

Fourth collision this year shows stress on US Pacific fleet

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The August 21 collision between the Navy destroyer USS John S. McCain and an oil tanker in the Strait of Malacca, near Singapore, is the fourth such collision this year involving a major vessel of the US Seventh Fleet, which conducts operations in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Ten sailors are believed killed in the collision, which had a devastating impact on the destroyer, which is only one-third the size of the tanker that struck it nearly broadside in the predawn hours of Monday. Some of the bodies have been recovered and the others are believed trapped in flooded compartments of the John S. McCain, where divers are conducting recovery operations.

Vice Admiral Joseph P. Aucoin, commander of the Seventh Fleet, was relieved of duty Wednesday and replaced by his deputy, Rear Admiral Phil Sawyer. Aucoin was due to retire September 7 and Sawyer was scheduled to replace him. The overall command structure of the Navy is unaffected, with Admiral Scott Swift remaining as commander of the Pacific Fleet, in charge of the largest regional component of the Navy.

While Aucoin's dismissal has a cosmetic character, it is believed to be the first time that a fleet commander has been removed since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The highly unusual step, along with the accident itself, points to a deep erosion of morale as the navy has been engaged in a high tempo of operations, particularly as the Trump administration has intensified the confrontation with North Korea.

The McCain disaster follows three other collisions involving Navy ships in the Seventh Fleet this year: a January 31 accident in which the guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam ran aground in Tokyo Bay; a May 9 collision between the guided-missile cruiser USS Lake Champlain and a smaller South Korean fishing vessel;

and the June 17 collision in Japanese waters between the destroyer USS Fitzgerald and a much larger Philippine container cargo ship, in which seven sailors died.

Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson, the Navy's overall commander, announced a brief "operational pause" for all 277 ships worldwide to review procedures at sea, proper staffing of the bridge, navigation and lookouts, and other "fundamentals."

A full-scale investigation into the series of accidents is also under way, but Navy officials denied the obvious conclusion that ship crews were being overworked and overstressed by the rapid escalation of naval operations in the South China Sea and near the Korean peninsula.

As tensions with North Korea have sharpened, warships have been effectively on a war footing for months, with their crews constantly on edge facing the prospect of being flung into a major conflict.

The USS McCain had just arrived in the Singapore area after a tour of duty in the South China Sea, where the Navy has stepped up patrols over the past year.

In concert with the stepped-up US war threats against North Korea and the series of "freedom of navigation operations" near Chinese-held islets in the South China Sea, as well as increased operations in the Middle East, Black Sea and Baltic Sea, the average duration of deployment overseas for Navy ships has increased from six months to nearly a year. This means both tired crews and delays of major maintenance, which waits until a ship returns to its home port.

After initially ignoring the issue, the US corporate media began to give significant attention Friday, with the *New York Times* publishing a lengthy front-page report suggesting that US Navy ships, because of their stealth technology and low radar profile, could not be

easily seen by the large commercial vessels that collided with them.

This is a red herring, since the obvious question is why Navy ships, supposedly operating on a hair trigger, “ready to fight” on a moment’s notice, failed to detect huge ships bearing down on them while they were navigating busy waterways like Tokyo Bay and the Strait of Malacca, when alertness and constant watch would presumably be standard procedure.

Whatever combination of overwork and negligence is involved is not limited to the Seventh Fleet or even the Navy. The McCain disaster is at least the fourth mass casualty disaster to affect the US military in the last three months.

An Army UH-60 Black Hawk crashed into the Pacific Ocean off Honolulu, Hawaii August 15, killing five soldiers, three men and two women, engaged in a night training exercise. An extensive search effort was mounted over the next week but finally called off after scanning 72,000 nautical miles without finding anything more than a few scraps of fuselage, indicating a crash in which the helicopter and its crew were torn to pieces.

On July 10, 15 Marines and one Navy corpsman were killed when their KC-130 airplane, a refueling tanker, crashed into a soybean field about 85 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi. The impact was so devastating that debris was scattered in a radius of nearly five miles. The tanker’s fuel payload and ammunition on board contributed to the scale of the blast. Body parts were recovered more than a mile from the impact site. Aviation officials said the aircraft suffered a “structural failure” at 20,000 feet and then plummeted to the ground.

The death toll from these recent accidents alone is greater than the 23 US soldiers killed in the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan so far this year.

Besides these publicly acknowledged disasters, there is the steady toll of death inflicted on its own personnel by the day-to-day operations of the US military machine.

At Fort Hood, Texas, for example, 11 soldiers died of “noncombat-related” causes during a three-month period from November 2016 through January 2017. Two died of illness, two from vehicle accidents, and the other seven died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds or other forms of suicide. The victims ranged in age from

19 to 32. The suspected suicides were all aged 20 to 24. For the calendar year 2016 there were 18 suicides at the base, although five were unconfirmed pending investigation.



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