

Surface Warfare

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DIGITAL FEATURE



Reserves at the Ready: SURFOR Reservists activate and deploy in critical roles

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Reserves at the Ready

SAN DIEGO (Apr. 15, 2024)—All winning teams have a common denominator to their success: a deep bench of skilled talent who step up to fill critical needs in the clutch.

For more than a century, the U.S. Navy Reserve has consistently played a crucial role in the fleet, not just during times of war but also in peacetime. It has always been a reliable source of trained manpower, critical skills, and expertise, stepping up to fill the gaps when needed.

Though many still see the reserve only as a wartime asset providing a quick infusion of manpower to the fleet in urgent moments, this stereotype is changing fast. Reservists now fill critical roles in the fleet, from senior leadership to specialized job positions.

“The Navy’s deep bench—the Navy Reserve—is critical to sustaining the fight at sea,” said Rear Adm. Ted LeClair, deputy commander of Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CNSP) and Navy Reservist. “There are hundreds of Sailors trained and ready to head out on a moment’s notice so our ships don’t skip a beat in readiness.”

In the Surface Force alone in fiscal year 2023, over 100 reservists supported afloat commands, totaling 12,716 days of operational support. So far in 2024, 90 Sailors have answered the call, with 25 serving 120 days or more.

These are two examples of reservists answering the call to keep ships in the fight. You never know; there might be one on your ship.

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Riding the Forward-Deployed Waves

The U.S. Navy has an abundance of forward-deployed ships operating around the globe at any given time. Making this possible are thousands of Sailors who wake up every day ready to fight and win when called upon.

However, there is occasionally a critical manning gap that needs to be filled by a willing Sailor back home—and that willingness is much more common than you may think.

Illustrating this are two command master chiefs (CMDCM) serving aboard Forward-Deployed Naval Force (F-DNF) ships in the Pacific Ocean in 2023 and 2024.

CMDCM Sean Baney, from Rossford, Ohio, is the CMDCM on the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Shoup (DDG 86). CMDCM James Butler, from San Diego, spent eight months as the CMDCM aboard another destroyer, USS John Finn (DDG 113).

The role of a senior enlisted leader is vital. Most of the Sailors in these billets are master chiefs (the highest enlisted rank) and go through training to take on the new rank of CMDCM. A large part of a CMDCM’s job is to be the resource, advocate, and source of accountability for all enlisted Sailors on the ship. A gapped CMDCM billet means Sailors are missing that resource. It’s a big set of shoes to fill.

For CMDCM Baney, there was no hesitation. Activating for a long-term at-sea assignment was a great opportunity.

“It is a win-win situation, gaining unique experience while

filling a critical billet,” Baney said. “I hope that this will lead to more opportunities for reserve Sailors to serve aboard ships underway, being part of a team while gaining critical in-rate and mobilization experience.”

Gapped billets can occur for several reasons, but one main factor is timing. It takes time to train up a new CMDCM to fill the senior enlisted role, and deployed ships must be prioritized for

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filling those billets. Training Sailors for their positions takes time at every level and in every rating, resulting in occasional gaps between a Sailor leaving a command and a new Sailor filling their spot. This is where reserves can help, often filling short-term gaps in shore billets while active Sailors fill long-term gaps at sea.

Butler and Baney are unique because they are reservists filling long-term sea duty billets. While the connection between reserve and active duty is vital, it is rare for reservists to be activated for extended periods at the CMDCM level and, especially on a deployed ship. However, that seems to be changing. According to the CMDCM for CNSP Reserve Forces Keith Metcalfe, filling a gapped sea billet with a reservist is relatively straightforward. A ship identifies a manning requirement and coordinates with CNSP’s Reserve Program Director. The billet is validated and funded, then advertised to reserve forces. Reserve Sailors can then be matched with the open billets and receive their orders.



So, why hasn't this happened more? Butler believes it is a matter of changing mindsets.

Butler is a special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) when he isn't doing reserve duty. In early 2023, at an FBI recruiting event aboard the San Diego-based Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Cowpens (CG 63), Butler learned that Cowpens, along with 17 other ships, did not have CMDCMs on board. Those ships were borrowing CMDCMs from other ships for deployment, and the senior enlisted leader role was filled by someone else while in port.

Butler was shocked. As a CMDCM, he knew this constant shifting left Sailors with an inconsistent source of support in their chain of command. He recalls saying in a conversation with then Force Master Chief for CNSP, Greg Carlson – "Force, have you considered sourcing from the reserve force? Please let me know if I can help."

