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We Must Master Our Game

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Captain Gerry Roncolato and Commander Audrey Monish, U.S. Navy (Retired)



During the U.S. Naval Institute *Defense Forum Washington* event on 4 December, an attendee posed this question to the Surface Warfare panel regarding the recent collision reviews, “What immediate steps should be taken to help ensure further collisions and incidents are avoided?” The question was inadequately answered. What follows is an attempt to correct that discrepancy.

The U.S. Navy collisions and groundings in 2017, addressed by the Navy’s *Comprehensive Review of Recent Surface Force Incidents*, were avoidable. So concludes the Review. To change course and get headed away from repeats of these events, the Review recommends myriad actions at every level. Just as it took years to reach this nadir, it will take time for these initiatives and corrective actions to take full effect.

In the meantime, our ships continue to operate at sea under demanding conditions. Many of these conditions remain unchanged from those experienced by the crews of the damaged ships. So, while the wheels of organizational change move inexorably, and perhaps ponderously, forward, today’s commanding officers can and should take immediate steps to make sure their crews perform at the peak of professionalism and to the best of their capabilities.

This is not deep philosophical scholarship—it is practical, urgent and basic. To many, it will seem obvious, but it suggests a reminder of the fundamentals: blocking and tackling; dribbling and passing. It needs to be said, and crews need to hear it. It is foundational, and it is a departure point from which to take the conversation—both internally and externally. That is the spirit in which the following is offered.

This “Captain’s Call” is a suggested conversation between commanding officers and crews that conveys the gravity of the situation and illuminates the environment in which our ships must operate—in peace and, potentially, in war. While conveying the value and necessity of individual contribution and inclusivity, it seeks to instill in the entire crew a sense of ownership and responsibility, and the self-assuredness, duty, and obligation to take necessary actions when required.

“Good morning. I’ve called you all here to talk about our ship, our Navy, recent tragic events, and our way forward.

Shipmates have died this year. They didn’t have to. The collisions involving Fitzgerald and John S. McCain could have been avoided. Had even one crew member spoken up and broken the chain of events, those 17 sailors could be alive today.

Our job is a dangerous one. That’s certainly true in combat; it is also true during routine peacetime steaming. Take a look around you, right now. Each of us relies on the others here, and they rely upon you, to ensure that we do not follow the paths of our less fortunate shipmates.

I’m the Captain, and with that position comes the ultimate authority and responsibility for the performance, effectiveness, and safety of this ship, and its crew. That is the way of the sea and of our Navy; it cannot be delegated; it cannot be shrugged away. But while I am the Captain, I, too, am human—we all are. As humans, we make mistakes; we miss signals; we get tired; this is true for me, no less than for any one of you. Each of us shares the dangers of going to sea equally, from Captain to the most junior Sailor on board. Each of us thus owes a responsibility to the rest to help ensure safety and mission success, to the very best of each of our abilities. The power and strength of that is by far greater than the sum of its parts. And that’s what makes a ship, especially a warship, so very special and unique.

These are challenging times. The world that I grew up in is rapidly giving way to an even more dangerous one. Not only the numbers of threats, the diversity of threats, and the complexity of threats have continued to increase, but the predictability of the threats has decreased. We are more globally employed than ever before, in a wider variety of missions, on even more limited materiel resources. Every year, even every day, the possibility grows of a major clash at sea, not just from the sea; such a clash may be against capable and determined opponents. We have to be ready for that possibility.

Being ready requires us to be masters of our “game.” We must first master the basics of dribbling and passing, and then we have to perfect the tactics we’ll use if it comes time to fight. In short, every one of us must be masters of our profession, because all of us are counting on each other to be ready when the chips are down—and so too is our country, our families, and our friends. We are a warfighting organization, and this is a warship.

So, I need you—each of you—to reflect on what happened on board Fitz and McCain and commit yourselves to the Navy, this ship, and your shipmates. I need you to think, to speak up, to act, and to trust—trust me, trust each other, and trust yourselves. We all need to constantly review the worst-case scenario, in every situation and be ready for it.

In all that you do, no matter how critical or routine, I need each of you to:

- *Own the situation and your role in it. Assume responsibility. This is your ship. These are your shipmates.*
- *Think about it/investigate it. What is happening? What should be happening? Pay attention to when the hair on your neck stands up.*
- *Report it. Let the team know.*
- *Act on it.*

I trust your contributions. I trust your actions. I expect them. This is both simple and hard. It takes courage and commitment. But, if we all do these things, we can do anything — safely and successfully.

With me rests the ultimate responsibility for our mission and our lives. But I cannot do it alone. The goal is for all of us to act in the interest of ship, shipmates, and mission—to act independently but as one cohesive unit. To act correctly the first time is ideal. To act and err is acceptable; mistakes must be used as learning points. But the failure to act when action is needed is unacceptable.

We must be safe and minimize risk, but safety and risk must be balanced with the need to be bold in action and swift in decision. With each of us owning, thinking, and acting—all aligned with commander’s intent and established procedures—we can get the mission done and bring everyone home. That is what we owe each other and what the nation expects

of us.

Questions?"

Captain Roncolato commanded the USS *The Sullivans* (DDG-68) and Destroyer Squadron 26. He is now an independent consultant working on DDG-1000 engineering training.

Commander Monish was part of the team that authored *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* .

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