

# Surface Warfare

SPECIAL  
EDITION

DIGITAL FEATURE



## U.S. Navy Surface Force Celebrates 50 Years

*Painting by John Charles Roach*

*Story by MC1 Sara Eshleman  
Images by Naval History and Heritage Command*



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**AS WE CELEBRATE 250 YEARS AS A SEA-GOING SERVICE,  
AND 50 YEARS AS A GLOBAL SURFACE FORCE, WE ARE  
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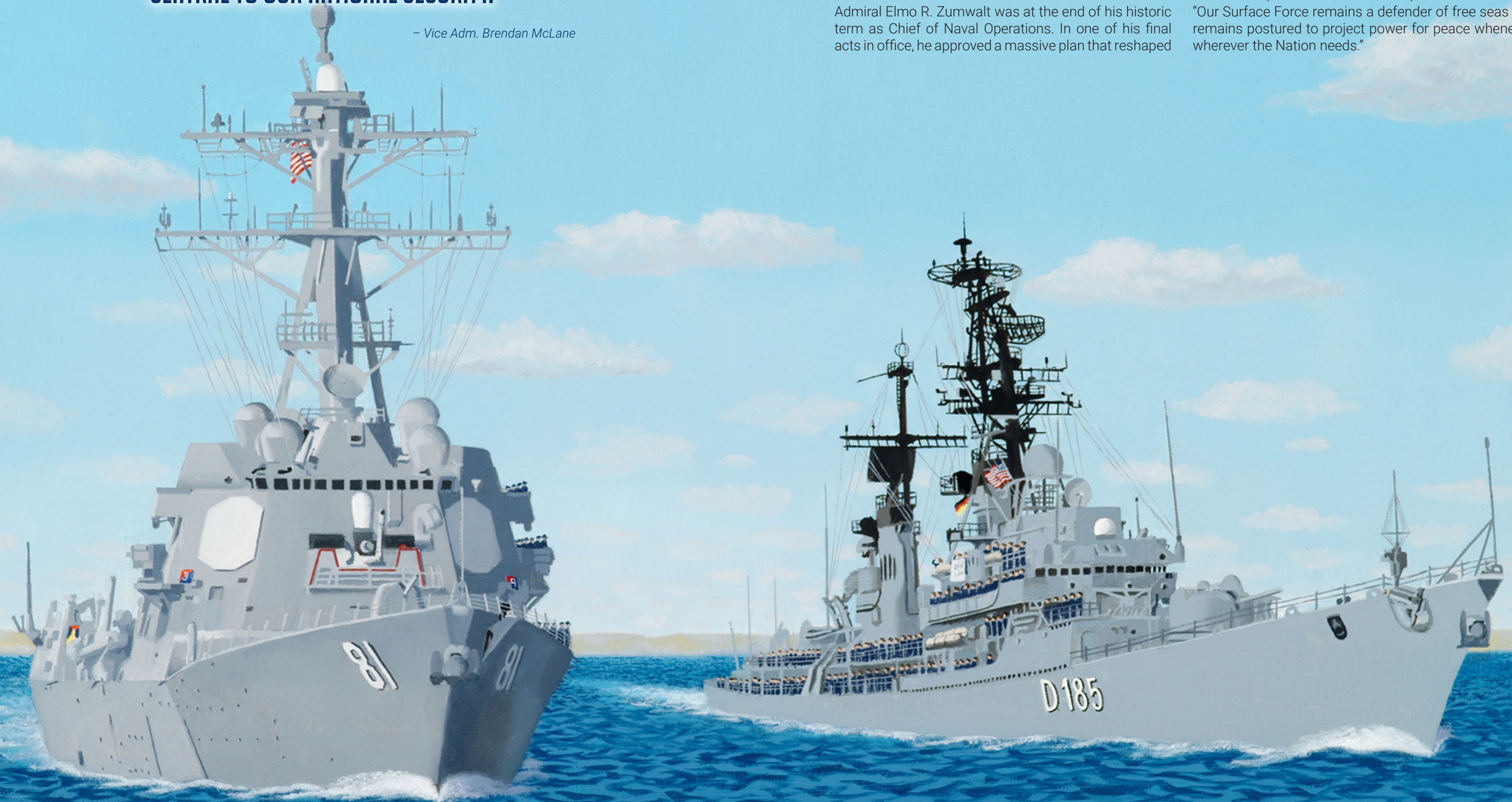
– Vice Adm. Brendan McLane

Fifty years ago, Operation Frequent Wind had just wrapped, officially signifying the end of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. The Cold War was in full swing, and the Navy, with an emphasis on readiness, needed to reorganize its surface force to meet the demand.

