Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

# "Status of the Force with VADM Brendan McLane"

DATE

**Thursday, January 16, 2026 at 3:00 p.m. ET**

FEATURING

**Vice Admiral Brendan McLane**

Commander, Naval Surface Forces Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet

**Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spicer, USN (Ret.)**

Chief Executive Officer and Publisher, U.S. Naval Institute

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Jerry McGinn: Good afternoon.

Audience Members: Good afternoon.

Dr. McGinn: My name is Jerry McGinn, and I'm here to welcome you to today's Maritime Security Dialogue. I'm the director for the Center for the Industrial Base here at CSIS. And on behalf of CSIS and the Naval – United States Naval Institute, it is my pleasure to welcome you here for the next event in our Maritime Security Dialogue. This series is made possible by the generous support of our partner, HII, today represented by Paul Tennant, a strong partner. So great to have you all here.

Today we are delighted to host Vice Admiral Brendan McLane. He's the commander of the Naval Surface Forces in the Naval Surface Force Pacific Fleet, based in San Diego. He's a graduate – a 1990 graduate of the United States Military (sic; Naval) Academy. And as we were talking about in the back, I'm a 1990 graduate of the United States Military Academy. So we had a little conversation about that, and as we both recalled our first biggest memory was the – our senior year, when Navy won on a last-second field goal in the Meadowlands. That was the only time Navy won during our four years, but that is the time we most vividly remember, so. And so, but that was a great shared memory, so it's great to have him here.

At sea, he has served aboard cruisers, destroyers, and frigates. While in command of the USS Carney, his ship won the Battle E and Battenberg Cup. In major command, he served as commodore of Destroyer Squadron 50. Ashore, he has served on the OPNAV staff and as COMNAVSURFPAC. Overseas, he served in Iraq with the U.S. Army's 354th Civil Affairs Brigade, at EUCOM, and at the 6th Fleet as the maritime operations officer director. As a flag officer, he led Navy Recruiting Command, the Carrier Strike Group Ten, and served as the 60th commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic. He assumed duties as commander, Naval Surface Forces and commander, Naval Surface Force Pacific Fleet on December 21st of 2023.

So I'm going to now turn it over to Rear Admiral Ray Spicer, who is the CEO and publisher of the U.S. Naval Institute. He's going to moderate the discussion. So over to you, Ray.

Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spicer (Ret.): Great. Thanks, Jerry.

I didn't realize you went to the Military Academy, but that's great. (Laughter.) You've had a fine naval career, despite that.

Vice Admiral Brendan McLane: (Laughs.) Yeah, despite that big setback at the beginning. (Laughter.)

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): I appreciate the partnership with CSIS. Thanks, Jerry.

Especially our sponsor, HII, Paul Tennant here today; couldn't do this without HII. So thanks very much for all you do.

This guy, if you didn't know, has spent the whole week here conducting an event called the Surface Navy Association National Symposium with a ton of panels and speeches and social events. And I can't believe he actually made it here this afternoon because he's probably hanging on a thread here. So I very much appreciate you, Admiral, making the time for us, particularly with everything that you've been through here this past week. But we're going to talk a lot about what went on at Surface Navy Association.

So big crowd, as you see, here in person. There's also additional people that are online watching this. And I bring that up because there's probably going to be a fair amount of questions. So for you in the audience that are here in person, use the QR code to ask your questions. You can start firing away now. And then if you're online, just use the website to submit your questions. I'll get to as many as I can. And usually for these I don't get to all of them, so the sooner you get in the better chance you have that your question actually might be asked.

One warning before we get going: The Navy on its own is an acronym-rich environment. I call it an ARE. (Laughter.) The surface Navy – and even for me, I was a surface guy, and I was at a couple of events this week, and I had – on countless occasions I had to lean over to my buddy and go, what does that stand for? (Laughter.) So there's a ton of acronyms associated with what we do. The last one of these that I did was with the Air Boss, Admiral Cheever, and somebody told me afterwards – they said, that was a great session, but I only understood about half of it. And I said, why is that? It was the acronyms. So I think we could out-acronym the aviation community based on what I heard this week.

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): So Admiral McLane and I are going to do our very best not to use acronyms, and if we do we'll at least explain what they stand for.

So, with that as introduction, Admiral, you spent a lot of time this week talking about your strategy for the surface force. You call it Competitive Edge 2.0. If you could just at a very high level start with what that strategy entails, I know it's about the surface Navy maintaining and extending their naval warfighting advantage but it involves several different lines of effort. If you

could just kind of high-level cover that, and then I'm going to try to dive down a little bit on some of the areas.

Vice Adm. McLane: Right. So I think at the highest level, to use just a business analogy, if you have a competitive edge against somebody else, that deters them from even taking you on, you know. It's that much of an edge. And that's how we thought about it.

You know, when we worked on the 1.0 version when I was SURFLANT and Roy Kitchener was SURFPAC, that was kind of the vision. We had five lines of effort. The first one is about our people, and we called it "leader, warrior, manager, mariner." The second one is to produce more ready ships. Those are really the two most important things that we do as a surface force.