According to Butler, it had yet to occur to anyone that reserve CMDCMs might be willing to go active for long periods to fill gapped sea billets.

"A bunch of us are built for sea," said Butler. "Not all of us. But a lot of us grew up on the ship."

Two weeks later, Butler got the call. He was offered a chance to deploy with forward-deployed USS John Finn out of Japan and jumped at the opportunity.

Butler's wife, who also works for the FBI, introduced him to the ship's namesake in 2003. She met the Medal of Honor recipient when he was traveling at a nearby airport where she

worked. She invited Butler to come and meet him, and they continued to stay in contact for Finn's remaining years.

"John was cool. He didn't really care what was going on with the ship, though," Butler noted, chuckling.

For Baney, serving aboard Shoup was equally exciting. "For the first week while I was aboard, one of my shipmates was Machinery Repairman 1st Class Johnathon Smith. He is my son."

Smith and Baney served together for a week, with Baney saying it was his favorite part of the experience thus far. Smith then transferred to Recruit Training Command (RTC) Great Lakes as a recruit division commander. Navy service runs in the family.

Both CMDCMs also spoke of the excitement of bringing a new round of Navy chiefs into the fold during their time at sea. Baney proudly shared

– *CMDCM. Sean Baney*

that due to operational requirements and the difference in time zones, "the new chiefs we had aboard were the first four this season across the entire Navy."

Baney also takes pride in the opportunity to serve the Navy both at home and abroad. "I have friends at home who have never left Ohio, and I have been to six continents and 30 countries while being able to serve my country and be a part of something bigger than myself."

Similarly, Butler's most significant source of satisfaction was knowing he filled an imperative role during a critical time. It was only 12 days from when he got the call to activate to the day he arrived at John Finn, and he stayed until another CMDCM could take his place in January 2024.

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Butler recalled John Finn's commanding officer, Cmdr. Earvin Taylor telling him the ship was in a better place because of his presence. Taylor hugged Butler on his last day aboard, telling him, "Shipmate, mission complete!"

Following this, much of the crew mustered on the quarterdeck to ring Butler ashore, a Navy tradition to honor those departing a ship for the final time.

"I don't know if you ever call it mission complete," Butler noted. "You just know you have moved the ball as far as you're going to move it, and then someone is going to pick it up and carry it on."

Butler also spoke of his desire to more fully exploit the active-reserve relationship in the future, especially for forward-deployed units, so reservists can continue to help carry that ball.

Part of the difficulty of being forward-deployed is the rigorous schedule. Ships are either in a demanding maintenance phase, or they are underway on active patrol. Not only this, but any gapped billet in each ship's crew creates a significant difficulty both in-port and underway. To go on patrol, some ships may borrow Sailors from the ships in port to fill those gaps.

"You have all those ships out there pulling from each other all the time," Butler explained, "so Sailors don't get a lot of downtime. If we know with enough notice what kind of Sailors they need, we can get some reserves out there earlier, and we don't burn Sailors down with patrol after patrol."

This seems to be the hope for the active-reserve partnership from now on. Recognizing that reserve Sailors are interested in going to sea means moving fewer active Sailors around so often, creating consistency and a stronger Navy team.



Swimming into Action

On a crisp, early Spring morning at Naval Base San Diego, three Navy reservists are taking a little swim in the chilly waters. This swim is far from leisurely, though, as a local warship looms above them, and the sounds of its Sailors echo down to the surface. These are search and rescue (SAR) swimmers, and they're training for active-reserve integration in the Pacific force.

This integration between active and reserve components transcends rank and even rating. SAR is not a Navy career field but a specialized collateral duty job available to Sailors from many ratings who can pass the physical fitness and training requirements, whether active or reserve.

Like other areas in the fleet, the active force can have difficulty filling SAR job gaps. According to Electronics Technician 1st Class Alex Stokes, a reserve SAR swimmer from Elk Grove, California, "Ships can't leave the pier unless they have qualified rescue swimmers, and it's hard for the active fleet to qualify and maintain them."

Because ships must have a qualified SAR swimmer on board to get underway, the reserve force has developed a SAR unit to supplement the fleet swimmers and meet the needs of deploying ships.

"We maintain those currencies, and we can augment ships at a moment's notice," said Stokes.

