

Ship XO Fleet-Up to CO Concept Resulting in Better Ships, Navy Surface Chief Says

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy's ship command policy of having a ship's executive officers fleet up to become the ship's commanding officer is proving to be successful and is making better COs for the fleet.

"I am a full proponent of XO-CO fleet-up," Vice Adm. Rich Brown, commander of Naval Surface Forces, said in a Jan. 6 media teleconference, information from which was embargoed until Jan. 13.

"Just like anything else it has its pros and cons, just like the traditional career path of a separate XO to a separate CO had its pros and cons," Brown said. "What I know now is something we predicted back then – I think it's really proven out. If you talk to the commodores and the strike group commanders, especially during the transition, the ships that were on their second or third iteration of XO fleet-up to CO were better ships.

"If you talk to commanding officers today, they will tell you, 'I can't imagine taking command of my destroyer having not been the XO first.' " He said. "They know their ship, they know their material readiness, they know their crew, they know their wardroom, on Day One of being in command. And on Day One they're not only in command of the ship but they're commanding the ship."

Brown said that bad CO/XO combinations can occur and "we're not opposed to breaking that chain. When an XO comes into a ship with a great command climate and the ship is really

firing on all cylinders, that XO not only adds to that command climate but they're kind of inculcated into that command climate. But for some reason the command has a bad command climate, the XO can get inculcated into that bad command climate, so we're actively breaking that. We've done that a couple of times on both coasts where we split up the team or put a new team in there. But it's only been a handful of times because – quite honestly – under fleet-up the ships are really performing.”

Brown said that, with all of the difficulties over the last decade of flat budgets and high operational tempo, one would expect the surface community to have witnessed a critical dip from material standpoint and “we really didn't. If you look at our INSURV [Bureau of Inspection and Survey] scores over the last 10 years, they remain steady or they've improved.”

“If you look at our PMS [Preventative Maintenance System] scores, our training scores, I attribute XO-CO fleet-up as one of the contributing factors,” he said, noting that when the XO checks on board and notes an upcoming INSURV in 20 months, for example, he or she realizes that he or she will be the CO in 20 months and will pay better attention to the material readiness of the ship.

“A lot of goodness,” Brown noted of the resulting attention.

The admiral said the policy came out of the 2018 All-Up Review as something to look at, but the decision was made in June 2019 to stay the course with some minor tweaks.

Brown said he was the architect of the policy when he was assigned to the Bureau of Personnel in 2005.

“The whole [ship] XO-CO fleet-up program started on a buck slip on my desk,” he said.

The naval aviation community has used the XO-CO fleet-up concept for decades.