And our – the ultimate objective in 2.0 is to have 80 percent of our available ships combat surge ready. And the way we define combat surge ready is the ship has completed the basic phase, so they're – they know how to do everything inside the lifelines and outside the lifelines. So they know how to connect with other ships, aircraft; they know how to do all that. They know how to fight fires. They know how to shoot weapons. And then we put them into a(n) advanced tactical scenario at sea with other ships run by our Naval Surface and Mine Warfighting Development Command. And once they pass that – it's called SWATT for short – they're combat surge ready. So it's a measure of performance. And the way – you know, one of the things that we did coming out of 2.0 is we've upped the pace of doing our SWATTs so that we're running them quarterly now.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): What's SWATT stand for?

Vice Adm. McLane: So that's surface warfare advanced tactical training.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Very good. Very good. See, I told you. (Laughter.) No, that's helpful.

I'm going to get right into, I think, what's your first line of effort, because it's all about warfighting. It's about – for me, what my takeaway was a big emphasis on training and certification and proficiency and things like that. And I know the surface Navy has come a very long way since you've been in the saddle there, so – made great progress. So, if you could, just start by talking about the kinds of things that you've implemented there as far as training goes in the surface Navy.

Vice Adm. McLane: Absolutely. So we've focused, really, on two levels.

One is leadership training. So we have enlisted leadership development, which we are pushing hard, and there are really three levels of that depending on where you are in your seniority, and we're doing all that. We've started a new course that blends in with chiefs initiation for new chief petty officers, which is really our senior noncommissioned officer rank on ships – and in the Navy, that's a – that's a very special leadership position. So we're investing heavily in leadership training.

We're also measuring it. For officers and for our senior enlisted, we have a Surface Warfare Command Assessment Board that we have five officers and a senior enlisted leader who, in a(n) interview process, talk about things like character and integrity and leadership, and we give people feedback on how they do with that. That's one thing.

Then technical training. We're investing much more in the technical training for our sailors. And one of the things that we're doing is really kind of catching up. You know, we split the fire controlman rating maybe a decade ago and we created fire controlman Aegis, which is one of our - is the premier weapons system that we have on our cruisers and destroyers. And so the fire controlmen, there's a special branch to them, but we didn't create a special school. They all still went through fire controlman apprentice school. So we're doing that now. We've created a kind of a hybrid where they start right after basic training in Great Lakes and then they finish it up at our facility in Dahlgren, Virginia.

And then we're doing a lot coming online this year with AI education, making sure that our sailors – it's kind of been, like, for – our basic junior sailors are getting an AI 101 course, and then it's kind of graduated up because we use it in the fleet. One of the technical improvements that we're bringing online is kind of a we call it artificial intelligence sidekick, but it helps with troubleshooting. And you know, you don't need satellite connectivity to run it. It's based inside the ship, helps with troubleshooting.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): How about on the warfare side? I know you've implemented maybe 10 years ago this whole concept of warfare tactics instructors. Can you talk about how that's come along? And –

Vice Adm. McLane: It's come very far. So the evolution 10 years ago is we created this – I've already mentioned it once, the naval warfare – Naval Surface Warfare and Mine Warfare Development Command. They produce weapons tactics instructors, and they're the ones who run these surface warfare advanced tactical training sets at sea.

Last year was their 10th anniversary, and we have – the goal is to have a weapons tactics instructor on every ship and at every destroyer squadron and amphibious squadron. We have multiple areas of expertise there.

Amphibious warfare is one of them. Integrated air and missile defense is another. And what I would say is you can see how the investment in training has paid off: 23 months of fighting in the Red Sea, not a single ship damaged, not a single sailor injured, everybody's come back home. That was a very successful combat period for us.

And one of the things that we were able to do with one of our industry partners, the team that makes the Aegis weapon system that I mentioned, have figured out quickly how to take engagement data and send it back. And then, together with industry and our WTIs, we can break that thing down like NFL game film and know, like, who pushed what button when, was everything set up correctly, and then be able to give the ship feedback within, you know, 48 to 72 hours of you did all this right but this one thing you did you can get better at. Ships were fascinated by this, of course, because their lives are all on the line. They want to get better in the moment.

And then if you think of it as concentric circles, we take the same thing and we break it back into our training at sea, both at the SWATTs that I mentioned but the group sails that we do with the entire carrier strike group or amphibious readiness group. And then in our pre-deployment final certification, we run the things that we've learned in the Red Sea. And then the third concentric circle is it goes back into our brick-and-mortar schoolhouses so it's part of the combat curriculum that we teach to officers before they go to sea.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. I think the thing that struck me, one, is just the improvements in the whole training – the way you train, but also in – you know, it used to be you do some training event, you get certified to go do whatever – shoot weapons or go to sea or flying helicopters or whatever – and then it was almost like a one and done; like, I got through that certification, let's go on to the next one. What struck me was that now it's certification and proficiency. It's like multiple reps of, you know, these scenarios to ensure that people stay proficient in their warfare area.

