



ACQUISITION RESEARCH PROGRAM SPONSORED REPORT SERIES

The State of the Warfighter Mentality in the Surface Warfare Officer Community

March 2022

LT Judith H. Cho, USN

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Paul Lester, Associate Professor
Dr. Mia-Sophia E. Augier, Professor

Acquisition Research Program

Naval Postgraduate School

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Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.



The research presented in this report was supported by the Acquisition Research Program at the Naval Postgraduate School.

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ABSTRACT

As the United States shifts focus from decades of land-locked wars to near-peer competitors like China and Russia, top naval leadership has begun to increase messaging and rhetoric to the fleet in order to start managing expectations about how Surface Warfare Officers (SWOs) will perform under the most stressful circumstances. SWOs must prepare for what may come: war. This analysis used semi-structured interviews to collect data and identify trends in experiences and/or opinions across a broad range of ranks.

Twenty-three interviews were conducted with SWOs and combat arms officers.

Throughout the research process, several key themes emerged. The majority of them were seen to detract from the development of the warfighter mentality in the SWO community. The following recommendations are made to aid the community in this development.

The Navy must:

1. Publish doctrine that includes SWO warfighter behavioral and cognitive characteristics.
2. Redirect and leverage positive aspects of the average SWO in order to help change negative aspects of SWO culture.
3. Conduct a large-scale, independent assessment into why there is such a large disconnect between the perceptions of senior leaders and junior officers when it comes to readiness.
4. Standardize the qualification process in the SWO community.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lieutenant Judith H. Cho

LT Judith H. Cho grew up on the Hudson River in Nyack, New York, a small town about 25 miles north of Manhattan. Following high school, she attended the Naval Academy Preparatory School, graduating in 2012, and went on to the United States Naval Academy where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in the Chinese language, Mandarin.

She commissioned May of 2016 as a Surface Warfare Officer and moved to Norfolk, VA for her first Division Officer tour onboard USS KEARSARGE (LHD-3.) She served as the Damage Control Division Officer, the Repair Division Officer, and the Internal Communications Officer during her two-year tour. There she earned all the qualifications required of a first tour SWO in addition to her Steam Engineering Officer of the Watch qualification. KEARSARGE was deployed on a no-notice deployment to the Caribbean after hurricanes Irma and Maria, where she conducted Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. LTJG Cho, served as the Officer of the Deck while landing the President of the United States onboard; only the second ship in the history of the Navy to do so while underway.

For her second tour, she served as the Assistant Chief Engineer onboard USS WINSTON S. CHURCHILL (DDG-81), stationed out of Norfolk, VA. The billet was created especially for her after observing her performance as the Auxiliaries Officer, which she did for the first six months of her tour. She earned her Gas Turbine Engineering Officer of the Watch qualification as her second EOOW. She also served as one of two Antisubmarine Warfare Evaluators, taking part in the Submarine Commander's Course, hunting U.S. submarines down by the Bahamas. At the end of her second tour, LT Cho was selected for re-designation into the Navy Human Resources community.



LT Cho is now a student at the Naval Postgraduate School, studying Manpower Systems Analysis in the Graduate School of Defense Management. She is currently working on her thesis (The State of the Warfighter Mentality in the Surface Warfare Officer Community) and is on track to graduate in March of 2022.

Lieutenant Cho's decorations include the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal (2 awards) and various other unit awards.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis and research process has truly been an enjoyable one, grounded in my own experiences as a naval officer and the experiences of my colleagues.

I would first like to thank my thesis advisors, Dr. Paul Lester and Dr. Mie Augier, for helping me take this idea, which was just a seedling, and transform it into what it has become. Your guidance kept me motivated and on track, and I hope I have made you proud!

