

Hellish conditions drive sailors stationed on USS George Washington to suicide

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A cover-up by the US Navy is underway following a string of suicides by sailors stationed aboard the USS George Washington. Between April 9 and April 15 of this year, three young sailors—Mika'il Rayshawn Sharp, a 23-year-old newlywed, Natasha Huffman, also 23 years old, and Xavier Hunter Sandor, only 19—died by suicide. All of them were forced to labor and live in prison-like conditions on the nuclear-powered Nimitz-class carrier.

Since 2017, the super carrier has been in dry dock at Newport News, Virginia, undergoing a \$3 billion retrofit that was supposed to be completed in four years, but has been recently extended through 2023. Some 25,000 workers, mainly government contractors, labor at Newport News Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries, the only builder of US navy aircraft carriers.

Huntington Ingalls Industries was founded on March 31, 2011 after being spun off from Northrop Grumman, one of the largest weapons manufacturers in the world. Roughly 7,000 sailors also work at the sprawling facility, which has been used as base of naval operations by US imperialism since the turn of the 20th century.

Seeking to boost morale and contain seething anger among the sailors, Democratic representatives Elaine Luria and Bobby Scott toured the USS George Washington on Tuesday, and two investigations have been announced by the Navy into the tragic deaths.

The unnecessary deaths of these three young people, according to an April report by *Military.com*, marked at least the 10th suicide by a sailor serving on the carrier in the last 10 months. The Navy has only recently acknowledged seven deaths aboard the carrier in the last 12 months, claiming that four were by suicide, while two were “health-related deaths” and another was “undetermined.”

Sailors speaking anonymously to *Military.com* said that on the morning of April 11, Captain Brent Gaut, commander of the USS George Washington, told sailors that the deaths of Sharp and Huffman were the “eighth and ninth suicides the ship had experienced in nine months.”

Sharp's mother, Natalie Jefferson, told NBC that her recently wed son “was the life of the party,” and that he “never showed his pain.”

A sailor on the George Washington, speaking anonymously to NBC, said that Huffman was suffering under the deplorable conditions the enlisted sailors were forced to endure, and that whenever she sought help from the leadership, none arrived. “She wasn't getting any assistance from the Navy, as much as she tried,” the sailor recalled.

Four days after Captain Gaut revealed the deaths of Sharp and Huffman, Xavier Sandor, a high school quarterback who enlisted in the Navy after

graduating, texted his family that he loved them and then shot and killed himself while on the ship.

In an interview with NBC, Sandor's father, John, said his son frequently complained about the horrendous conditions aboard the ship. John explained that his son worked 12-hour night shifts, and due to the 24 hour-a-day construction, was unable to get any sleep or relax. Instead, he was forced to sequester himself in his car under a thick blanket in the parking lot.

In anonymous interviews with *Military.com*, sailors said the arduous process of getting to and from the ship from the overcrowded parking lot resulted in sailors spending upwards of three hours a day commuting.

One sailor described the constant “...grinding, needle gunning” on board, adding “there's always problems with ventilation, there's always problems with hot water.”

The years-long construction on the ship has meant weeks or even months during which entire decks have gone without heat, running water or air conditioning. Anonymous accounts by sailors, seeking to avoid retaliation from their “superior” officers, describe unsanitary conditions, including feces and urine in hallways and stairwells throughout the ship due to contractors and sailors being unable to access working bathrooms.

Citing the commanding officer of the George Washington, *Military.com* reported that as of April 29, 2022, the ship had 422 sailors living onboard, most of them enlisted and under the rank of E-5, meaning they are not eligible to receive a housing allowance.

As a result, they are forced to live in the active construction zone/floating toilet.

Xavier Sandor's father, John, said that in his daily phone conversations with his son, Xavier spoke of the indifference of commanding officers to the working and living conditions of junior enlisted sailors.

“He always said it sucked, and I'd always say to ask for help,” John told NBC. “He'd say, ‘Dad, they don't give a f*ck. They don't care.’ That was always his response to me.”

Seeking to escape the dreadful conditions, every other weekend Xavier would drive eight hours back to his home and lament the fact that he was forced to return to the ship.