Vice Adm. McLane: Right. Yeah, I would say on top of that the currency as well, how frequently you have done it. You might be proficient, but how – what was the last time you ran it, so that you're, like, really at the – at the top of your game. That really has been an evolution for us to be able to measure all those things.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. And then I think you're taking that model and that warfare tactical instructor – or WTI – model and doing the same thing on the engineering side now with –

Vice Adm. McLane: That's right. That was – you know, maintenance has been an area that has challenged us. One of the things that we've done to try to get better there is create advanced engineering instructors kind of at this WTI model to help us

better in our surface groups, in our afloat training groups, help our ships get through the maintenance and start the basic phase successfully.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. And of course, you know, the end result – you touched on it – of having these operators that are well-trained, proficient. You saw it play out in spades in the Red Sea. You know, first use of antiship ballistic missiles in combat – and not just antiship ballistic missiles, but throw in the mix antiship cruise missiles; throw in the mix drones of various sizes, shapes, flight profiles, sometimes simultaneously coming at our ships. I want you to talk a little bit, because I know you're proud of that.

Vice Adm. McLane: Very.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): And we're all proud of how the surface Navy did, but can you just talk a little bit about the results?

Vice Adm. McLane: Absolutely. And I think just to make sure everybody really appreciates how difficult this is, this is in the toughest radar environment in the world. The southern Red Sea is usually humid. It's hot. There's a mountain range on the western coast of Yemen. And it's high wind, so you get a lot of sand blowing. And all those things combined make it difficult to pick up things that are coming off the coast, because the mountain range kind of obscures it until it goes feet wet and then the – all the sand in the air makes it really difficult when you're tuning the radar to be able to pick up is that sand or is it – or is it a missile coming in. And usually what a poorly tuned radar will do is it'll mistake sand blowing for an incoming missile and you'll get a lot of false alerts. So you have to have that thing tuned, but you don't want to tune it all the way down because then you won't pick up anything at all.

So one of the things – just to come back to the SMWDC and the WTIs – is we know the right way to tune it. Thanks to a lot of our industry partners, we now for most of our baselines have got training tapes where they can work on doing that, like, almost like in a classroom environment. That's a new thing, being able to simulate that environment. Usually it looks – training tapes are usually things like you're operating off the coast of California, and it's pristine, and the radar is easy to tune, and it's easy to pick up the missiles.

But what I would say is really foot-stomp the performance of USS Carney. They came through in really late '24, before we knew the war was going to kick off, and they had just gotten through the Suez Canal, and anybody who's been through the Suez Canal knows that that is a varsity-level event where just about everybody on the ship is up for over 24 hours because the way you come down through the Suez Canal, it usually starts around midnight if you're doing the southern run, it's a high-traffic area before you get in. So

you've got everybody up in their navigation stations well before that, and you've kind of prepped, and everybody's excited particularly the first time you're doing it. Like, by the eighth time it's old hat. But so you – so you've been up a long time, then you come out, and again it's another high-traffic environment down in Port Suez.

So Carney had gone all the way through that, and the next morning – so they're at the – really, the entrance, the northern part of the Red Sea, when they got the call: You've got some inbound cruise missiles, and the call came from Fifth Fleet, and you're going to need to shoot them down. So they went from that long Suez Canal transit into combat like that, and they were ready for it. So every ship subsequently knew what they were getting into. Carney didn't. Carney had to – Carney demonstrated the readiness that you have to be, you know, with no notice. Everybody else knew that they were going into combat.

It's certainly helped – and I talked to all of our returning deployers, talking to the captains of Stockdale and Spruance, two San Diego destroyers who came back from a combat patrol last year. How did you get your crews ready for it? You know, being told you're going into combat at the beginning of the basic phase, you know, that thing is, like, six, eight months away, we're going to be in combat. It doesn't have the immediacy, like a tension effect, that you would imagine with a Millennial sailor. They're like, yeah, OK, that's eight months from now. If you'd asked one of, like – like my daughter, it's like, tell me right before it happens so then I'll know right before, but don't tell me now; I don't need to know it yet. But this is like developing the muscle memory to be ready for it. Having the tapes, having pictures, having the PowerPoint slides of each shot reconstructed, and then being able to show that to the crew – like, this is real; it's going to be coming at us; we have to get ready – very, very motivational thing.

And then just to tell the story of Spruance and Stockdale, highly successful deployments. Both ships together – one of the things that we did tactically was we would run two ships together in tandem for mutual support. They had a southbound run last year where – and it takes you about 36 hours to drive through the entire threat area in the Red Sea when you're kind on in range of everything that they can shoot at you. And so you're – it's a full-ship experience. Your engineers have to be there on the engines because you're running at full power. You're not, you know, taking your time driving through it; you're going 25 knots, so all four engines are online. And you know, and – but you're doing it for a day and a half, so everybody gets to rotate through. There's no A-team type of mentality there.

