

## **Q&A: Mabus on the shape of the future fleet**

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Navy Secretary Ray Mabus sat down with Navy Times to share his vision for the future of the Navy as he begins his fourth year on the job. In the interview, conducted March 27 as he began a trip to the Pacific — the region that's the focus of the new national defense strategy — Mabus discussed longer deployments, expanding opportunities for women and the service's new initiatives to stem alcohol abuse and sexual assault. Here's a partial transcript of the interview, edited for brevity and clarity:

### **Strategic shift to the Pacific**

**Q. Is there anything about the Navy you would like to discuss, anything right off the bat?**

**A.** When you look at the new defense strategy, with its emphasis on the Middle East and the Western Pacific, with its requirement for innovative, low-cost, small-footprint presence elsewhere in the globe, with its requirements with engagement with partners, it's a very maritime strategy. It requires a great Navy and Marine Corps. It requires a Navy and Marine Corps to be forward-deployed to be very agile, to be very adept at doing anything. And that's the kind of Navy/Marine Corps we have. I think the strategy recognizes that. And I think that it's going to make sure that sort of capability continues.

**Q. The strategy does point to the Pacific. How do you provide the sort of coverage you need? How are you making sure that every single need is being addressed? Are you going to have to forward-deploy ships? Are you going to have to shift anything around? What's your strategy? Longer deployments?**

**A.** For one thing, we've been there for 70 years. During and since World War II we've had a major presence in the Pacific. And our fleet is right now 55 percent in the Pacific, 45 [percent] in the Atlantic. That's going to change some, it's going to more 60-40. But as [Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jon Greenert] keeps stressing, we're also going to use our ships differently. We already have a carrier strike group in Yokosuka. We already have a Marine amphibious group in Okinawa. We're going to base four [littoral combat ships] in Singapore. And we're going to crew them differently, we're going to have three crews for two ships. And so the crews will fall in on the ships.

**Q. In Singapore?**

**A.** In Singapore. And that will probably be the template for LCS no matter where they are. But we're starting in Singapore. And if you look at the Marines, we're putting Marines ... there's a process, but we're putting Marines in Guam. There's going to be a rotational presence of Marines in Northern Australia. And Marines are coming out of a decade of hard, effective fighting, are going back to maritime roots, back on amphibs. Back doing the things Marines have historically done, and do so well whether it's engagement, or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, particularly focused, as we've been talking about, on the Pacific. I think the important number to

remember is that there will be at least as many Marines west of the international date line once we've made these moves, as there are today.

**Q. With this, as things gear up in the Pacific, what does it mean for 5th Fleet?**

**A.** That's the other focus of this strategy. And we've also had a presence there for over 60 years, in that region. In fact, I was ambassador [to Saudi Arabia] when we stood up 5th Fleet in the '90s. We'll do there what we've always done, which is take a look at requirements and assets and what's needed when — what the combatant commander needs as the situation warrants, as the situation dictates. That's another place that, as LCSs join the fleet, you'll see them.

**Q. Do you anticipate less of a presence? The campaign in Iraq is over, and the campaign in Afghanistan is winding down.**

**A.** I think if you look at this national strategy, there are two focuses. One is the Western Pacific, one is the Arabian Gulf region. So, again, as we're out of Iraq, we're beginning the drawdown in Afghanistan. And as the situation changes, we will, like we always do, take a look at what forces we need there, what's appropriate. In so many ways that's a maritime theater as well and it's becoming more of one as we're out of Iraq and pulling down in Afghanistan.

**Wellness, stress and breath tests**

**Q. Going back a little bit, to the presence in the Pacific, do you have any concerns about any strains made on the crew, anything like that? The Navy is getting smaller.**

**A.** Well, we have been operating at a very high op tempo now for a long time. It's pretty much who we are, what we do. We're taking some steps like where we're deploying ships, homeporting them, or deploying them so that we can ease some of that. We're also building more ships in the long run so that we'll have more that will ease it to some degree.

This is the best force we've ever had. It's the most resilient force we've ever had. And one of the reasons that I've announced this 21st Century Sailor and Marine [program], is so that sailors and Marines — given this op tempo and given the fact that so much responsibility is going to continue to be put on the Navy and Marine Corps — give them the tools, give their families the tools to continue this resiliency. To make sure that they have a good career, to make sure they are able to do the things that the Navy of today does without having an adverse impact on them. What we try to do is take all sorts of these separate programs — these disparate, almost stove-pipe programs — and put them together and see how they're interrelated, not just tackle things like suicide and fitness or something like that.

**Q. The lifestyle things?**

**A.** So many of them do interrelate. So I do think that making sure that they do have the resources to deal with the realities of the modern Navy is really important. At the same time, building more ships, using them differently, and keeping an eye on the most important aspects we have, and the sailors and Marines that crew these ships and do these missions.

