

# Surface Warfare

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DIGITAL FEATURE



## Destroyer Chaplains: Driving Personnel Readiness on Navy Destroyers

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**THE NAVY IS COMMITTED TO PLACING CHAPLAINS AND RPS ON THESE PLATFORMS WITH THE MOST JUNIOR COMMANDERS AND MOST VULNERABLE CREWMEMBERS ENGAGED IN THE MOST ISOLATED AND ARDUOUS MISSIONS.**

– Capt. Scott Cauble

The Navy's Arleigh Burke-class destroyers increasingly operate as individual deployers in austere and demanding operational environments around the world, far from traditional Navy support.

This makes serving on these "greyhounds of the sea" among the most challenging jobs in the Navy.

According to a Surface Force study, crews on long and demanding operational deployments experience higher stress levels than traditional strike group deployments. This demands increased courage and commitment to complete the mission.

Now, the Navy's Chaplain Corps is stepping up to help, increasing its fleet presence with a multi-year effort putting chaplains and religious program specialists (RPs) onboard each destroyer.

"The Navy's studies show that combat and crisis effectiveness are directly linked to personnel readiness," said Capt. Scott Cauble, Force Chaplain on the Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet staff.

"The Navy is committed to placing chaplains and RPs on these platforms with the most junior commanders and most vulnerable crewmembers engaged in the most isolated and arduous missions."

Cauble said that the effort is now roughly 50 percent complete. Going forward, all deploying destroyers will depart with chaplains in the crew.



*The USS Russell at Naval Base San Diego the night before deployment.*



*Clockwise from Top Left Lt. Vaughan checks his cell phone in Pearl Harbor, listens to Sailors on deck, Shares a story with FC3 Anthony Brusca and meets with the the ship's triad on the fantail.*





Adding the enlisted RPs to the mix will take longer but is on target to be completed in the next two years.

Until recently, only cruisers and larger Navy vessels rated chaplains and RPs in their crews.

Two chaplains were instead assigned to each of the Navy's destroyer squadrons to provide spiritual support for destroyers.

This has been the case since before the Vietnam War. Chaplains shuttled between the vessels when they were at sea but were never full members of the ship's crews.

In the future, destroyer squadrons will still have a senior chaplain assigned, but junior chaplains will now be assigned directly to the ships.

"The model of shuttling chaplains on and off destroyers was better than nothing, but it was not as effective as we needed," Cauble said. "Part-time chaplain support to shipboard triads and their crews was barely effective - full-time destroyer chaplains are changing that dynamic dramatically."

It's also changing the level of competency in the Chaplain Corps as now most new chaplains will go to sea first in their careers, he said.

"Destroyers are a great place to learn about the Navy - it's a small crew and a young crew and a good place for a new chaplain to learn," he said.

Lt. Zachary A. Vaughan has been assigned to the guided-missile destroyer USS Russell (DDG 59) since October 2, 2023. He's the first full-time chaplain in the ship's 30-year commissioned life and the Navy's version of a small-town minister, charged with the spiritual readiness of roughly 330 souls who call the ship home.

Russell departed San Diego on February 10 and is operating in the Western Pacific.

"In a small town, as with a ship, everyone knows your name, place and role," Vaughan said.

"That's the same on a ship. Everyone has a role and is vitally important and needed—they are part of a team, and the mission would suffer without them being here and fully engaged."







Vaughan, 39, has been in the Navy for nearly eight years and on active duty since 2021. A native of Tucson, Arizona, he spent over a decade ministering at Serenity Baptist Church in the small rural Arizona town of Three Points southwest of Tucson. For much of his life, he felt called to ministry and to serve his country.

His family has some Navy history, as his grandfather, or “Tata,” as he calls him, was a 22-year reserve Seabee. Vaughan’s recollection of his sea stories is one of the reasons he wanted to serve, too.

It wasn’t until 2016 that Vaughan found a way to bring both of his “callings” together.

Early in 2016, he said, two of his seminary friends told him

they were talking to a Navy chaplain recruiter and encouraged him to look into it.

In a few short months, he was a reservist and found himself out and about in the Navy, filling in where the Navy needed him both on the ship and ashore.

This included a short activation during the COVID-19 Pandemic, during which he remained in quarantine for periods so he could fill in anywhere at a moment’s notice.

The more time he spent on active duty as a reservist, the more he thought about joining full-time.