The Houthis shot everything at them. Antiship ballistic missiles at depressed trajectories, so these things were coming at you at Mach 5. And I kind of described, like, it's very hard to pick them up until they go feet wet, and

when they go feet wet you – and they're coming at you at Mach 5 you've got a minute. That's it.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. There's not a whole lot of wet there, right?

Vice Adm. McLane: So we'll pick it up, engage it, shoot, and then probably shoot again just to make sure. So we were – they did that multiple times. And then you described cruise missiles are coming at you at a much slower speed, so that's – it's a difficult thing if you think of it almost like in a tennis way. You're getting, like, really hard shots and then really slow shots, and you have to be ready for all of that. And then the drones, hard to pick up with radar because they're going so slow, and they can come at all type of altitudes so there's not necessarily the same profile that you're looking for on the altitude side.

So one of the things that impressed me the most was how everybody on the ship got it that they were part of this. You know, one of the supply clerks who was one of the lookouts, she got it and she knew that, you know, her job was to keep the soda machine stocked so when people come out of the Combat Information Center they can get a Red Bull in order to wind down after, you know, standing six hours of a combat watch.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah.

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah, very stressful. They did a, you know, fantastic job, as everybody knows.

I think you told the story about – I think it was The Sullivans that did operations in the Red Sea and then subsequent operations in defense of Israel. And I don't know if you want to share that.

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah, absolutely. So we had three – on three separate occasions, our ships supported Israel in their ballistic missile defense, but it wasn't until the 12-day war that we saw the numbers that we did before. Before the shots were not as numerous, but there were hundreds and hundreds of missiles that came at Israel during the 12-day war. And together, you know, our ships that were off the coast of Israel – and this is a difficult geometry for ballistic missile defense, really kind of designed for a the ship is in front of the country that it's going to protect, if you can think of it that way, and the missile system is designed for that. So when you're on the other side, on the back side of the country in the Israel geometry, trying to shoot over Israel to hit the missile before it comes, that's much more difficult.

We're coordinating with the Israelis, you know, over the radio and trying to get shot deconfliction in real time. Didn't always work because it's happening so fast. Sometimes we shoot at the same missile, which is – you know, inbound missile, which is OK. You know, you don't want – you don't want anybody hurt. And the performance overall was great; combined together, shot down over 90 percent of the incoming missiles. So that was a very, very successful operation that our ships were part of.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): A good problem to have, but they essentially shot most of their inventory.

Vice Adm. McLane: So we –

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): And then they proved, you know, an ability to reload at sea, which I –

Vice Adm. McLane: Rapid reload, you know, was an important mission. We had – you know, we've got – Sixth Fleet has a task force that's an integrated air and missile defense task force. They ran how to do that. They did a lot of the coordination with the Israeli Defense Forces. Meanwhile, our Destroyer Squadron 60 was the one that was doing the maneuver side so that you had ships on station, ships coming off station going into a rapid-reload area where, you know, the planes were coming in with missiles, offloading them, putting them onto the ships, and then coming back in. And so you had this movement around to keep 24/7 coverage.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. Wonderful.

I'm going to move to people.

Vice Adm. McLane: OK.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): There's a lot to talk about people, but some of the things that I took away.

One, the Navy had the best recruiting year ever. I think the target was 40,600 sailors; in 2025, the Navy ended up recruiting over 44,000. So you got that.

Meanwhile, on the surface Navy side, I think the number you threw out was roughly 6,000 gapped billets at sea. Which – the number I took away was that you said roughly, if you do it per ship, it's 42 gapped billets per ship.

So I know it takes a while to get through the boot camp and the A School and the C School, you know, to get those sailors out to the ships at sea. Do you foresee – I know that you had to kind of personally get involved with making sure the manning was right at the right time for each of these ships as they

went through various cycles, but do you foresee a time when it'll start to catch up, where we can see improvements in the manning at sea?

Vice Adm. McLane: Yes. In fact, I just got an update from my personnel officer, Eric Pond, and he predicted that Q1 FY '27 we should see the numbers come down, because we can measure it. We know how many people are needed on a ship, and if the system doesn't get them all on the ship we have to move people around. So we track by movement how many it takes.

So in – when we started doing this several strike groups ago, it took about 200 what we call type commander manning actions. And what we like to do to prevent jerking people around is if you're going to do one destroyer in San Diego but the other one, let's say, needs you more, we will divert you to the other one rather than have you report and then send you temporarily to that one just to get through this deployment and then send you back, which is – that's the real disrupting people's lives. So that's what we're doing.

We're also doing this thing called cross-decking, which is, like, a permanent move. You're going from this ship; you're now on that ship, and you don't have to go back after the deployment to your original ship. So –

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. But same home power to the extent – yeah.

Vice Adm. McLane: Same home port. So – yeah, so, you know, families aren't disrupted. But it's – we're trying to keep it to apples to apples in order to balance it out, and getting the right number of people on the ship at the right time. And that right time is the beginning of basic phase.