I would also like to thank all the participants in my research. I acknowledge the time commitment it required to sit down with me. I appreciate the expansive amount of insight. Your contributions are the meat of this thesis, and I hope I did your experiences justice.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Peter. Without your support, I'd still be in quarter two manually deleting Excel datapoints one by one. I love you.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ARL	Army Research Laboratory
BDOC	Basic Division Officers Course
BECC	Basic Engineering Common Core
BUD/S	Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL
CBT	Computer Based Training
CIC	Combat Information Center
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CO	Commanding Officer
COMPTUEX	Composite Training Unit Exercise
EOOW	Engineering Officer of the Watch
FDNF-J	Forward Deployed Naval Forces – Japan
GQ	General Quarters
GWOT	Global War on Terror
IA	Individual Augmentees
INSURV	Board of Inspection and Survey
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIC	Immediate Superior in Command
JOOD	Junior Officer of the Deck
NAVPLAN	Navigation Plan
NSW	Naval Special Warfare
OCS	Officer Candidate School
OM	Optimum Manning
OOD	Officer of the Deck
OJT	On the Job Training
PCO	Prospective Commanding Officer
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
POD	Plan of the Day
POE	Projected Operational Environment
PQS	Personnel Qualification Standards
PT	Physical Training



RAMS	Readiness Assessment and Monitoring System
READRON	Readiness Squadron
RIT	Revolution in Training
ROC	Required Operational Capability
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
SOSMRC	Senior Officer Ship Material Readiness Course
SURFLANT	Surface Force, Atlantic
SWO	Surface Warfare Officer
SWOS	Surface Warfare Officers School
SWOSDOC	SWOS Division Officer Course
TAO	Tactical Action Officer
TFF	Total Force Fitness
TORIS	Training and Operational Readiness Information Services
TYCOM	Type Commander
USNA	United States Naval Academy
XO	Executive Officer



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

General Background Information

As the United States shifts focus from decades of land-locked wars to near-peer competitors like China and Russia, top naval leadership has begun to increase messaging and rhetoric to the fleet in order to start managing expectations and preparing their people for what may come: war. However, many sailors and officers alike would describe their Navy roles as an “administrative” one; one that seems to conflict with the objectives and mindsets of their leaders. My research looks into the state of the warfighter mentality in the Surface Warfare Officer community, the members of which serve as leaders and decision makers onboard ships and will be required to carry out these roles even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Methodology

The analysis used semi-structured interviews to collect data and identify trends in experiences and/or opinions across a broad range of ranks, O-2 to O-6. Interview questions aimed to answer several questions concerning the warfighter mentality, its existence, definition, and the aspects of SWO culture that aid or hinder it. Officers from several different combat arms communities were also interviewed to serve as comparisons to the SWO community. The data juxtaposed with the documented experiences of the human experience in surface action and the psychological and physiological effects of combat show how prepared today’s SWOs really are mentally and emotionally to fight a kinetic war at sea. Particularly, the following research questions were answered from the data collected.

Primary research question:

1. In what ways does the warfighter mentality exist in the SWO community?

Secondary questions:

2. What is warfighter mentality as it pertains to SWOs?
3. Do SWOs have what it takes to withstand kinetic warfare at sea?
4. How does the SWO mentality compare to communities that have seen combat in recent years?



Analysis

Twenty-three one-on-one interviews were conducted with SWOs and combat arms officers ranging from the ranks of O-2 to O-6. My objective was to generate insight from the responses of interviewees that were based on their unique or collective experiences in their communities. From these responses, I was able to interpret the data and answer the research questions. Participants were selected for the study by availability and interest in participation. Initially, I created a convenience sample by drawing upon participants from various social networks of SWOs and non-SWOs and contacted them via email to inquire about participation in the study. These networks were then leveraged to identify other subjects who were interested in participating in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals who volunteered were interviewed.

Findings

Throughout the research process, several key themes emerged among interviewees. Some themes were overwhelmingly shared by all participants, while others were grouped into smaller categories like rank, job description, or experience. These overarching themes have been categorized into seven findings; some with multiple sub-themes associated. Compelling viewpoints shared by multiple interviewees were included while one-off responses were not. My findings should be interpreted as general views of specified populations. Each finding is seen to contribute to addressing the state of warfighter mentality in the SWO community.

