Navy Admirals: SWO Proficiency Standards Toughened With New Checkpoints

WASHINGTON – The Navy's efforts to improve training and the readiness of its surface warfare officers (SWOs) now include longer initial sea duty tours and a series of checkpoints that must be passed before an officer can command a ship.

The new standards result from the Navy's reassessment of surface warfare training in the wake of the fatal collisions of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyers USS Fitzgerald and USS John McCain in mid-2017.

Testifying Feb. 26 before a joint hearing of the Readiness and the Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittees of the House Armed Services Committee on Capitol Hill, Adm. Christopher W. Grady, commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command and U.S. Naval Forces Northern Command, and Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, also told Congress that ships will not deploy without having met the training standards.

Grady said the Navy is working to develop a culture where "we view standards as the absolute minimum."

"If ships of the Pacific Fleet aren't ready, they don't get underway," Aquilino said. Noting that manning challenges are being relieved by an additional 6,200 sailors earmarked fleetwide for ships, he said, "No [ship] deploys without the full complement of people that they will have."

Aquilino, who is briefed on the status of his ships three times per week and talks to his commanders weekly, said that since he took command of the Pacific Fleet, he has terminated

the deployments of two ships that were not ready. He also said he has granted no waivers.

“We adhere to those [standards] rigorously,” he said.

Grady said that commanding officers are required to submit letters to their type commander 90 days after assuming command on the readiness of their ships.

He said SWO training has lengthened, from 14 weeks to 23 weeks, with much more time in simulators. A few years ago, SWO school was only four weeks long and then was shut down altogether for a few years while officers learned via compact discs (“SWOs in a Box”).

“The total duration at sea for a young division officer is now going to be four years,” he said.

“We have recognized that it is all about the appropriate experience,” Grady said.

Ten milestone checkpoints in a career have been established to track the progress of a SWO from ensign to captain toward command of a ship. Three of these checkpoints are go/no-go decision points.

“If you fail one of those three checkpoints, we’re not going to let you command a ship,” Grady said.

“This is the culture of excellence that we’re [inculcating] and, to this point, 5 percent of those folks have been asked to leave the command pipeline [because] they were not ready.”

Aquilino said he was impressed with the effectiveness of the simulators for the littoral combat ships.

“That model is going to be transitioned into the destroyer [force] as well,” he said. “The way we train is getting better. That will allow us to more quickly get those up to speed who haven’t had it.”

The fleets also are focusing on the training of enlisted operations specialists and quartermasters – the two ratings most involved in the navigation of a ship.

Grady also said “the complexity of a modern warship” demands that the Navy maintain its generalist approach that SWOs be both operations and engineering officers, unlike the Royal Navy, which splits SWOs into separate operations and engineering tracks.

Grady cited the example of the Ticonderoga-class cruiser USS Princeton that struck a mine during the Persian Gulf War.

“The two officers that were on watch and responded to that were the weapons officer and the engineering officer, both of whom so well understood the complexity of the integration of the combat systems and the engineering plant [and] how to maneuver the ship that they were able to keep fighting for 72 hours by pointing the deckhouse up-threat into Iraq,” he said. “That’s why you need officers who are both engineers and topside ship drivers.”