

Surface Warfare

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DIGITAL FEATURE

The Virtues of SWO Virtual Training Environments

Story By
Commander, Naval Surface Force,
U.S. Pacific Fleet Public Affairs

Officer of the Deck Lt. Yuma Kuwata, draws out the ship's ideal course and position while standing watch in the pilot house aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain (DDG 56)

*Photo by Mass Communication Specialist
2nd Class Markus Castaneda*



A SWO has one of the toughest jobs in the Navy. They are responsible for maintaining and operating the most advanced ships in the world, leading by example, and developing expertise on everything related to their ship and its crew. A SWO must be ready to solve the most difficult of problems aboard their ship in each department, whether engineering, combat systems, or navigation. But before prospective SWOs gain their sea legs, they must go through a gauntlet of classroom and virtual training, to ensure they are capable of contributing to the fight from the first day they step aboard their first warship.

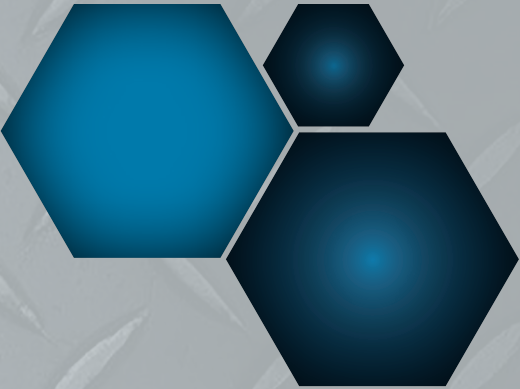
In the last decade, the SWO community evolved its traditional classroom setting.

Since the 2013 establishment of the Surface Advanced Training Virtual Environment (STAVE), the Surface Navy invested nearly \$5 billion dollars into virtual training environments, all in an effort to increase the readiness and capabilities of our most important asset, people. Assessments and multiple choice exams are important, however, in the unique case of a SWO training to take the conn of a ship, standardized tests cannot fully prepare SWOs for their jobs. A premium must be placed on experiential learning and knowledge application in a safe environment for first-time mariners. That's why STAVE training is so critically important to training officers how to fight and win.



*Ensign Precious Iverson stands conning officer watch on the bridge aboard amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli (LHA 7)
Photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Brian P. Biller*

Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener, Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, left, observes students of the Officer of the Deck Phase I training course, conducting a simulated exercise at the Mariner Skills Training Center, Pacific (MSTCPAC).
Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kevin C. Leitner



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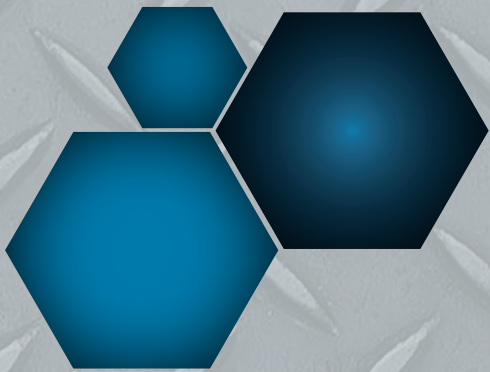
Now, instead of hoping test results translate to real-life outcomes on a warship, our junior officers and their instructors can leverage virtual learning platforms, known as “trainers” in the SWO Training Pipeline that introduce trainees to scenarios they will face at sea. Not only do the trainers capture evidence of a SWO’s readiness, but it also removes any doubt surrounding a junior officer’s comprehension level.

“This is a game changer for the SWO pipeline,” said Vice Adm. Roy I. Kitchener, Commander Naval Surface Forces. “The revamping of our training was intended to better prepare our junior SWOs for the high demands of bridge watch teams. Instead of arriving to a ship

and facing a steep learning curve, we are now sending out bridge-ready officers capable of taking the conn seamlessly.”

The introductory courses aim to provide junior officers with effective, realistic, and relevant training, heavily focusing on ship handling and Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS) competency.

The revamped Basic Division Officer Course (BDOC) curriculum serves as the first training milestone. Traditionally, BDOC taught basic shipboard and program knowledge, but has now shifted to focus more on preparing junior officers for the Officer of the Deck (OOD) Phase I course through increased time in the simulator.