We invest heavily in training our crews. And it's all team training, as you can imagine. Like, to be able to fight a fire, it takes a team of people. We've got three repair – what we call repair lockers on a ship. One in the front, one in the middle, one all the way in the back. Depending on where the fire is, you want the closest repair locker to be able to action that fire. Each of those repair lockers has a fully trained team of firefighters. You know, and that's really a collateral duty for everybody. Everybody on the ship has a firefighter assigned to them. And we practice that all the time.

But you don't know how to do that as a team right away. It has to be trained over, and over, and over again. So we want to get the highest number of people at the beginning of the basic phase so you take full advantage of the team training so that you're not coming in, like, right before the deployment, and then you try to plug into a team that's already formed. You can imagine that's difficult, hard to do. So we want to take full advantage of the training infrastructure that we have so that we get our maximum return on investment there.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Gotcha. You just came from SNA. What's the – how are the retention numbers? What are you hearing from the junior officers about the Navy and – or, the surface Navy? Are they sticking round?

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah. So, yeah, we measure it really two ways. One, enlisted retention, which is high. We're making the numbers, like, in the aggregate. But there are certain niche ratings that we're falling below on. As you can imagine, our sailors are highly sought after in industry. And we're very proud of that. And we want to keep them, but it's competitive. So fire controlmen, intelligence, and, you know, IT are hard ratings to retain. So I think we make the difference in leadership. We know when people are coming up on the end of their commitments. And being able to mentor, coach, make sure that they fully understand the benefits of staying in the Navy, that's something that we're doing a lot more intentionally now.

On the officer side, we had a real challenge during the COVID years for the division officers who went through their sea tours during that time, of retaining them. So we're lower in those three year groups. But subsequently, post-COVID, we're back to getting the numbers that we need. So if you can kind of think of it this way. We bring in, surface warfare-wise, about a thousand new ensigns every year. You know, spread out across the year, but at the end of the year we've brought in a thousand new officers into surface warfare. We need 275 officers to stay in order to make our department head numbers, right? So it's obviously not – it's not a one for one. It's the people who have gotten on board, you know, four years ago that we need to sign up for department head. And last year we made that number.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Great. I'm going to shift over to – I see some questions coming in, so keep them coming. But one of your lines of effort is about producing more ready ships. And I know it's been a challenge. And you came in as the SWO boss. And, you know, you inherited three decades or so of maintenance issues that you've had to wrestle with. And I think you're making great progress there. How are we doing at improving ship maintenance and maintenance delays? What kinds of actions are you taking? What kind of results are you seeing from that?

Vice Adm. McLean: Yeah. Yeah. So it has definitely been a struggle. You know, I think we crested back in 2019 with, like, over 7,000 days of maintenance delay. So the way we measure it is your maintenance availability is supposed to end on a certain day. If it goes long, that's like a counter. And it starts going. And then you, you know, you get to the cumulative from of all the ships that are running along. So you can imagine 7,000, very high number. We have worked hard to bring that down. We were on a really good pace in '23 and '24, '25 was a difficult year for us. We had some setbacks with, really, on the west coast, six ships

that rolled over and rolled almost the entire year. So those six ships caused, like, almost a thousand days of maintenance delays must among them.

Those have all been closed out. So we're rolling into '26, the first quarter, already done. We're already 100 days of maintenance delay under what the projection is. We're 20 percent better in our on-time completion than we should be. So I think a lot of the things that we had started several years ago are clutching in now, and we're seeing the ROI. Some of the things that that we're doing. One is the – we stood up what we call surface groups. And this is kind of a playbook from the Cold War. We had organizations on the waterfront that got ships ready through their maintenance and training phases. And then we had organizations that would take them on deployment and lead them tactically. In the early '90s, in order to become more efficient, we collapsed that and made that into one organization. And what we have found, that that really just didn't work anymore. That stopped being effective. It might be efficient personnel-wise, but we weren't getting the outcomes we wanted in the maintenance phase.

And to think of it like a story, you're the commodore of a destroyer squadron. You've got four or five ships. You have a successful deployment. You come back. And then slowly, one after the other, enters the maintenance phase. So they're in a private shipyard in Norfolk, let's say. And the first one – that first avail starts going off the rails. And you've learned five ways that, wow, we can't let that happen again. You take those five ways, you apply it to the next ship that goes in. And then you learn there are five completely different ways for a maintenance availability to go off the rails. And then you're, like, well, by the third one we're not going to get tricked anymore. We know it for sure. And then that third one goes pretty well, and the fourth one does too.

And then you transfer off. And then everybody – and then everybody resets, because everybody moves on. And you redo it again. And there's no corporate knowledge. And we're losing on 50 percent of our maintenance availability. So we have – we've reconstituted surface groups that that's all they do, is they get ships through maintenance phase, they get ships through the basic phase, and they own that. And the corporate knowledge is growing there. This is where we're sending our advanced engineering instructors to help. And I'm very, very encouraged by what we're seeing.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Great. All right. I'm getting all these questions. I won't get through mine. I didn't think I would. But I do – before we leave on this already – more ready ships idea, we heard time and time again this week about combat surge ready at 80 percent is the goal. And you talked a little bit about what that means. Is that a lofty goal? Are we far away from it today? Or are we close? What's your sense of how close we are to combat surge ready at 80 percent? I know the target is 2027, but where are we today?

