

US naval collision raises questions about morale, training

Peter Symonds
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The second collision in just over two months involving a US guided-missile destroyer and a large commercial vessel points to a crisis of morale and preparedness within the American navy and military as a whole.

The USS John S. McCain collided with the Liberian-flagged oil tanker Alnic MC at 5.24 am local time as the destroyer was approaching Singapore for a routine port visit. Five American sailors were injured and another 10 are missing despite an extensive international search effort.

The destroyer later docked at Singapore's Changi naval base with a large hole in its port side and, according to the US navy, "flooding to nearby compartments including crew berthing, machinery and communications rooms." The tanker, which is over three times the size of the USS McCain, sustained some damage but no crew injuries.

Navy Admiral John Richardson, the chief of naval operations, ordered an "operational pause" of one to two days within the coming week for all US fleets around the world, to ensure that the navy was taking "all appropriate immediate actions to ensure safe and effective operations around the world."

Admiral Richardson also instigated a "comprehensive review" to get to the root cause of the recent collisions in the western Pacific, where the US navy has been involved in four major ship accidents this year. "That gives great cause for concern that there's something out there that we're not getting at," he told the media.

Yesterday's incident followed a fatal collision in June between another guided missile destroyer, the USS Fitzgerald, and a Philippine-registered container ship in waters off Japan that killed seven US sailors.

After an investigation, the Navy announced last week that it would relieve the destroyer's two senior officers

of their duties and discipline another 10 sailors.

Admiral William Moran, vice chief of naval operations, said those on watch in the ship's bridge "lost situational awareness," contributing to the collision.

In May, the guided-missile cruiser, the Lake Champlain, collided with a South Korean fishing vessel, but no injuries resulted. In February, another cruiser, the Antietam, ran aground in Tokyo Bay, spilling hydraulic fluid into waters near the US naval base at Yokosuka.

The immediate cause of the latest collision is yet to be investigated but initial data appears to indicate that the USS McCain was at fault. While the sea lanes around Singapore are among the busiest in the world, ships follow a traffic regime that establishes two separate lanes for vessels entering and leaving the port.

The *Financial Times* pointed out that ship-tracking data was not available for the John S McCain, but was for the Alnic. "The available data, say analysts at Jane's IHS Markit, suggest that the tanker was in the correct lane and conforming to its rules at the time of the collision," the article stated.

Commenting to the *New York Times*, Kirk Patterson, a former dean of the Japan campus of Temple University, suggested that something went badly wrong. It was "really hard to understand with all the technology that's out there in the world on a boat, especially a naval destroyer that's supposed to be the best in the world," he said.

Retired Navy Captain Bernard Cole told *New York Times* that for a destroyer making a difficult passage, there would typically have been half-a-dozen sailors, including two officers, on watch on the bridge. There would also be a navigator and other enlisted men in the combat information center scanning radar.

For two collisions, involving the USS McCain and the USS Fitzgerald, to take place in similar circumstances within just over two months, points to a breakdown in morale and training. After the incident involving the Fitzgerald, the officers and crew on the McCain should have been on alert to the dangers and taken added precautions to avoid such an accident.

In recent months, the Trump administration has dramatically ramped up tensions with North Korea, this month threatening a war that would engulf the country in “fire and fury like the world has never seen.” As a result, the US military, including the navy, has been involved in a heightened tempo of operations.

Trump has also intensified the so-called “pivot to Asia” of the Obama administration, aimed at confronting China, including through a military build-up throughout the region. The USS McCain had been on patrol in the South China Sea where earlier this month it provocatively challenged China’s maritime claims by sailing within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Mischief Reef, one of China’s islets.

The *Financial Times* cited naval expert Ridzwan Rahmat who noted the destroyer’s involvement in what he called a mission of high sensitivity. The article continued: “The succession of accidents, he said, could raise questions over whether the US Navy had become too stretched in the region and whether the tempo of operations involving this class of ship was becoming unsustainable.”

The impact of growing operational demands on the US navy on training, maintenance and morale has been compounded by budgetary constraints and a smaller overall fleet size. Retired Rear Admiral and CNN analyst John Kirby said that in addition to issues of leadership and training, the navy’s probe would “also want to consider the degree to which the budget uncertainty of the last few years has likewise affected any of those factors.”

Jerry Hendrix, a defense analyst at the Center for a New American Security, told CNN that the navy had been forced to become “more innovative” in its procedures, to compensate for a smaller number of vessels. “Our ships become more combat-effective working together as a group than they are singularly. But, in kind of going after that high-end innovative approach, have we missed or ignored or overlooked basic operational shiphandling skills?” he asked.

These issues are not limited to the US navy. Earlier this month, the Marine Corp ordered a 24-hour “operational reset,” grounding all aircraft to reinforce safety and training procedures following two fatal accidents. Three Marines were killed in early August when an MV-22 Osprey aircraft crashed off the coast of Australia. This followed the deaths of 15 Marines and a sailor in a crash in Mississippi involving a Marine Reserve KC-130T tanker.



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