Reserve SAR swimmers can activate and fill these critical billets anywhere from a few days underway to a months-long deployment.

Senior Chief Boatswain's Mate Gregori Bianchini, from Portland, Oregon, is the pioneer of the reserve SAR program for the Pacific fleet. As their senior enlisted leader, he oversees the reserve SAR units for the East and West coasts. So far this fiscal year, the seven SAR swimmers in the Pacific unit have gone underway with six ships for a combined total of more than 212 days.

"We are making an impact globally daily," said Bianchini.

When they are not activated, these Sailors' time mainly consists of living their civilian lives and keeping up with their

qualifications by participating in SAR exercises. Bianchini said every quarter, he brings his Sailors in for a week to do drills or further sustainment, and then each has a typical drill weekend on top of that.

This way, they work on requirements to ensure they are current on necessary training. According to Bianchini, keeping his Sailors qualified allows them to do as little or as much active time as they want while also becoming more competitive for advancement within their rates.

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On March 21, three of these SAR swimmers put their training into practice, operating from the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Chosin (CG 65). Each swimmer was lowered into the water off the ship's side while it was moored pier-side at Naval Base San Diego. This exercise helps keep the swimmers sharp and provides a training opportunity for the deck department on board. Boatswain's mates across the brow could be heard shouting repeat-backs and improving their process throughout the exercise.

All three swimmers offered enthusiastic encouragement to the crew after the exercise. These Sailors are highly motivated, passionate, and ready to serve. Each one credits the reserve SAR program as a fulfilling and exciting way to stay involved with the Navy.

"Once I found out I was going to be a search and rescue swimmer, that's all I wanted to do," said Damage Controlman 2nd Class Ulysses Jiminez, from San Diego. "I just love being in the water and doing something that means something."

Each of the swimmers from the exercise said they were glad to feel their job as a reservist had a level of importance and necessity.

"The cool part of being a reserve SAR swimmer, especially

attached to [CNSP], is you are part of the actual Navy. You're going out and being operational," said Stokes. When we come here and recertify as rescue swimmers, we interface with the active units. We're doing something important, and we're doing something that could potentially save a life. We're still getting that touchpoint with the active fleet. And yeah, it just feels important."

Quartermaster 2nd Class Alan Medina, from Fresno, California, said his favorite part of the job is the chance to be impactful and versatile as a reserve Sailor. In total, he has spent more than 100 days underway filling critical SAR billets.