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah. So the way – you know, the CNO likes to talk about, you know, 2027, yes, of course, but I want to be ready now. And that's how we are looking at it. So if you think, where are we today combat surge ready, that's still a stretch goal for us, like, on a day-in, day-out. But within 30 days from today, I can get there. So I know what I need to do to be able to do that. And that's really the challenge for my team and our surface groups, is to kind of bring that difference down so that we are 80 percent combat surgery every day. And we're doing that.

Read Adm. Spicer (Ret.): All right, I'm going to get into these questions, but I do want to – one that I know is going to come up, so I'm just going to ask you, lots of talk about the Golden Fleet. What is the Golden Fleet?

Vice Adm. McLane: So I think of the Golden Fleet as the fleet of the future. It's a high-low mix. Which is something we have always had. That's not a controversial thing. People are kind of spinning this like it's a controversial thing. It's not. Going back to the very beginning of our Navy, we had a high-low mix. So you've got high-end ships that can do high-end things and you've got some low-end ships that can do missions that aren't at the – you know, not at the major combat operation level.

Right now we don't have a lot of low ships. We've got – on the lower end we've got littoral combat ships. We really don't have enough of them. They do a lot of great missions. We've got three of them in Fifth Fleet, which is, you know, in the Middle East, with the mine countermeasure mission package. They're doing great work there. We've got them in the Pacific doing surface warfare there. And then we've got them in the Gulf of America and off the coast of California doing the territorial integrity of the United States mission.

So they're very busy, but we really don't have enough of them. And what you end up doing is you end up using a destroyer, a high-end platform, for a lot of the missions that you really don't need a high-end platform for. You know, to use a car analogy, you know, you're pulling something that's very, very light with a Ford 350. You don't need to do that. You can probably – you know, a sedan could pull it just fine. But we're using our, if you think of the destroyers as the Ford 350s, we're using those for everything. And it's not what they're really designed for.

So if we have more frigates, which is going to be part of the Golden Fleet, we're going to be able to do a lot more of that. You know, there's a lot of talk about, well, you know, what's the survivability? What's the lethality these ships have? You don't need to be full, you know, major combat operation for a lot of the things that we do. You just don't need to. And we're going to be able to do that with them. They're going to be very capable for the things that we do. You know, two of the ships that I've been on were frigates. They were amazing ships. And I really can't wait to get them. And using the proven

design of ships that are already built here in the United States, we're going to be able to get them quickly. Like, '27, '28 we should be able to get the first ones. I'm very excited about that.

And then high end, I think one thing for the group here to understand, the war of the future is going to be a lot different. We kind of talked a bit, Red Sea. That's a, you know, very – relatively small space, but in that small space things are coming at you very fast. War of the future could be in a completely different area where you've got wide open areas, but things coming at you very, very fast, too. Maybe even faster, like in a hypersonic missile war. And we want to be able to shoot hypersonic missiles too. Right now, we don't have anything at sea that can do that. A hypersonic missile is very large. It does not fit into one of our vertical launching cells that we have on our destroyer.

We are refitting the ships of the Zumwalt-class with a missile called Conventional Prompt Strike which is a hypersonic missile. Zumwalt just finished at HII, thank you. And they just did builder trials today. And so we will have a Conventional Prompt Strike capability at sea. This is something – like, so Zumwalt, this is of a certain size. If we can build a battleship, we can put a lot of Conventional Prompt Strike missiles on something like that. That's something I am very, very excited about. Bottom line, working with our ship design people, the destroyer hull, which we're now, you know, building flight III versions of, maxed out on air conditioning, electrical power, and just sheer space to be able to launch weapons from. There's nothing else that we can put on that ship. Nothing else fits.

And the design that we are working on for the future, which we call DDG(X), we had realized recently that we were going to have to make some really tough choices. It was either going to have to have a gun or a, you know, conventional prompt strike launcher, you couldn't get both. And that's – you want both, right? The battleship gives us both. I'm very excited about that.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Great. Some – I'll get to the questions here. But there was sort of a human outcry when we decided – or made the decision on the frigate to use an existing model. Is that is the Navy giving up on antisubmarine warfare? What's your response to that?

Vice Adm. McLane: No. I mean, I think you know, when you come and you divide the tasks up in the high-low mix, antisubmarine warfare is high, right? That's varsity-level warfare. And that's what our destroyers do. And they have got the premier antisubmarine warfare suites in the world.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. OK. I promise to get your questions. I'm going to get to them. This one is from Mike Mann. And I'm the reason I chose Mike Mann is because he's my classmate from the Naval Academy. (Laughter.) But I've seen this question

from a couple people: So your surface combatants certainly achieved tremendous success against the Houthis and Iranians in the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. Are you comfortable that we could achieve the same degree of success against our near-peer competitor in the western Pacific?