**Q. One aspect of your 21st Century Sailor and Marine isn't being welcomed with open arms everywhere throughout the fleet, specifically, Breathalyzers. Some of the feedback I've seen says, "Don't they trust us to show up sober, or to handle these issues ourselves?" What do you say to sailors who do not like the idea of taking a breath test when they show up for watch?**

A. I'll say several things. We've run two pilot programs on this — one in Bangor in Washington state, the sub base, one at the Naval Academy. In both cases, all sorts of things that are bad have decreased: Sexual assault. Domestic violence. Suicide attempts. Fitness has gone up and if you look at the issues that we have, the Navy and the Marine Corps, alcohol is involved in so many of them. And I just named a bunch of them. And it's there regardless of rank. Thirteen of the commanding officers we relieved last year, alcohol was involved in the incident that caused them to be relieved.

If you've got that sort of evidence, if you've got that sort of proof, that, No. 1, you've got an issue, and No. 2, you know one way to get at it, I think it would be irresponsible for us not to do it.

Having said that, I'll say some other things. Juan Garcia, the assistant secretary for manpower and reserve affairs, just did a trip through 5th Fleet, 6th Fleet, into Afghanistan. He probably did 15, 20 all-hands calls. Talked about it. You know how many questions he got on it?

**Q. It's either going to be a lot or zero.**

A. One. That was a mechanical question. Just sort of how does this work? It's not punitive; it's to try to stop bad things from happening before they happen. ... And I'm kind of curious where you're getting the negative feedback. And I'm being pretty serious about this because we haven't seen it fleetwide.

**Q. We've gotten a lot of emails from readers and additionally there's been comments and blogs. And on the Navy's official story there were comments of that nature as well.**

A. We just haven't seen much. That's why we ask.

### **Women on subs, as SEALs**

**Q. Last year when we spoke, you mentioned allowing women to serve on attack submarines. Where are you in that process and are there any other communities that you would like see opened up to women? This is something that has come up a few times.**

A. Once the decision was made, congress was notified in February of '10. We did the ... accessions for submarines in the spring of that year out of ROTC and the Naval Academy and put them in the normal submarine pipeline, which is nuclear school and sub school. The first group reported to their submarines in November of last year. Some of them are beginning to come back from their first deployments. And thus far, no issues. And we're doing two things.

One is we've assigned women to [ballistic- and guided-missile submarines] because they were larger and there wouldn't be any changes required in the structure of the ship.

The first thing we're doing is making sure there's a pipeline to go into the submarine force. And, secondly, to make sure that we're on track to take the lessons learned from these women going on BNs and GNs. Right now it's officers only, so we can expand it from enlisted and so we can expand it to attack subs. We don't want two types of submarines, one where women serve and one where they don't. And we also don't want to limit it just to the officer community. We're opening it up to the whole community.

One of the issues that we're trying to address in [the] 21st Century Sailor [program] is the fact that we have a lot of the women joining the Navy, both in the enlisted ranks and in the officer ranks. What we're not doing a very good job of is keeping them through their career. And we want to make sure that it doesn't happen across the Navy, but particularly on submarines. Not particularly, but for submarines also, because it's such a long training pipeline. For anybody, for the men who have been on there, particularly for enlisted, to get a chief in 15 years, you have to have so many seamen that gradually neck down to get to be the chief, chief of the boat, and you want to make sure that enough women are going to stay so that it won't just be junior sailors on subs, or junior officers on subs, it will be spread through the ranks. So that's an issue that 21st Century Sailor and Marine is trying to address. And having said all of that, I think we're making very good progress in terms of getting women throughout the submarine community.

**Q. From this point you're using lessons from the boomers and applying them, creating strategies, for the rest of the submarine community.**

A. And we had the lessons learned from women being integrated onto surface ships over 20 years ago.

**Q. What about the riverines, or SEALs or anything like that?**

A. Right now 95 percent of Navy jobs are open, are gender-neutral, are open to women. ... The secretary of defense has issued an exemption for women to co-locate with combat Marines. This doesn't go to SEALs and riverines that much, but I guess it does, it actually does. If you look at, if you go to Afghanistan today, there are no front lines. The notion that you can separate out combat from non-combat, it's just become eroded so much to nonexistence. And the fact that we've lost almost 150 women in combat situations, the fact that Marines have female engagement teams that go out with Marine patrols. I don't want to speak for the secretary of defense here, but at least, in terms of things like SEALs, more than 80 percent of men can't make it. Opening those communities up, keeping those exact standards — you shouldn't change the standards to do something like that. I think the Navy has done a far better job than anybody else for removing restrictions for women.

I think that the decisions, or the decision that I can make, women on submarines, I have made. Women in other combat specialties, in the Navy or Marine Corps or anything else, rests with the secretary of defense. And I'll stop there (laughs).

## Ship names and Navy culture

**Q. Another thing that has come up recently, again this is where there was a little bit of criticism that we received from readers and on blogs, was with ship names, with [Cesar] Chavez and [Gabrielle] Giffords. Giffords was a break from conventional naming for LCS. What is your plan for ship names? Are you going to keep to the conventions?**

A. I've also gotten a whole lot of support for those two and for all the ship names. ... Chavez fit right in with the conventions. It's for pioneers. And if you look at the ship-naming convention ... it was pioneers for all sorts of things, not only for exploration, like Lewis and Clark, but medicine. You've got a doctor, space exploration, things like that. So that fit right into the convention.

