

Services Tackling New Type of Enlistee



Three senior enlisted leaders from the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard spoke during a panel discussion on May 7 at Sea-Air-Space 2019. Charles Fazio

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The new generation of Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen who are entering the force and in the early stages of their careers is, well, different. Such is the consensus among the three senior enlisted leaders who spoke at Sea-Air-Space 2019 on May 7.

On one hand, these young people come into military service with an unprecedented technological savvy. On the other, they have a greater need to know why they are given the tasks they must complete. And they must be placed in the right jobs – with the understanding that they should know how to perform other tasks necessary to support the warfighting mission.

“From my perspective, as I’m looking at the Sailor standing in front of me, is there are too many choices and options in time management,” said Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Russell Smith.

Young Sailors understandably are attracted to service by incentives like tuition assistance and the ability to take college courses while deployed on ships. Still, Smith said, those Sailors must know how to do their jobs.

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"What you're expected to do under high stress in the middle of the night, with things exploding around you or the ship sinking," is critical, Smith said. So too is the "ability to continue the fight."

Leaders, Smith said, need to convince their younger charges that goals like the achievement of associate degrees are worthwhile.

"Stay with us. We'll help you get there – but focus on your job," Smith said.

Smith said he spent too much time in the accession pipeline to believe that the next generation of Navy leaders is not up to the task.

"By any measure, we have more capable Sailors today than any time in our nation's history," Smith said, mentioning that performance and retention went up due to recent efforts to bolster physical standards and boot camp requirements.

Sgt. Maj. Robin Fortner of the Quantico, Virginia-based Marine Corps Systems Command, discussed the need to show new recruits what the service can offer them.

"We have to make

sure we have the right incentives for those with the right skills to stay," said Fortner, who was standing in on the panel for Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Ronald Green.

Master Chief of the Coast Guard Jason Vanderhaden emphasized the need to allow the service's young men and women to specialize in fields that are compatible with individual skill sets.

"They want to get really good at their jobs," Vanderhaden said.

But like his fellow panelists, Vanderhaden stressed that these Coastguardsmen also must be able to perform missions like damage control, law enforcement or helicopter landings that may be outside of their ratings. As the smallest armed service, the Coast Guard needs everyone possible to fulfill mission requirements, he said. Moreover, as the service gains from technological advances associated with the largest recapitalization in service history, young members' skill sets must grow accordingly to keep pace.