Despite the US Department of Defense accounting for over half of US discretionary spending, with a budget of more than \$1 trillion this year, the rank-and-file members of the military, the vast majority of whom are economic conscripts and immigrants, are treated worse than the equipment they are charged with maintaining, operating and repairing.

Hannah Crisostomo, who was medically discharged from the Navy after attempting suicide last year while serving on the George Washington, told NBC that the command staff aboard the carrier was a “joke” and indifferent to the suffering of the ranks. Crisostomo said she tried to access mental health services, but because she worked the night shift, none were available. Seeing no way out, Crisostomo ingested 196 pain relief pills in May of 2021.

Crisostomo survived, but while recovering at the hospital she was filled with dread at the prospect of having to continue laboring for the military.

“If they keep me in the Navy, and they put me back in the same situation, I’m going to kill myself,” she recalled thinking in her interview with NBC. “And I’m going to be successful the next time.” Crisostomo told NBC that working conditions were “95 percent” of the reason she wanted to kill herself.

“The command pushes you to that point,” Crisostomo said. And since the US government requires soldiers and sailors to sign lengthy enlistment contracts, in many instances a minimum of eight years, forcing enlistees to labor under penalty of death or imprisonment, “There is no putting in your two-week notice and getting out,” she noted.

A crewmate of Crisostomo on the George Washington, 23-year-old Nautica Robinson, also tried to kill herself last May. After being sexually abused by a sailor off-base in 2020, Robinson sought mental help from her commanders but received nothing.

“It’s life-draining,” Robinson told NBC. “It’s truly sad to see that the place you work for can take so much of you. They just threw us back in the environment, like our attempted suicides didn’t happen,” she said. Like “the things that pushed those sailors overboard didn’t exist.”

The US military’s indifference to the lives and well-being of sailors was bluntly stated by the top enlisted official in the Navy, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Russell Smith, who visited the carrier last month.

After press accounts emerged of the suicides driven by the deplorable conditions aboard the George Washington, Smith was dispatched to the ship to give the impression of “doing something.” Speaking to sailors less than two weeks after three of their crew mates had taken their own lives, Smith essentially told them to “suck it up,” and that nothing could be done to improve conditions.

In audio obtained last month by the *Navy Times*, a sailor questioned Smith about the atrocious living conditions and inadequate mental health services, to which Smith replied that the Navy “probably could have done better to manage your expectations coming in here.”

Telling sailors that he welcomed “their concerns,” Smith was quick to add that things could always be worse. “What you’re not doing is sleeping in a foxhole like a Marine might be doing,” he said.

Smith’s comments, unsurprisingly, did not sit well with hundreds of sailors and their family members, forcing Captain Gaut to announce last Thursday that 260 sailors would be provided accommodations off the ship, “to an offsite barracks-type living arrangement on Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth.”

The indifference of capitalist governments to a deadly pandemic that has claimed over one million lives in the US, and over 20 million globally, has

had a terrible effect on the mental health of workers the world over. Several COVID outbreaks have been reported on carriers in the last two years, due to the fact that military members have been forced to live in cramped quarters. The infection and reinfection of soldiers and sailors can lead to adverse health, including cognitive, impacts.

Even before the pandemic, the US military was infamous for the high rate of suicides among its members. The pandemic increased the toll. In April 2022, the US Army announced that 176 Army personnel had killed themselves in 2021, more than any other year since 2001.

In 2020, the last year for which figures are available for all branches, 580 members of the US military killed themselves. In the final quarter of 2020, 156 soldiers killed themselves, a 25 percent increase from the 125 documented suicides during the same time frame the year prior.

Between 2006 and 2020, according to the Congressional Research Service, of the 17,645 active duty personnel who died while enlisted in the US military, 13,068, or 74 percent, occurred while military members were in the United States, i.e., not engaged in overseas combat operations.

Of these deaths, “accidents” was listed as the number one cause, accounting for roughly 31.8 percent of deaths. The second leading cause of death, accounting for 24 percent of all deaths, was listed as “self-inflicted.”

The deplorable conditions experienced by the crew of the George Washington, and the official indifference to their safety and well-being, is mirrored by the conditions facing workers in dilapidated factories, schools and hospitals around the country, as tragically witnessed last week with the suicide of a California nurse while on shift in an emergency ward.



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