

Surface Warfare

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ISSUE



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Surface Warfare Officers of the Year

Story by Lt. Zachary Anderson
Commander, Naval Surface Force,
U.S. Pacific Fleet Public Affairs



A surface warfare officers (SWO) are renowned warfighters, tacticians, and leaders. SWOs are trained extensively to operate the most advanced warships and combat systems and ensure their teams are ready for high-end combat. The Surface Force is built on a warfighting culture of grit, tenacity, and connectedness that enables Surface Warriors to operate in the most austere operational environments and win decisively.

Each year, the Surface Force recognizes one SWO from each coast with the Surface Warfare Officer of the Year award. This award recognizes SWOs who best personify the ideals of the Surface Warrior ethos to include excellence in warfighting, leadership, and mission accomplishment through professionalism and personal example.



Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet Vice Adm. Brendan McLane presents the 2022 Commander, Naval Surface Force Atlantic Surface Warfare Officer of the Year award to Lt. Cmdr. Zane MacNaughton, from the USS Gravelly (DDG 107), and Naval Surface Force Pacific Surface Warfare Officer of the Year award to Lt. Cmdr. Alex Turner, from the USS Chafee (DDG 90) at the Surface Navy Association's (SNA) 36th National Symposium.

Photo by Mass Communication Specialist
3rd Class Anthony Collier

Photos by Mass Communication Specialist
1st Class Kelby Sanders

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THIS AWARD MEANS A GREAT DEAL, ESPECIALLY
AS A NUCLEAR SURFACE WARFARE OFFICER.

— Lt. Cmdr. Zane MacNaughton

Lt. Cmdr. Zane MacNaughton was selected as the Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet SWO of the Year while assigned to Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Gravelly (DDG 107). Serving initially as weapons officer then subsequently as the combat systems officer, MacNaughton earned the award due to superior performance during his tour. He is currently assigned to the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) where he is the main propulsion assistant.

For MacNaughton, the award is a testament to his ability to adapt and thrive in new leadership positions. “This award means a great deal, especially as a nuclear surface warfare officer,” he said. “The career path of switching between surface and nuclear communities can be challenging, with the risk of feeling we are not adequately prepared for either.”



For those of us who are placed into challenging leadership roles, it's common to experience discomfort in the unknown, and MacNaughton is no exception. That said, gaining experience in new positions was precisely what allowed him to develop and grow as an officer.

"As a first tour department head, I was finally feeling comfortable as the weapons officer when I was given the opportunity to step up into the second tour job of combat systems officer," MacNaughton said. "This proved quite challenging, but forced me to keep growing as a SWO and a leader, resulting in an even more rewarding time on Gravelly."

His hard work onboard was reflected in the ship's achievements during his tenure. During Gravelly's time at sea in 2022, the crew participated in exercises Neptune Strike 2022, Cold Response, Operation Songwright, Dynamic Manta, Neptune Shield 2022, and Hedgehog 22 with forces from Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

The deployment showcased Gravelly's diverse mission set, highlighting her capabilities while underscoring the importance of interoperability and operational readiness. Gravelly also played a key role in protecting national security interests during 2023 when she sortied for Operation Steel Shadow in response to the deployment of Russian guided-missile frigate Admiral Gorshkov.

Reiterating the themes of former SWO of the Year winners, MacNaughton attributes much of his success to those around him, noting this award would not have been possible without the tireless mentorship of various leaders he worked with during his time in the Navy.

"From my first leading petty officer as a junior enlisted sailor teaching me to be a technician, to my division leading petty officer keeping weapons department running while I found my footing as weapons officer, I've been lucky to learn from outstanding sailors at every part of my career," MacNaughton said. "I've also been blessed with department heads, executive

officers, and commanding officers that pushed me, gave me opportunities, and supported me, even when I've fallen short of the mark."

MacNaughton credits a strong relationship with his spouse, for allowing him to succeed in the demanding profession. He says that without her taking care of their two young children it would be near impossible for him to focus all his attention on missions at sea. One piece of advice the Surface Warrior had for future generations relates back to this idea of being supported and supportive in the wake of mistakes. A valuable character trait is the ability to fail well—learning and growing from a mistake rather than letting it define us.

In his words, "don't take yourself too seriously. We all make mistakes—use them to learn and teach others, and don't be afraid to laugh with everyone if you goof things up. The ability to handle setbacks large and small without losing your composure shows confidence in yourself and your team."

