

Following multiple suicides on the USS George Washington, US Navy belatedly discloses an apparent suicide on the USS Bataan

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Last Friday, the US Navy confirmed that 19-year-old Amare Nazir Matthew Long was “found dead” aboard the USS Bataan, an amphibious assault ship currently stationed in Norfolk, Virginia.

Continuing an attempted coverup of the deplorable working and living conditions faced by sailors and soldiers throughout the US military, the Navy has refused to state the cause or nature of Long’s death, citing an “ongoing investigation.” In an April 26, 2022 Facebook post by the Mark Edwin Lee UNC Basketball Camp Scholarship, of which Long was the first recipient, the nonprofit organization wrote that Long was “an extremely dedicated brother, son, grandson & most recently, sailor in the [US Navy.]”

The post continued: “His passion for life, leadership skills, & infectious smile will long be remembered not only by family & friends, but by the community at large. Life is a precious thing that can change at any moment. In this very difficult time, please remember to always tell the people who matter most that you love them.”

The USS Bataan first came into service in 1994 and has played an integral role in US imperialist wars ever since. The Bataan participated in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and the US government has admitted to using the Bataan as a mobile prison.

In 2006, President George W. Bush admitted that the CIA operated a secret network of “black sites,” and that ships, including the Bataan, were used to hold detainees at sea while CIA torturers applied so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

While Long died on April 18, the Navy confirmed his passing only on May 6, nearly three weeks after the fact. It is unconfirmed as of this writing that Long’s death was a suicide, but there is no doubt that the Navy is trying to hide the

epidemic of suicides that has occurred recently among rank-and-file sailors. Long’s death came three days after 19-year-old Xavier Sandor committed suicide aboard the USS George Washington. The massive aircraft carrier is currently stationed in Newport News, Virginia, located across the bay from Norfolk.

Sandor shot himself on April 15. On April 9 and April 10, respectively, two other sailors stationed on the aircraft carrier, Mika’il Rayshawn Sharp, 23 years old, and Natasha Huffman, also 23, died by suicide. According to reporting last month by *Military.com*, Captain Brent Gaut, commander of the USS George Washington, in a ship-wide address to sailors following the deaths of Sharp and Huffman, revealed that their deaths marked the eighth and ninth suicides by sailors stationed on the ship in the last 10 months.

Sandor’s father, John, 49, has spoken to multiple press outlets, lambasting the commander of the George Washington and the Navy leadership for refusing to respond to the terrible conditions aboard the ship. Sandor has revealed that when the Navy told him his son had committed suicide, it did not reveal that Sharp and Huffman had also taken their lives that same week. Sandor found out through social media posts and local news reports about their suicides and the extent of the intolerable conditions on the ship.

“I’m sick to my stomach,” Sandor told NBC News. “I haven’t slept. I don’t eat.” He said that had he known about the other suicides, coupled with what his son had revealed, “I could have have changed it somehow.” He added, “That’s going to haunt me for the rest of my life.”

While the circumstances surrounding the death of Long have yet to be revealed, there is no question that sailors are forced to labor for poverty-level wages in dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, risking COVID-19 infection over 12-hour

shifts, leading to extreme mental stress.

Following the reporting of the suicides aboard the George Washington, the Navy attempted to placate angry family members and sailors by announcing a series of measures to “improve morale,” including moving sailors off the ship and hosting “video game tournaments.”

Sailors stationed on the George Washington have complained for years about the unlivable working and living conditions on the warship, which is currently in dry dock and undergoing a \$3 billion retrofit. More than 400 junior enlistees have a family home located far from the ship. They receive no housing allowance and therefore have no choice but to live in the active construction zone. Many sailors, like Sandor, are semi-homeless, forced by the constant construction noise and poor conditions onboard to sleep in their cars, which are located in the parking lot of the shipyard, a 45-minute walk from the carrier.

In interviews with CNN and NBC, young sailors have described the living and working conditions on the George Washington. Besides the constant banging and screeching of construction equipment, entire sections of the ship are without running water, heat or usable latrines for months at a time.

One sailor interviewed by CNN described the conditions on the ship as “unlivable,” and said the ship consistently had power and heating outages. Photos and video provided by sailors to the network show bathrooms and hallways flooded with murky brown and black sewage water.

Another anonymous sailor told CNN that it was common to “just run out of food.” He said that “if they had anything left, it would be, if you are lucky, a little cereal thing, or like one chicken leg that may or may not be undercooked.”

Asked by the reporter what happened when sailors attempted to bring their concerns about the living conditions and lack of edible food to higher-ranking officers, the sailor said the response was “absolutely nothing.”

Jacob Grella, a former Navy sailor from Richmond, Virginia who was also stationed on the George Washington, described to CNN the toll on his psyche caused by being forced to toil and live in a fetid construction zone for months on end. After some of his crew mates began killing themselves in response to the horrible conditions, Grella, who was initially excited about being stationed aboard the ship, said he attempted to make an appointment with the ship’s psychiatrist, only to be told there would be a minimum six-month wait.

“I tried to tell my leadership that this could be a reason why these deaths are occurring,” Grella recalled. But his concerns

“met with the same negative feedback.”

Another former sailor from the George Washington told CNN that the Navy’s callous indifference to the lives of sailors was “unacceptable” and an example of “willful neglect.”

Master Chief Petty Officer Russell Smith, who was dispatched to the carrier last month to give a “pep talk” to the sailors, warned them that conditions could be worse.

“What you’re not doing is sleeping in a foxhole like a Marine might be doing,” Smith said. When a sailor asked why the Navy could provide chaplains but not psychiatrists, Smith replied that the Navy did not have a “supply of psychiatrists” to “spread around on all the destroyers and all of the aircraft carriers.”

The Navy currently operates 11 aircraft carriers and 92 cruiser/destroyers. So Smith is essentially saying that the Navy, with a 2023 budget of over \$230 billion, has “no money” to hire the less than 500 psychiatrists it would take to provide every ship with at least three doctors.

One sailor told CNN that Smith’s comments were “laughable” and his visit was “offensive.”

With morale among the rank and file plummeting, the Navy turned to Democratic Representative Elaine Luria of Virginia to provide support for the Navy leadership. Following Smith’s visit, Luria toured the George Washington. On May 2, she told reporters that she did not see any “large red flags” when it came to the command culture on the ship.

Luria is the vice chair of the House Armed Services Committee. In a recent article, she boasted about her credentials and deep ties to the Navy, writing that “of all the members in the House Democratic Caucus, I served the longest on active duty,” having been deployed “six times to conduct operations in the Middle East and Western Pacific.”

Luria, who since being elected in 2019 has repeatedly called for increasing the Navy budget in preparation for war with China, added that she thinks “the captain, the command master chief, the command triad, I would say they have their heads and hearts in the right place.”



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