

From: Gilday, Michael M ADM USN CNO (USA) [email address redacted]
Date: Wednesday, Jul 22, 2020, 11:27
Subject: BONHOMME RICHARD - Observations

Admirals and Master Chiefs,

After walking the decks of BONHOMME RICHARD last Friday and listening to our Sailors who fought the fire, I wanted to pass along my observations and reflections.

As you are aware, the damage is extensive; there is fire and water damage, to varying degrees, on 11 of 14 decks. With the flight deck as a reference, I walked sections of the ship 5 levels below and had the opportunity to examine the superstructure. The island is nearly gutted, as are sections of some of the decks below; some perhaps, nearly encompassing the 844 ft length and 106 ft beam of the ship (NAVSEA's detailed assessment is ongoing). Sections of the flight deck are warped/bulging. The fire started in the lower vehicle storage area -- 6 decks below the flight deck and near the middle of the ship -- spreading aft, forward, and up.

While response from the crew and federal firefighters was rapid, preliminary reports indicate there were two main factors that contributed to the intensity, scope, and speed of the fire. First was wind that fueled the fire as the vehicle storage area leads to the well deck, which opens to the air at the stern gate. The second were the explosions, one in particular, reportedly heard about 13 miles away. The explosions, some were intense, and the uncertainty of their location and timing, led to a situation, that might have been under control late Sunday night, but expanded into a mass conflagration ... spreading quickly up elevator shafts, engine exhaust stacks, and through berthing and other compartments where combustible material was present. There were likely other contributing factors, but I won't speculate on that.

I met with federal firefighters, some with 25 years experience, as well as industry experts who fight ship/maritime fires for a living. They described conditions they have never seen before (1200 degree heat; zero visibility; multiple explosions) ... providing unsolicited admiration for our Sailors. Four descriptors were common: resiliency, fearlessness, confidence, and competency.

Then, I met with our Sailors ... and I listened. How fortunate we are to serve with Sailors like them. Meeting with all of them was humbling, uplifting ... and reassuring. The group I met with was preparing to head back into the ship again; some for their 8th time on a fire team. They had experienced the intense, inferno-like heat, the dark smoke that obscured view of teammates by their side, and the explosions -- the latter had to be like a mine field ... unknown when and where, and how severe, those blasts might be. Some had been knocked down by these blasts -- some, more than once -- but they got up, re-focused, and re-attacked.

As you would expect, they spoke calmly and unflinchingly about heading back in, this time to compartments we had not yet accessed to check for hot spots and to guard against re-flash. Tired, but focused. Smiling, yet dead serious about what they had

experienced and what might lie ahead. Confident in their individual training that began at boot camp as well as their collective training at sea and with their inport duty sections. There were Sailors from across the San Diego waterfront who responded to this fire – hundreds of them; many without receiving direction to do so. Every single fire team was led by BONHOMME RICHARD Sailors – no question, this was THEIR ship and they would walk point on every firefighting mission. Most had to be ordered ... and re-ordered ... to go home at some point and get some rest. I also met with the air crews of HSC-3; the aerial bucket brigade who dropped nearly 700K gallons of water on the blaze, day and night, from their helos. Their efforts were critical in helping get the fire under control; and they used their IR capability to locate hot spots and vector fire teams to the source. Awe inspiring teamwork.

In the days since, I thought about Warrior Toughness and the way we transformed the warrior mindset at boot camp as a result of what we learned from the 2017 FITZGERALD and MCCAIN collisions. NTC Great Lakes is the Navy's crucible of leadership training for our new Sailors. It really focuses on the two pillars that define our Navy culture – professional competency and character – rooted in honor, courage, and commitment and exhibited by traits like initiative, integrity, accountability, and resiliency (mind, body, and spirit). Most of the Sailors fighting the fire on BONHOMME RICHARD joined the Navy within the past few years. For me, what I saw in San Diego is inextricably linked to those formative weeks of training at Great Lakes. As described by those federal firefighters, the competency, fearlessness, resiliency, and confidence displayed by those Sailors most definitely exhibits our Navy culture. It was tested on BONHOMME RICHARD. My gut tells me our Sailors met that challenge head-on.

Further, as I review daily operational reports from our fleet commanders, it is not lost on me the enormity of our Navy's presence across the globe right now ... from dual carrier strike group operations in WestPac ... to exercises in the Bay of Bengal with our Indian partners and the Black Sea with our Ukrainian and NATO shipmates. Recently, we conducted a no-notice surge of our Pacific submarine force. Robust multi-ship maritime security operations in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al Mandeb. A mine countermeasures exercise ongoing in the Arabian Gulf. A near constant presence of destroyers in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean with additional operations high north in the Norwegian Sea. Our destroyers and littoral combat ships in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, along with our Coast Guard shipmates, are sustaining a Presidential directed counter-narcotics surge. We have expeditionary medical teams deployed to COVID hot spots in the southwestern U.S. Our SSBNs remain on their continuous silent patrols. Our EP-3s and P8s are flying around the globe as I type. All this ... All. Of. This. – amidst a global pandemic. Our Commanders and Captains at sea are leading these operations – and along with our Chiefs and Sailors – they are getting after it.

We will thoroughly look into and learn from the fire on BONHOMME RICHARD. We will be committed to doing that together. I have no doubt about that. As we look hard into recent events – and revisit and assess what we've learned from previous incidents, I am relying on you to reinforce those aspects of our culture demonstrated on BONHOMME

RICHARD and across the Navy right now. Focus on the positive attributes – that will overcome the negatives we want to avoid. Continue to tackle concerns within your span of control while encouraging your subordinates to do the same. Push feedback up echelon; ask for more guidance if you need it. You all know these are the underpinnings of effective leadership and align closely with the Culture of Excellence we are building upon.

Mission readiness does not get a pass in the environment in which we operate.

I look forward to seeing you virtually at our Flag Officer Conference this week.

With respect, Gilday