The OOD Phase I course – the second training milestone in the pipeline – focuses on building bridge resource management and ship handling skills. OOD Phase I recently stood up following modifications to the Junior Officer of the Deck (JOOD) course.

“The overall outcome of OOD is to prepare Sailors and junior officers to become better mariners as they head out to sea,” said Cmdr. Leonardo Giovannelli, commanding officer of Mariner Skills Training Center Pacific (MSTCPAC). “We put them through some high density traffic scenarios, teach advanced rules of the road, and how to be good mariners for when they head out to their ship.”

Before new officers arrive at their ships, they must complete 15 weeks, or 550 hours of training at BDOC and OOD Phase I.

Students who have taken the course felt that it was comparable to real-world, at-sea situations, and prepared them be assets to their ship’s bridge team.

“This course has made me a lot more confident about ship handling and I feel that I can walk on

the ship now and be a very useful part of my team,” said Ensign Daniel Ofuka, a student at MSTCPAC.

The courses are jointly taught by both active duty and civilian instructors, many of whom are retired commanding officers or experienced merchant mariners. This give SWOs the unique opportunity to receive hands-on training from seasoned maritime experts during high-stress simulated evolutions.

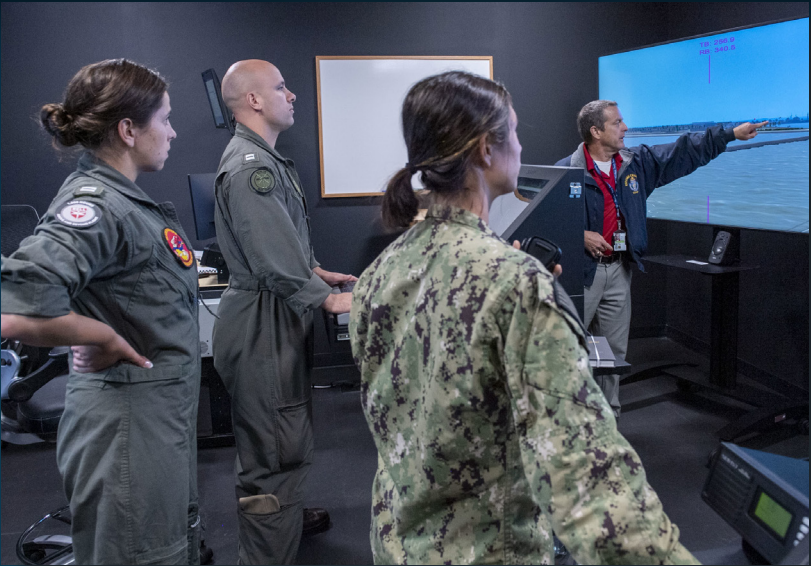
The updated training ensures graduates are confident and competent when they arrive to their ships. Between BDOC and OOD Phase I, junior officers have the opportunity to log nearly 100 hours of simulated ship driving before they stand their first bridge watch.

“The world class instructors took the time to teach us the fundamentals of ship handling, which provided myself and my peers a solid foundation to go onto ships and immediately contribute to the team,” said Ensign Zachary Taylor, gunnery officer aboard USS Gonzalez (DDG 66).



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Students attending the officer of the deck training course at the Mariner Skills Training Center, Pacific (MSTCPAC), take part in a simulated ship handling exercise. MSTCPAC Photos by Mass Communication



Cmdr. Leonardo Giovannelli, the officer in charge of Maritime Skills Training Center Pacific (MSTCPAC), discusses the new officer of the deck training course with Andrew Dyer, a reporter from the San Diego Union Tribune. Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Julio Rivera



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— Lt. j.g. Samuel Weitzman,
Auxiliaries Officer, USS Milius (DDG 69)

The Surface Warfare community is working to ensure they build well rounded maritime professionals, as well as leaders, which is what piqued Ofuka's interest in becoming a SWO.

"The SWO community has always been something I admired especially because of the leadership potential," said Ofuka. "It is one of the unique officer designations where you can make a significant impact in the Navy."

After arriving aboard their ships, junior officers who completed the new training pipeline say they have felt ready to join their experienced bridge crews thanks to BDOC and OOD Phase I.