Knowing your team and knowing your role as an officer

is also a key word of wisdom. From MacNaughton's perspective, it's his obligation to set the right conditions for his people to succeed—that given the correct amount of independence, guidance, and responsibility everyone can thrive. Moreover, being technically competent enough to explain to the boss what the team is doing on a daily basis is the best way to provide support. The team is most efficient when the officer can brief the chain of command while allowing the true experts find a solution.

MacNaughton implores future generations to avoid busywork and not waste anyone's time. Our Navy Sailors are among the most driven and capable people our country has to offer. They can accomplish anything when they have their 'why' clearly defined and feel a sense of fulfillment from their work. The Surface Force separates itself as the most capable warfighting force in the world because of its people, and MacNaughton is yet another example of excellence in its ranks.



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OVER THE COURSE OF A VERY LONG YEAR IN
WHICH WE ACCOMPLISHED AN UNREAL AMOUNT,
AND OVERCAME MULTIPLE CHALLENGES.

— Lt. Cmdr. Alex Turner

Lt. Cmdr. Alex Turner was selected as SWO of the Year for Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet while assigned to the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Chafee (DDG 90). Turner currently serves as the executive officer of the Avenger-class mine countermeasures ship USS Devastator (MCM 6). For Turner, the selection of SWO of the Year is a reflection of his team's success. "It's a validation of the team's hard work over the course of a very long year in which we accomplished an unreal amount, and overcame multiple challenges," Turner said. According to Turner, the award is emblematic of "what a diverse group of officers and Sailors can accomplish in an uncertain environment, executing dynamic tasking, and conducting ourselves professionally while also meeting every mission without fail."



During Turner's tour, Chafee was involved in Summer Exercise 2021, during which they became the first U.S. Navy ship to encounter the Russian fleet off Hawaii. Following a 10-month deployment stretching from May 2021 to February 2022, Chafee participated in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2022, executing six live-fire missile tracking exercises and conducting their own similar missile live-fire Detect to Engage (DTE) with a successful BQM drone engagement. Remarkably, Chafee was out to sea for 315 days during 2021, which not only tested the crew's endurance, but allowed for significant professional development across the board. The Surface Force puts unique emphasis on servant-leadership. Turner embodies these leadership traits, effusive in his praise of the hard working Sailors who enabled his team's success. The recognition for this award, Turner notes, pales in comparison to helping his team succeed and advance in their proficiency, skills, and careers. Over the last year, Turner helped a Sailor

meritoriously advance to first class petty officer, two of his chief petty officers were promoted, and another Sailor earned the Copernicus Award, awarded by the U.S. Naval Institute for recognized superior performance in a cyber or IT related field.

Similar to how this award is a representation of his subordinate's performance, Turner sees his success as a continuation of the high-standard established by his predecessors and ship leadership.

"I am blessed with awesome individuals working with me, above and below the chain of command, and those people deserve the credit for my success," said Turner. "My commanding officers and executive officers were incredible in empowering me as a department head. It was that latitude that helped me fail, get back up, learn, and go on and win."

Turner also credits the inclusion in key decision conversations as invaluable for his personal development. Working through issues with his superiors

gave him the experience and confidence necessary to make the tough calls when similar situations arose. Empowering our people at all levels helps develop Turner's keys to success, the "three C's," of competence, confidence, and comfortability.

In addition to being an accomplished Surface Warrior, Turner is steadfast in his dedication to his family. Despite working in a profession that often requires 100% of your time and effort, Turner found ways to establish a measure of work-life balance. As Turner notes, being successful at sea has as much to do with being supported at home as it does on the deck plates. "My wife and kids are the backbone of my success," he said. "My wife never complained when I came home late or missed my daughter's recital because I was underway unexpectedly. Her unwavering, unconditional support is paramount to me being able to give this job everything. I cannot thank her enough for her sacrifice." Reflecting on what leadership advice he would give to the

next generation of SWOs, Turner emphasized the importance of a growth mindset. The Navy is constantly training, and it's important to recognize that "no one knows everything and everyone is on their own leadership journey." There will be bumps and hurdles along the way, but if we approach decisions with patience and humility, we can ensure a successful outcome. Two other words of advice are to "bloom where you're planted," and to be able to identify "spirit versus energy." For the former, recognition that needs of the Navy come first is vital—even if we find ourselves in an environment that isn't optimal, the no-fail nature of our job requires us to make the best of any circumstance. As for the latter, energy can be refilled with a nap and a cup of coffee, but finding what refills our spiritual cup is equally as important for long-term success. ↓