From my research, I've found that most insights into the SWO community are seen to degrade the warfighting mentality. In particular, the following findings exclusively degrade:

- Not all SWOs are created equal. The professional development of SWOs is largely dependent on a few random factors. Mentorship has been identified as one of the biggest drawbacks in the community, as it is entirely dependent on being in the “right place” at the “right time” and is often required to be individually sought out. Another factor is the fact that many key standards of qualifications are set at the command level. This was seen to have contributed to the differences in the quality of training from one officer to another. Much of the personal and professional development is driven by individual efforts to better oneself. Depending on this level of interest and what the individual finds important, officers



are developing differently from each other, even within the same wardrooms. Command leadership drives the continual development of SWOs across all ranks. Onboard training and drills were also identified to differ by experience. While some interviewees described them to be taken seriously and effectively, most had a contrary view on how their ships conducted these trainings and drills, even if that meant sending ships off on deployment ill prepared or after cutting corners.

- The pressure to be seen as “ready” for combat is leading to unethical behavior. Several officers shared instances of unethical behavior conducted/accepted by themselves or others in their commands in response to external pressure to remain operational. Whether it was dishonesty in watch team qualifications, manipulating certifying scenarios in order to ensure ships passed and were able to deploy, or falsely reporting readiness and training statuses to higher ups, many shared the sentiment of the Navy perpetuating the “get it done attitude.”
- SWOs across the board are stressed out about the same things. From the most junior O-2 to the most senior O-6, SWOs shared in the roots of what made their jobs stressful. Almost every interviewee expressed that they put an immense amount of pressure on themselves to succeed. They keep high standards for themselves as well as for their subordinates. Since many SWOs are “type-A” personalities, having control over their work is comforting. However, the nature of a ship’s schedule is ever-changing, sometimes day-by-day, or even hour-by-hour. The unknown and constantly changing schedule makes planning extremely difficult and a focal area of anxiety and stress for SWOs across the board.

The following findings were seen to both aid and/or degrade the warfighting mentality:

- Attraction to the SWO community. While the majority of SWOs interviewed did not originally want to be SWOs, there were a few distinguishable factors most believed to be favorable. Factors such as the almost immediate start in service obligation, opportunities to laterally transfer after their first tour, or the ability to complete their service obligation and get out of the Navy quickly.
- Physical fitness is not a priority while mental fitness has made strides. Physical fitness was seen to be one of the easiest things to drop off the radar. Other aspects of the job are often seen to be prioritized above physical health. However, most interviewees believed it to be an integral aspect of warfighting. Several interviewees stated that commands that tried to prioritize physical fitness had leadership who were physically fit themselves. Mental fitness, on the other hand, was seen to have made strides in the community. However, efforts were largely seen as reactionary rather than proactive.



- There is a stark difference in the assessment of the fleet and its ability to endure a kinetic fight between junior and senior officers. My research revealed a positive correlation between optimism and rank. Senior officers were generally seen to be more optimistic of the fleet's readiness to endure a war at sea, while junior officers had little faith. Many interviewees believed that, should the fleet go kinetic, it would be an occasion to rise to. Senior officers were seen to think about a kinetic war more frequently compared to junior officers. The possibility was closer to home, particularly for officers who were post-command.
- The definition of "warfighter" is generally shared as well as aspects of SWO culture that aid and hinder the warfighter mentality. The framework and characteristics of a "warfighter" were universally shared amongst SWOs. Characteristics such as tactical proficiency, sound and timely decision making, calm under pressure, physically and mentally fit, confident, competent, and leader were all used to describe and define a good "warfighter." However, from my research I found that the culture of the SWO community took away from the warfighter mentality more than it added to it. The approach to developing the warfighter mentality seemed to be done passively, through little to no direct or active efforts outside of indoctrination. The culture of "workaholics" who are afraid to fail or make mistakes, micromanagement, perception control, competitiveness, the zero-defect mentality, and politics were often stated as hinderances to the warfighter mentality.

Discussion and Recommendations

Research Question 1: What is the warfighter mentality as it pertains to SWOs?