"Upon assuming my first watch as conning officer (conn), I had a foundation of knowledge," said Lt. j.g. Samuel Weitzman, auxiliaries officer aboard USS Milius (DDG 69). The civilian instructors provided Weitzman with insight into the way merchant vessels drive and interact with other ships. "I did not feel like the 'new guy' watchstander that others had to babysit and teach. I was able to have educated conversations about the ship and her mission and quickly qualify due to the knowledge learned at these courses."

"The classroom portion of the class was a good knowledge refresher, but the simulator time was what set this course apart from others," said Ensign Sean Brennan, assistant

operations officer aboard USS Carter Hall (LSD 50). "It challenged me as a bridge watchstander and immediately gave me experience that would otherwise take months to get on a ship. The course jumpstarts your professional knowledge in the SWO community and has paid off immensely."

Lt.j.g. Nicole Kim's training was put to the test almost immediately upon her arrival aboard USS Milius (DDG 69).

On November 15, 2019, she flew from USNS Washington Chambers (T-AKE 11) onto the flight deck of USS Milius and within 10 minutes of being aboard, she was requested on the bridge. "I was greeted by the operations officer and was instructed to take the CONN and now I can say, during my first 45 minutes ever standing watch, I safely kept us 160-180ft alongside the Washington Chambers," Kim said.

Ensign Michael Bauldrick, the automated data processing officer aboard USS Ramage (DDG 61), said the training he received helped bring him up to speed with experienced officers.

"That [simulator training] mixed in with the classroom learning from surface warfare officers and retired commanding officers really helped to put you on the same level as junior officers nearly a year group ahead of you," said Bauldrick.

The Navy's changes have been well received by course graduates and have resulted in junior officers hopeful for the future of the Surface Warfare community.

"Overall, I am very thankful that the Navy has begun to invest more resources and attention to the SWO training pipeline," said Santangelo. "I firmly believe that even more time and energy spent on our professional development will only make our Surface Force stronger and more capable."

Beginning in October 2021, after a SWO completes BDOC, OOD Phase I and their first division officer tour aboard a ship, they will return to the classroom and simulators for a new phase of OOD: Officer of the Deck Phase II.

The OOD Phase II pilot was launched in March 2021. It is a three-week continuum of education for Fleet OODs after the completion of JOOD and qualification on their first ship.

OOD Phase II includes Mariner Skills Assessment (MSA) No. 3, which is one of 10 assessments conducted across the span of a SWO's career. It is meant to be a milestone assessment that will determine whether the Sailor will continue on in the SWO community.

It is preceded by an OOD Competency Check (MSA No. 1), conducted during the OOD Phase I Course, and an OOD evaluation (MSA No. 2), conducted by the SWO's commanding officer. OOD Phase II and the

MSA No. 3 assessment are designed to produce proficient mariners, consummate OODs, and officers ready to undertake qualifications in advanced warfare and engineering watch stations.

"One of the toughest lessons that junior officers are going to learn here [at OOD Phase I and II] is learning how to apply their knowledge that they are getting from the course to ship handling and leading a bridge team," said Lt. Nicholas Antonio, a SWO instructor at MSTCPAC. "They will need to be confident in the ability make decisions and stand with those decisions that they make on the bridge."

OOD Phase II will reach fleet concentration areas in October 2021 and will be taught at the Surface Warfare Schools Command's (SWSC) MSTCPAC in San Diego, California, and Mariner Skills Training Command Atlantic (MSTCLANT) in Norfolk, Virginia.

"Junior officers should take away from the courses that they need to be forward leaning and understand that they are a core part of the bridge watchstanding team," said Antonio. "They should be competent and seek to improve their competence at all times. My hope for all junior officers as they enter their first tours is that once they step aboard their ship, that they already have the fundamental knowledge on how to drive the ship in order so they can focus on being better leaders and learning how to fight the ship." ⚓



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*Lt. Davis Chandler (Left) and Lt. Daniel Ye (Center), instructors assigned to Maritime Skills Training Center Pacific (MSTCPAC), conduct a practical scenario in a Navigation, Seamanship, and Shiphandling Trainer (NSST).
Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Julio Rivera*