Vice Adm. McLane: So I would say, I'm never comfortable. I always want to get better. What I can say is I'm very proud of our performance in fighting in the Red Sea, but nobody in the service Navy is resting on those laurels. We're taking it to the next level. We know the future fight is going to be a lot different. And we're going to continue to train against the highest-end threats that are out there.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): This one's from Bob Shinnell (ph): From your fleet readiness perspective, where do you see the greatest shared industrial base risks between surface? And how can industry help address those risks before they show up as availability or maintenance delays across the fleet?

Vice Adm. McLane: So I think the greatest area where industry and the Navy could help each other is advanced manufacturing getting after obsolescence. So we have a significant obsolescence problem, particularly when it comes to, like, circuit cards, but also a lot of other things that are just made out of metal. And the companies that – you know, our ships last a very long time. We've extended the service life of the very first destroyers that were built by another five years because they were built so very well. But a lot of the components there, which were built for lifetime of the ship, well, we're exceeding that now. They're going to have to get replaced. A lot of those things are not made anymore. And I need help from industry to get after this obsolescence problem. I think additive manufacturing is a great way of doing that.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): This one from Ben Cipperley, chief strategy officer at HavocAI: With the Navy well underway in adopting unmanned systems – we haven't talked about unmanned – on, under, and above the sea, can you talk about how you're thinking about command control of these multidomain systems, and how operation centers and watch standards are managing the cognitive load associated with controlling the numbers of systems that will be employed in a China contingency in the Taiwan Strait.

Vice Adm. McLane: So I don't really want to talk about just one specific scenario. I think the larger issue of where are we with manned/unmanned teaming, we've made a significant investment in unmanned and our sailors love working with them. We're experimenting with it. We're learning a lot with the forward fleets that have task forces set up that experiment with these things. Task Force 59 has been around for several years. They've really started the whole thing. Six fleets got one. We've stood up unmanned squadrons to start working on those things on the West Coast. Very excited about it. The sailors are into it. We've got the kit.

I think one of the things that that we're learning a lot about is, how do you launch them quickly from sea, and you do it safely, in a safe environment? Easier said than done, right? So we're practicing that. We're getting a lot better at it. When it comes to operator to unmanned vessel ratio, we're getting a lot better at that too. We thought we'd be at a certain benchmark, and that's what we would – kind of that's how we'd shape the manning of our squadrons. We're able to really exceed that already in 2025. So I'm very excited about that, too.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): So that that gets at the command and control issue about how many you can do.

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): OK. Richard Abott, Defense Daily: Can you update us on the state of HELIOS laser testing on USS Preble? We didn't talk about directed energy, but, you know, that was something that we saw in the Red Sea, about using lower cost, infinite magazine-type capability against some of these low cost threats. Instead of, you know, high-end missiles against a $10,000 drone. So HELIOS is one of those.

Vice Adm. McLane: So I'm committed to directed energy weapons. You know, how I see it really helping us is if you think of directed energy weapons as – at this stage of where we are in development – as defensive, then we can save all of the missiles in – or, the space in our vertical launching system for offensive weapons. And we've got – if you're thinking directed energy – you've got a limitless magazine for defense. When it comes to HELIOS, I'm very excited about that. We had successful tests against drones last year. Preble is now in a maintenance phase. When she comes back out we're going to continue the testing and kind of keep upping the challenge to see what she can do. And this is – you know, it's still nascent for us. It's the very first type of laser that we've had on a ship. And I know that our industry partners are already coming up with better, more efficient ways of doing it. And I'm looking forward to continuing to work together with them.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): We touched on this a little bit, but I'll ask it anyway. Stephen Alexander, U.S. Naval Academy Board of Governors: The face – "the face" is in quotes – of our Navy projects power. To that end, our ships must look good. What are your plans to improve the repair conditions of our surface warfare fleet?

Vice Adm. McLane: So I guess I'd object to just the inference there in it. Our sailors and our crews and the support structure in our ports work very hard at getting our ships in the best possible condition all the time. And we work hard, particularly, you know, when ships come back from deployment, we want them to look their very best. Which is challenge because they've been at sea for nine months.

And as everybody knows, if you put metal in salt water that's going to be a challenge to fight corrosion. So it's something – when I was the captain of the ship we had a kind of a Golden Gate approach to it. Like, we're always working on some part of this. Like, it's always going on, just like painting the Golden Gate Bridge.

And I was really glad USS Fitzgerald just came back last week from a long deployment. And she looked really, really good. But you just have to really pay attention to it. You have to stay on it all the time. We're working with industry to come up with better things that that don't corrode as much. You know, bimetallic corrosion is a really big challenge. So we're trying to do – use polymerics instead of metal when it comes to junction boxes and things like that, that you bolt on to the top side of a ship. And then we've made a significant investment, you know, several years ago with polysiloxane paint, which is supposed to be better. And then frequently we're compared to other navies, like, how come they look better? Well, a lot of them are using lead-based paint, which we're not allowed to use anymore. But lead-based paint works really, really well. (Laughter.) We don't do that. And polysiloxane paint has lots of advantages, but it's not perfect yet.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): From Trent Hone (ph): What is the largest challenge facing the service fleet with regard to distributed maritime operations? And how well do you feel the fleet is getting after it?