The term "warfighter" was universally defined by SWOs and combat arms officers alike by several choice characteristics. A warfighter is someone who is:

- Tactically proficient
- Able to make sound and timely decisions
- Calm under pressure
- Physically and mentally fit
- Confident
- Competent
- A leader

Recommendation: The Navy must publish doctrine that includes SWO warfighter behavioral and cognitive characteristics.

Research Question 2: In what ways does the warfighter mentality exist in the SWO community?



It appears that the SWO community could benefit from putting more emphasis on developing these characteristics in an active way. The divide between perception and assessment of readiness among the different ranks of the SWO community is particularly interesting as they all serve in the same Navy, on the same ships, and will inevitably have to go into battle with one another when the time comes.

Recommendation: Redirect and leverage positive aspects of the average SWO in order to help change negative aspects of SWO culture

Research Question 3: Do SWOs have what it takes to withstand kinetic warfare at sea?

There is generally a positive relationship between assessing the state of one's readiness and the readiness of other SWOs to seniority. More of the higher-ranking officers, starting at the O-4 and O-5 levels, were seen to be optimistic and confident in the state of the abilities of themselves and other SWOs across the fleet. **In general, however, SWOs do not believe the fleet is ready for a kinetic fight at sea.**

Recommendation: Conduct a large-scale, independent assessment into why there is such a large disconnect between the perceptions of senior leaders and junior officers when it comes to readiness. The assessment should include identifying large-scale inefficiencies for elimination, such as program evaluations of training and education effectiveness. It should also use this research as a basis for identifying areas for improvement in developing warfighters on a fleetwide level.

Research Question 4: How does the SWO mentality compare to communities that have seen combat in recent years?

Although only one of five of the combat arms interviewees had ever experienced combat, their approach to maintaining readiness and fostering a warfighter mentality differed considerably from the SWO community, particularly when it came to community attraction, quality of training, approach to risk, and physical fitness.

Recommendation: Standardize the qualification process in the SWO community. This would ensure that each SWO is being trained and assessed by the same rigorous standards across the fleet at all levels.





I. INTRODUCTION

The United States Navy has played a prominent role in American history from the American Revolution to present day. However, as the U.S. focused its efforts on land wars in the Middle East for several decades, and with the absence of near-peer naval threats since World War II, the U.S. Navy adapted to the country's priorities. As China has become the country's number one competitor, more and more rhetoric has come out from top leadership via message traffic, fragmentary orders, and the most recent Chief of Naval Operation's Navigation Plan to prepare and shift focus. The Navy's focus and dedication to preparing for conflict is at the forefront of its leaders' priorities. Although, what many sailors and officers would now describe as an "administrative Navy," seemingly conflicts with the objectives and mindsets of their leaders. I research just how prepared Surface Warfare Officers really are to endure the challenges that will come with the atrocities of war. Particularly, I will be researching the state of the warfighting mentality in the Surface Warfare Officer community, as they are expected to lead their sailors by example. SWOs are charged with carrying out the plan of the day, handling pre-planned responses, leading divisions and departments, and taking command of the most advanced warships in the world. The state of the SWO community reflects that of the surface Navy at large, and their readiness to fight and win future wars.

A. MOTIVATION

As things heat up in the Asia-Pacific and more attention is being put on potential kinetic action, it's hard to ignore the fact that the U.S. surface fleet has not experienced kinetic surface warfare since World War II. Although there are programs in place to ensure the material condition, warfare areas, and that certain teams are certified, there are currently no official programs in place to ensure individuals are prepared to sustain the human experience of combat at sea, even as ships are deployed all around the world, 365 days a year. Currently, no single sailor or Surface Warfare Officer has endured traditional surface-to-surface combat at sea, as it has not occurred since 1944 against the Imperial Japanese Navy during the Battle of Leyte Gulf.