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt was at the end of his historic term as Chief of Naval Operations. In one of his final acts in office, he approved a massive plan that reshaped

the Surface Navy and created the Naval Surface Force we know today.

“As we celebrate 250 years as a sea-going service, and 50 years as a global Surface Force, we are central to our national security,” said Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. “Our Surface Force remains a defender of free seas and remains postured to project power for peace whenever, wherever the Nation needs.”



Painting by Douglas Rowe

Rowe





"When I look back at 50 years of surface Navy, I just try to envision what the waterfront looked like," echoed Force Master Chief Larry A. Lynch, Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. "I remember seeing pictures of 5, 10, 15 ships nested alongside the San Diego waterfront, and the quay wall was full of warships. And that's the one thing that captivates me the most: the history and tradition of it. And it just intertwined with 250 years of Navy. And I can only imagine what it looked like if there were wooden ships here, pier side, I think it would give you a very amazing picture and very amazing atmosphere and environment."

The reorganization combined the Cruiser-Destroyer, Amphibious and Service Forces on both the East and West Coasts, respectively, into two mammoth

Surface Forces: Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, headquartered in San Diego, CA, and Naval Surface Force, Atlantic, headquartered in Norfolk, VA. On July 1, 1975, both commands became fully operational, marking July 1, 2025, as a significant milestone in which both entities will celebrate 50 years as an organization.

In "NAVOP" message 89/74, Zumwalt stated that "The rationale for this action is to achieve an organization which will permit more effective management and utilization of existing resources, thereby improving the support to combat ratio, allowing us to eliminate duplication in administrative and support areas, thereby generating savings in common overhead."

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Also in 1975, the Surface Warfare Officer (SWO) insignia was created, mainly in response to the insignia worn by aviators and submariners. The SWO pin helped the SWO community reestablish its identity and instill a sense of pride and ownership within the wardroom. The Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist designation and pin would come along four years later, in 1979. The merger was nearly a year in the making. Following the announcement in mid-1974, the commands

were established in a development phase, commencing January 1, 1975. This initial move on both coasts combined the cruiser-destroyer and amphibious groups, which were disestablished on April 1. The command was considered fully operational with the addition of the service and mine ships on July 1, 1975 - the day the Surface Force now celebrates its anniversary.





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“I think in 50 years, we’re going to have a lot of unmanned vessels, and to lead that effort, I think our Sailors are going to have to continue to be smarter,” said Lynch, on the next 50 years for the Surface Forces. “And I think we’re going to pave the way for them and teach them that technology, and if you look at today’s generation, I think they are the concrete for that, the foundation of how smart they are and how they apply technology. I think we’re all going to be amazed and very surprised with how technology is going to be utilized for the next 50 years. And I think it’s going to make us more lethal, and I think it’s going to make us more efficient as a war fighting unit in 50 years.”

Of the nearly 400 surface ships active in 1975, only three remain in service: U.S. 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19), homeported in Yokosuka, Japan, and Blue Ridge-class command and control ship USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20), homeported in Gaeta, Italy. The legendary USS Constitution, the world’s oldest commissioned warship still afloat, rounds out the group and is berthed in Boston as a historic ship.

Throughout its 50-year history, the Surface Force has expanded and contracted, as its various entities have grown in capabilities and responsibilities.

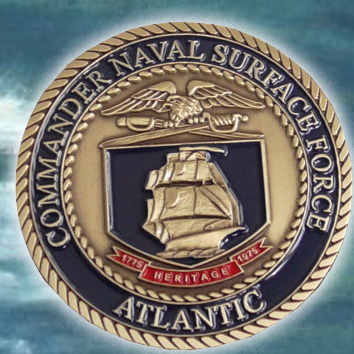


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For example, Naval Special Warfare Groups One and Two, originally part of the amphibious forces, were no longer included in the Surface Force and migrated to their own type command, the Naval Special Warfare Command, in 1987. In 2006, the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Groups and Mobile Diving and Salvage units were reorganized and are now part of the Naval Expeditionary Combat Command. Multiple bases, including the Naval Amphibious Bases in San Diego and Norfolk, were originally a part of the surface merger, but are now under the responsibility of the Naval Installations Command.

“For 50 years, our Surface Force has been the backbone of naval power, born from a bold reorganization that united our communities and strengthened our warfighting readiness,” said Rear Adm. Joe Cahill, commander, Naval Surface Force Atlantic. From Admiral Zumwalt’s vision to today’s Surface Warriors, we have evolved and excelled, remaining ready on arrival to fight and win across the globe. As we celebrate this milestone, we honor our proud history, the ships and crews who shaped it, and reaffirm our commitment to 250 more years of naval tradition.” †



Painting by John Charles Roach