Vice Adm. McLane: So great question Trent. And what I would say is contested logistics in a distributed maritime operation, making sure that you have everything that you need. Because you're going to be far away from all the other ships. You're going to be – and if something breaks on your ship you need to have the spare part, the replacement part, already on board. So one of the things that I'm working on is something that we're calling trying to get to maximum redundancy, so that every part that you have – or, everything that you have on the ship, you have got the spare part for as well. So if there is a casualty, you can – because you're not going to – it's going to be very difficult to get the spare parts.

On the side of, well, what else could we be doing in contested logistics? Just coming out of SNA and seeing what industry is coming up with when it comes to unmanned things that you can send at high speeds for long distances across the ocean with, you know, one, two, like, multiple-ton carrying capabilities, very low radar cross sections, I'm very excited about that.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Mmm hmm. Wonderful.

This one's from Bill Hamblet, editor-in-chief of Proceedings: In the contest for sea control/sea denial inside the first island chain, offensive mine warfare

could play a huge role in deterring or defeating the PLAN. Does the Navy have a plan to boost investment in mine warfare at scale?

Vice Adm. McLane: So I would say that that is a great question, but probably for somebody else. Like, I'm the – I'm the man, train, and equip guy. I get ships ready to go on deployment. The ships that we have – we've got, you know, special ships that do mine countermeasure, but I'm not a mine-laying type of organization.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. Got you.

OK. From Lieutenant Commander Melnick: With the implementation of the AI troubleshooting sidekick you mentioned, are we receiving real-time feedback on the usability of that program? And are we looking at expanding that type of technology into combat information center – into the combat information center to provide sidekicks in tactical scenarios and operations?

Vice Adm. McLane: No. We're not – we're not there yet. So we're not – to say it this way, the way, the way I think it's being implied, is we're not connecting the AI sidekick into Aegis. Like, it's a standalone system where it helps us troubleshoot things that are going wrong with the weapon system, let's say that. The other thing that we have is an augmented reality maintenance set. Think of goggles that our sailors can put on when they're troubleshooting equipment. It's connected, you know, via satellite, back to our in-service engineering agents in Crane, Indiana, who can help them troubleshoot radars or other electronic great. That was huge.

I was on deployment during the pandemic. And we couldn't fly tech reps out. Like, everything was closed down. We had to figure it out on our own. And we did. We kept everybody going. But it would have been nice to have something like that, no doubt about it. So I'm very excited about that new kind of way of troubleshooting.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. All right, I think we're out of time. There are more questions. That's always a sign of a good session, when you got more questions than you have time to answer them. But is there anything – before we close, is there anything that you wanted me to ask that I didn't ask? Or do you have any parting thoughts for the audience?

Vice Adm. McLane: I think one of the parting thoughts, or one of the things that we haven't touched on that I'm really going to be pushing hard on in '26, is this connection between innovation and training. You know, we really need to continue and accelerate on innovation, but unless we have a firm foundation in training and education of our sailors it's really going to be hard to land that innovation. Innovation is great, but we have to take it from prototype and then bring it to scale across all the ships to be able to make it effective for us. And being able to – that scaling process, it has to land on every ship

and people need to know how to – what to do with it. And then, if you're really well trained, then you can be able to experiment with it and do things with it that nobody anticipated. And our sailors are really, really great at that if they're well trained. So the training of our sailors while we're pushing hard on innovation, it's kind of a symbiotic relationship that we're going to be working on hard in '26.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah. All right.

Well, I want to close by thanking CSIS for being a great partner and letting us use the facility here; thank again our sponsor, HII, for sponsoring this event.

But mostly I want to thank you, Admiral. Been a rough week. I think this is the last official act of the week for you. I'm sure you're exhausted. But you know, having spent a little time over there this week, to a person everyone is impressed with what you and the team are doing for the surface Navy, and the quality and character of the people that are in the surface Navy. So hats off to you for everything you've done for the – for the surface Navy, for the Navy as a whole, and for our nation. So how about a round of applause for Admiral McLane? (Applause.)

Vice Adm. McLane: Thank you. (Applause.)

If I could – if I could just add one thing, I mean, it is an exhausting week, but I think one of the things that gives me energy is talking to midshipmen. I know you are based on the yard of the Naval Academy so you're used to this, but when you're from the fleet you don't get to see midshipmen until the summertime. And then getting to interact with them just about every day at the – at the annual convention was just inspiring. It gave me great hope for the future. We are in very good hands.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): Yeah, I agree. Thanks again.

Vice Adm. McLane: Yeah. Thank you.

Rear Adm. Spicer (Ret.): All right. Thanks, everybody. (Applause.)

(END).