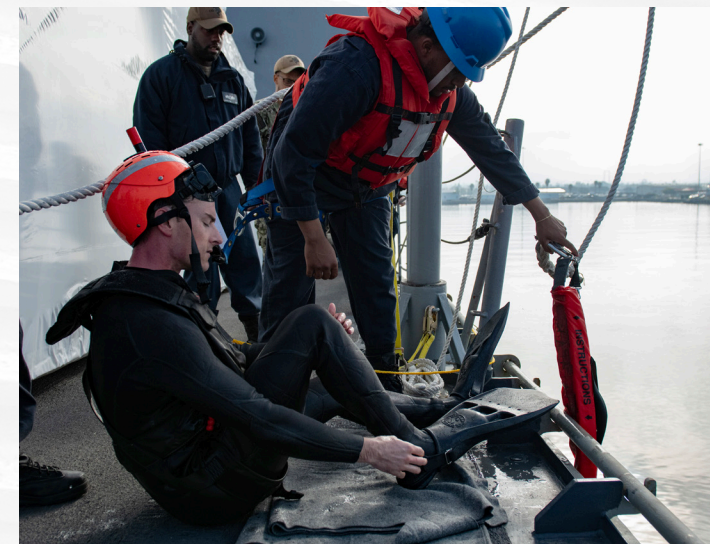
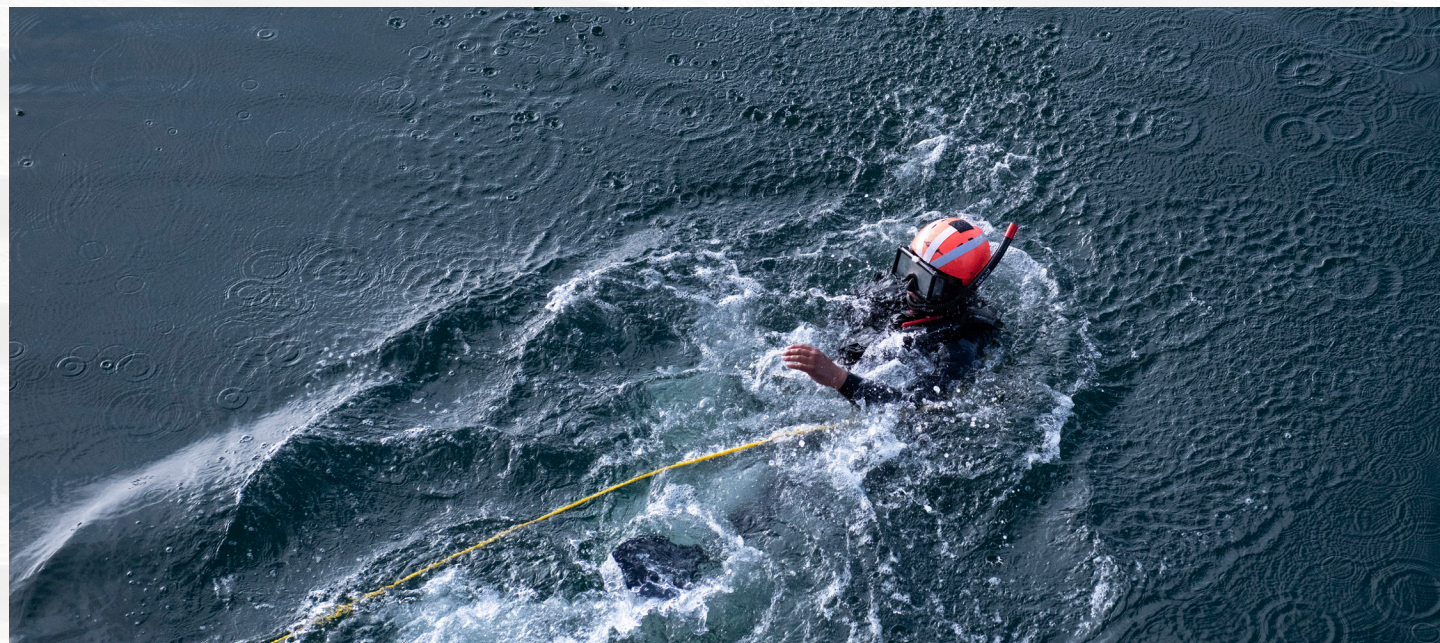
Not all reservists want to be activated for so long, though. There is plenty of opportunity for them, too.

Stokes said that he finds personal fulfillment from helping whenever his schedule allows. "I'm able to fill in as a [type commander] evaluator, so when I come out, I'm maintaining currency for the boys, but we have other guys who are just on back-to-back reserve orders. So it's almost like being active, except you kind of get to choose where you go."

Bianchini was also aboard Chosin for the exercise, overseeing each evolution and collaborating with the deck department.

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"I think the best part of this job is the impact that we give to the fleet, being able to get ships underway that can't get underway," said Bianchini. "From my standpoint, being an evaluator and a swimmer, being able to teach deck crews and make them better across the Navy and globally is fun."

Bianchini also spoke proudly of his other Sailors' current work, mentioning that Chief Electrician's Mate Brad Wiggins just returned from a homeport shift for USS McCampbell (DDG 85) and Hull Technician 1st Class Cory Cain after already spending time aboard the Chosin for its homeport shift, recently left to supplement a forward-deployed ship in U.S. Seventh Fleet.

"I think this is a great program for Sailors who have a good bandwidth to be able to help, and it has instant impact," said Bianchini. "That's one of the biggest things that I can hang my hat on: we're able to get ships underway anytime, anywhere."

He hopes to see the program grow, highlighting two pathways

to join the team. The first is for rated reservists who would like to add the SAR collateral – he invites them to qualify and then follow the steps to become certified.

The second is for Sailors coming off active duty into the reserve force who already have the SAR collateral. He invites those Sailors to attend the two-week refresher school, certify, and become part of the team.

The SAR program is only open to Sailors with a rating and the physical ability to qualify.

Stokes agreed that sharing this opportunity is also his desire. "A lot of people don't know this exists. So join us if you're a swimmer coming off active duty and you still want to scratch that itch. If you're in

the reserves, fit, and up to the challenge, join us."

Bianchini echoed this invitation. "The Sailors in this program are doing exactly what the program was intended to do: to stand in and support the mission at the most critical time so the Navy's not skipping a beat. We're doing what we should be doing, making an impact every day." ↓

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