That mobilization was followed by an offer of an indefinite recall to active duty. Vaughan, with the

support of his wife and their four children, Vaughan accepted. Soon, he was one of the chaplains assigned to Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, which the Navy then followed up with orders to the Russell.

Within seconds of his arrival aboard, “I immediately lost my dress blue cover when it was caught by exhaust exiting the ship on the port side and ended up in the water,” he said. “So that started me out with a dose of humility on day one—I just started laughing because what else can you do?”

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Since then, the command and their new chaplain have been learning how a clergyman fits into the day-to-day operations of a warship.

"As the commanding officer, my concerns boil down to the crew's well-being and our mission readiness," said Cmdr. Michael McNerney, Russell's commanding officer.

"Having a chaplain is critical to the crew's well-being."

Growing up in the Navy on cruisers and destroyers, McNerney saw much of his life at sea with and without a chaplain.

Though thankful for the squadron chaplains' contributions during their visits, he says he's already seeing how much more effective a full-time chaplain is.

"They weren't here long enough to fully build trust with the crew—they were ship riders," he said. "Many times, a chaplain arrived in response to something bad happening. That is changing now. Having full-time chaplains is a proactive approach to Sailor well-being. Chaplain Vaughan is better equipped to prevent that bad scenario from happening in the first place."

Key to Vaughan's effectiveness on Russell is that he is a confidential outlet for Sailors and has set counseling hours during which he can be reached for one-on-one talks.

Strict confidentiality rules mean that what's said during these private talks stays between the Sailor and Vaughan.

"It's a sacred trust that I have with every Sailor, and I don't think about whether they are religious or whether they go to my services," he said. "I am here to care for everyone—confidentiality means what they say is not going anywhere."

The fact that a talk with "Chaps" is 100 percent confidential is critical to Vaughan's trust among the crew. That "sacred trust" is also essential to the ship's leadership, too.

"The fact that Lt. Vaughan has a confidential bond with the Sailors gives him the ability to connect with them much deeper than any of us can," McNerney said. "Their trust in him gives them a confidential outlet they might not otherwise have out here."

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*— Lt. Zachary A. Vaughan*







*Left to Right – Lt. Vaughan (L-R) speaks in a mess deck meeting, prepares his evening prayer on the bridge and salutes as the Russell passes the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor.*



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**WE’RE GOING TO FIGHT FOR ALL OUR SAILORS—WHATEVER  
FAITH THEY BELIEVE IN. IN THE NAVY EVERYONE NOT ONLY HAS  
THE RIGHT BUT MUST ALSO BE GIVEN THE ABILITY TO PRACTICE  
WHAT THEY BELIEVE—THAT’S VITAL.**

— Lt. Zachary A. Vaughan

The ship’s triad realizes the importance of the trust between Vaughan and the Sailors, McNerney says and honors that.

“He checks in with me daily. If he sees trends, he can bring up general issues, without giving specifics, that he believes are affecting the crew,” he said. “It might be something like underlying stressors the crew is struggling with.”

He said that knowledge “empowers the triad to do something to influence or mitigate those issues before they become bigger problems.”

Vaughan says he often prays with and for those seeking his counsel or venting about their jobs or lives. “I can’t report anything, but I can tell them what help

is available and encourage them to seek it out,” he said. “I can say, hey, let’s go talk to Doc about this because I think that’d be the best thing for you to do—but the decision is up to them.”

Though Vaughan sees his role as a counselor as a big part of his job, he believes being visible around the ship and present when evolutions are happening is just as critical.

While at sea, “Chaps,” as he is called by the crew, walks around the decks and observes everything from underway replenishment to weapons shoots and even fire drills. If it is happening on the Russell, he’s there more often than not.

During lulls in the action, he gets to know the Sailors by name simply by sitting down with individuals and groups and having conversations.

Every evening, as the sun goes down at sea, Vaughan makes his way to the ship’s bridge and says a prayer over the 1MC announcing system, preceded by a short story he shares with the crew.

“You’d never know he’s only been here a little over four months,” McNerney said. “He is really fully integrated with the crew.”

Vaughan said there’s no extra space on a DDG, but he’s thankful he has an office to work in, even if it’s small.

“The CO has given me the use of his at-sea cabin; it’s a place to base out and a private place for talking to Sailors,” he said.

He knows it’s not the long-term solution, but for now, it’s working. ⚓