



Bringing Predictability to the Fleet

By Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Peggy Trujillo, Defense Media Activity

Families gather on the pier in the shadow of the 80,000-ton aircraft carrier looming behind them. While there are many tearful goodbyes, the Sailors and their families have prepared for this day.

The crew of more than 5,000 Sailors are getting underway to steam halfway around the world, prepared to execute whatever tasking is handed down from higher authority.

Unfortunately, as world demand has increased predictable underway schedules have become less common, leaving Sailors and their families unsure of when they will see each other - or when they will have to say goodbye - again.

The crew of USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) certainly understands this dilemma. After spending the first half of 2011 completing training and certification, the ship departed Naval Base Kitsap, Wash. in July for a scheduled seven-month deployment to support Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

They returned home in March of 2012. Designated as the surge-ready carrier, the commanding officer was notified a mere four months after returning that the ship needed to deploy in August to the 5th Fleet area of operations.

The crew of Stennis spent eight months serving as the primary platform for aviation support to coalition forces in Afghanistan and returned to Bremerton, Wash., in May 2013 to start a 16-month dry dock period.

"While this has been a challenging tempo, our crew has answered the call every time, and, along with the men and women of Carrier Air Wing 9, was recognized as the 2012 Ramage Award winners for carrier and air wing operational excellence," said Stennis Commanding Officer Capt. Mike Wettlaufer.

Navy leaders saw similar scenarios happening to other

ships and decided to do something about it.

At the 2014 Surface Navy Association Symposium, Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command Adm. Bill Gortney unveiled the Navy's new optimized fleet response plan (O-FRP), a plan that addresses quality of service through quality of work and quality of life. The plan intends to provide the Sailors and their families with more stability and predictability.

"We have to go get our force generation model back under control and get our deployment lengths and our quality of our service for Sailors and their families back into an acceptable norm," said Gortney.

He explained the force generation model, in this case O-FRP, includes manning, training and predictable deployment schedules. He said the Navy's previous FRP required a six-month deployment in a 24-month cycle, with more time at sea in between deployments for training.

However, increasing demands for naval forces often extended those deployment times, so much so, that now the current average is an eight-month deployment, especially for ballistic missile defense forces, carrier strike groups and amphibious ready groups. Under the new O-FRP, Sailors will be able to count on one eight-month deployment in a three-year period.

Some Sailors in the fleet, like Logistics Specialist 3rd Class Eddie White serving aboard Stennis, look forward to the schedule this plan offers.

"It would be the most ideal situation for Sailors to be home, instead of being away 15 out of the 20 months due to back-to-back deployments," said White.

The Navy hopes to improve Sailors' quality of life by giving them more time at home and a better idea of their schedules during this 36-month period.

“We’re bringing predictability back into their lives,” said Gortney. “The key element here is we’re going to tell them what their schedule is for the next three years, and as long as we’re able to manage the votes from the outside world, it’s going to be pretty good.”

Gortney said the first step in achieving this plan is manning.

“The long pole in the tent, the thing that we must achieve, is getting our manning correct so that the ships and the squadrons and the staffs have the right Sailors and officers on board at the right time in the FRP cycle,” said Gortney. “We’re trying to do that, so they all go through the training together and deploy together.”

The Harry S. Truman Strike Group will be the first to go through O-FRP beginning November 2014, once these Sailors return from deployment and begin a scheduled maintenance period. As the strike group undergoes maintenance, the Navy will focus on manning levels, so that when the training cycle begins, it will have its full deployment crew in place.

Some Sailors who have heard about O-FRP have concerns as to whether or not the deployment schedule will work, considering that real-world events have changed deployment schedules in the past. Many of them wonder how this plan will actually be implemented.



Airman Jacob James, assigned to the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74), sees his newborn daughter for the first time during a homecoming celebration for the aircraft carrier at Naval Station Kitsap-Bremerton. Photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Ahron Arendes

“It seems good on paper with just one deployment,” said White. “However, you still have to count all the other underway periods with work-ups, INSURV [inspections], and CQs [carrier qualifications.]”

Under O-FRP the entire strike group is scheduled to train and qualify together, with a syllabus-approached structure that will standardize doctrine on how the Navy trains and fights. By streamlining the training and qualification cycle, the time spent away from home will be lessened, said Gortney.

The O-FRP also addresses quality of work issues by eliminating as many detractors as possible. Proper manning is a start, but having the proper equipment on board, in working order, is also paramount to success.

“If a Sailor needs a part, needs a widget, to fix his equipment and that widget isn’t available, that is a negative. He’s not part of a great organization because we didn’t give them what they need,” said Gortney. “If that Sailor doesn’t have her chief petty officer, when a chief petty officer should be training and mentoring, that’s a detractor - that’s a negative. We’re trying to fix all those things. It’s more than just deployment length.”

While the Harry S. Truman Strike Group will be the first to operate in the O-FRP cycle, they will not be the first command to see changes.

“We’re not waiting [until Truman deploys] to tackle parts of the problem and implement solutions,” said Gortney. “As soon as we get [a part of the equation] fixed, we’re putting it in place for everybody. We’re tackling maintenance for everybody. We’re fixing manning. We’re prioritizing based on when each group enters into maintenance.”

Gortney said one of Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert’s goals is for all Navy leaders to focus on improving quality of service.

“Quality of service [means] we adequately pay them, we reward them, and then the quality of their work is good, and they’re happy with it, and there aren’t any detractors out there,” said Gortney.

Sailors, like those aboard Stennis, said they look forward to seeing the stability that O-FRP offers.

“The O-FRP removes uncertainty and provides a more predictable deployment schedule than what Stennis experienced from 2011 through 2013,” said Wettlaufer. “This predictability helps minimize the natural anxiety that comes with deployments and allows families to plan and best prepare for those times when their Sailors are away from home supporting our national security objectives.”