class of 2020 in June COVID-free and to bring on board in July the new class of 2024 – about 280 young men and women – get them through indoctrination COVID-free, and then

at the end of July brought back all the rest of the regiment of midshipmen. They're up to almost 800 people on board all maintaining a COVID-free environment, conducting their classes and doing their sea training. There is a group of about 250 that are out at sea right now getting the Sea Year training. As I mentioned before, they are participating with the ships to make sure the ships stay clean and keep those mitigation efforts in place. They're getting a real first-hand look at how our Merchant Marine functions even in a COVID crisis. Kings Point is doing a tremendous job. I'm very, very pleased and impressed with the job that the superintendent, Rear Adm. Jack Buono and his staff are doing up there.

What do you say to critics of the Jones Act who consider it a protectionism that is detrimental to the national economy?

BUZBY: I say it is protection for our country. The national security implications of what would happen if we were to strike the Jones Act are absolutely profound in the negative. I've been asked on several occasions before Congress what would happen if the Jones Act went away and I answer directly back with, we would not be able to deploy our nation's armed forces by sea if we were to do that, not because of the ships but because of the pool of trained mariners who crew those ships. The domestic Jones Act fleet employs the largest number of unlimited tonnage/unlimited horsepower mariners of all of our ships that sail under the U.S. flag.

You get rid of the Jones Act and its requirement for U.S. mariners in U.S. ships, those mariners won't have sailing jobs anymore and will leave the industry. Those U.S. mariners on vessels trading in the United States are the same people that I absolutely rely upon along with others from the rest of the Merchant Marine to crew up our Ready Reserve Force – all of our sealift ships in time of crisis.

I therefore lose my ability to man those sealift ships and have them available to take our nation to war if necessary.

Not to mention the impact on shipbuilding and ship repair in this country – the 124 or so shipyards that we still have in this country – they would go away with the exception of just the very few yards that would be building military vessels because that requirement to build in the United States and repair in the United States would go away as well. So, it would be, perhaps the worst thing we could do from a national security point of view.