And every one of my predecessors, as far as I can tell, have made exceptions to naming conventions for exceptional people or exceptional things. And I don't think anyone disputed the heroism and the inspiration that Gabrielle Giffords has shown the country. She was wounded while serving her country and her struggle ... her recovery and doing it in a very hard and public way, has just been an inspiration to a whole lot of folks. And I do think that one of the things ship names ought to do is reflect who we are as a people.

**Q. If there's anything in Navy culture that you would like to change, what would it be and how would you do it?**

A. I think it's fair to say, here's what I think Navy culture is, and what I want it to be strengthened in. I don't think change is the right word. I want sailors and Marines to have the ability and the tools to uphold a 236-year proud heritage; to innovate from that heritage. I want it to be a culture of protection in the sense that shipmates look after each other, Marines look after each other, regardless of what the issue is. A culture of inclusion for women, minorities. We are stronger if we are diverse.

## Alternative energy

**Q. Your energy program is coming along. You've tested some sort of alternative fuel on every single aircraft. Even in testing, the Fire Scout has run on a vegetable blend. What's the next immediate step for this?**

A. Right now we're testing all surface combatants. We've done all our small surface combatants and we're doing our large surface combatants. In July we're going to demonstrate the "Great Green Fleet," which is a carrier strike group. Obviously the carrier and submarine are nuclear, but all the aircraft, all the surface ships will be running on a 50/50 blend of [aviation fuel] or biofuel or diesel biofuel. And we're going to do that at [the Rim of the Pacific exercise]. I think we're making excellent process all the way along.

**Q. Congress has raised concerns about the cost of this initiative, particularly in the current fiscal situation. They say this is nice, but it can wait. What is your assessment of the costs?**

**Is it worthwhile? The veggie blend is going for five times more expensive than conventional fuel.**

A. Well, No. 1, they've come down a lot in the small amounts that we're buying in the test amounts that we're buying — they've come down dramatically, in fact. No. 2, the Navy can bring a market, and the military can bring a market. And when you have that market ... the price gets to be a more stable and market price when it's a commercial scale. If we made all of our decisions based strictly on the cost of a new technology, we wouldn't have nuclear subs today. We wouldn't have nuclear carriers today. We wouldn't have computers today, because they cost a lot more than typewriters when they first came in. You can still, today, buy still several conventional submarines for the cost of a nuclear one, but the nuclear ones are so much more capable.

And I don't think we can afford to wait, both in terms of cost, because of the price spikes that hit oil. We are just too vulnerable to foreign sources of energy. It is a military vulnerability, it is a national security issue and you should not wait on that. You shouldn't wait until you have to do it because you either can't get the supplies or can't afford them. And if you don't have this new energy technology in the United States, other countries are, and we will simply be trading one form of foreign energy dependence for another.

**Q. Do you have an estimate about when the cost of alternative fuels will be comparable to traditional fuels? Has that sort of research been done?**

A. Any sort of new technology like that, it becomes competitive when it becomes a big enough market. Part of it depends on how big a market the military brings. Secondly, you can't look at it in just terms of price, you just can't do it. This is a military vulnerability. We will be less effective as war fighters if we don't do this.

### **The amphib fleet**

**Q. So you have enough amphib right now to cover the Marines' future mission. What are you going to do with the Gator Navy? Right now there's 28, but I believe that there's been calls for as many as 33.**

A. What you're referring to, is about four years ago, the commandant and CNO at the time signed a memorandum saying that we needed 33 amphib to cover an amphibious assault. That was down from 38. But the important number in that, both numbers, whichever you want to use, the goal is to have 30 operational amphib for this mission. We are, in the budget we submitted, the budget and the shipbuilding plan, we'll be at 32, which is slightly more risk, but still doable. So it's one, from 33 to 32. ... Coming from 33 to 32, which represents some more risk, but not substantially more to get to that 30 operational, but as important of a concept is that we have at least one amphibious ready group at sea in the two areas of focus today, in the Pacific and around the Arabian Gulf.

And they do everything. They do partnership engagements. They do training with allies; they do humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. When we have 11 big-deck amphib, and that's what we're going to have ... you can argue that we have 22 aircraft carriers instead of 11 because of

their incredible capability. Those big-deck amphib, for example, they have a bigger hospital capability than our hospital ships. They are so flexible, they do so many missions.

**Q. That big-deck amphib was going to be in the America class.**

**A.** We've got a [memorandum of understanding] on LHA 7, and that's on schedule. But LHA 8 moved from '16 to '17, but it won't have any operational impact on doing that.

**Q. Will any other ships' decommissioning be pushed back a year to accommodate?**

**A.** It will stick to our original schedule, even with that one-year slide.

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