

RMC Admiral: Not Enough Ship Repair Capacity for Peacetime, Let Alone Wartime



The USS Bonhomme Richard sits pierside at Naval Base San Diego on July 16 after four days of fire that devastated the amphibious assault ship. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communications Specialist 3rd Class Jason Waite

ARLINGTON, Va. – The admiral in charge of the U.S. Navy's regional maintenance centers said the Navy, as currently resourced, is not able to keep up with the ship repair demands of the current fleet and would have greater challenges in keeping up in wartime.

"We don't have enough capacity for peacetime," said Rear Adm. Eric Ver Hage, commander, regional maintenance centers, and director of surface ship maintenance and modernization for Naval Sea Systems Command, speaking at an Aug. 25 webinar conducted by the Navy League of the United States and sponsored by L3Harris Corp. and Tri-Tec.

"We have so much to be proud of, but we're not as effective or efficient," Ver Hage said. "We can't get ships delivered on time with the predictability we need today."

"Think about how long it took [the Arleigh Burke-class destroyers] Fitzgerald and McCain to get back in operation," he said, referring to their respective collisions at sea in 2017. "We'll see what we do with the [Wasp-class amphibious assault ship] Bonhomme Richard [which was devastated by fire in July], but that would be a massive effort to repair her, if that's the decision. I'm talking years."

The admiral said that developing the workforce needed to repair ships in both the public and private shipyards is

critical to the repair industrial base.

He also stressed more discipline is needed in maintenance planning. He said that 50% to 55% of every ship repair availability should be planned in advance and that port loading projection needs to be scrutinized constantly to optimize the flow of ships in and out of maintenance. A positive development is that the fleets are increasingly cognizant of the importance of level-loading the maintenance ports for the ship availabilities.

The admiral said that the increased use of distant support in the COVID-19 era has improved the resilience of the ship-repair efforts.

Ver Hage said that public-private investment is needed to have the industrial base needed to repair ships on time.

He said his command is trying to buy materials and components more deliberately and proactively.

The admiral said he is trying to simplify and reduce the diversity of systems, for example, steering and navigation systems, so as to reduce the parts support and repair expertise needed. He also noted that software is increasingly more central to the testing of a component.

Also speaking in the webinar were Rear Adm. Tom J. Anderson, program executive officer-ships, and John Rhatigan, chairman of the Maritime Machinists Association. Bryan Clark, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, served as moderator.