The term “warfighter” has socially become a de facto label for all service members. It is inherently patriotic and is an easy way to grab the attention of the public, and to even boost the morale of service members themselves. In the Navy, terms like “sea-warrior” are often used to address sailors and officers alike and serve as an inflation of the reality of the last 77 years. Though motivational, terms like these reduce sailors to an unrealistic patriotic view of their own abilities in a community that seemingly struggles to develop them as “warriors” and “warfighters.” What does it truly mean to be a warfighter in the surface Navy? How do Surface Warfare Officers view their own and their shipmates’ abilities to sustain kinetic action at sea? The current reshaping of the surface fleet in its operations, deployment cycles, and training requirements may not be enough without a concentrated focus and investment on the actual “warfighter.” If there is a real chance for surface-to-surface action soon, it is the goal of this study to identify where and how the Navy must develop their “warfighters” to carry out the mission and bring sailors home alive. It is the duty of top officers to ensure that their fleet is ready and capable on all fronts. Years of the “get it done and do it with less” attitude has permeated the Surface Warfare Officer community and has seemingly required less of a focus on warfighter development and more of a focus on administrative tasks like inspections, spreadsheets, and PowerPoints. As the U.S.’s competitors have become more and more capable, the ocean has subsequently resurfaced as a viable battleground. China’s routine patrols in the South China Sea, for example, have caused pressure in the naval space. This research is to encourage early and decisive action to invest in the most important naval asset there is—its people—before it’s too late. Knee-jerk reactions and Band-Aids have proven to be fatal for the community, and it may be time to act now.

B. METHODOLOGY

The analysis used semi-structured interviews to collect data and identify trends in experiences and/or opinions across a broad range of ranks, O-2 to O-6. Interview questions aimed to answer several questions concerning the warfighter mentality, its existence, definition, and aspects of SWO culture that aid or hinder it. Officers from several different combat arms communities were also interviewed to be used as a comparison to the SWO community. The data juxtaposed with the documented



experiences of the human experience in surface action and the psychological and physiological effects of combat shows how prepared SWOs really are mentally and emotionally to fight a kinetic war at sea.

C. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research is focused on how the warfighter mentality exists in the Surface Warfare Community and whether or not it is a priority.

1) Primary Research Question

- In what ways does the warfighter mentality exist in the SWO community?

2) Secondary Research Questions

- What is warfighter mentality as it pertains to SWOs?
- Do SWOs have what it takes to withstand kinetic warfare at sea?
- How does the SWO mentality compare to communities that have seen combat in recent years?



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II. BACKGROUND

What is a Surface Warfare Officer (SWO)? What do they do? A career SWO is a true generalist. They are managers in charge of engineers, technicians, specialists, quartermasters, ship's legal, cryptography, environmental programs, and more. Underway, they drive and navigate ships from the bridge, serve as tacticians in the Combat Information Center, and oversee the engineering plant from the Engineer's Central Controlling Station. Simply put, they are responsible for any aspect of managing a surface vessel. They learn their craft through on the job training (OJT) and shipboard qualifications, and for that reason, SWOs are born and raised onboard warships, vice in classrooms, simulators, or practice ships. The generalist approach is intended to prepare young SWOs to, one day, take command. The knowledge of an average SWO is often described to be "a mile wide and an inch deep," speaking to the expectation to know a little bit about everything rather than specializing in any one concentration. Navy.com describes SWOs as those who lead by example. Those who maintain and operate the most modern and technologically advanced fleet of ships in the world, alongside a team of sailors who look to them for guidance and leadership. They warn that SWOs need to be experts on everything from engineering to combat systems to navigation. Traditionally, the only requirements to becoming a SWO (outside of the requirements to join the military in general) is a degree from a four-year college or university, training via NROTC, USNA, or OCS, and U.S. citizenship. The United States Naval Academy regards the Surface Fleet as the backbone of America's Navy. According to the Academy, SWOs develop skillsets early in order to lead, fight, and win as future commanding officers and warfare commanders. As the United States is bordered by the world's two largest oceans, it is safe to assume that it will always have a vested interest in maintaining its prominence as a superior maritime nation. The United States' Navy has approximately 296 ships, with the goal to grow the fleet to 355 active ships, that are in a constant deployment rotation.¹ The purpose of these deployments across the globe are

¹ Mark M. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2021," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 09, 2020, accessed September 09, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2021-navy>.



primarily used to demonstrate U.S. power and resolve to potential enemies. Each of the Navy's seven active numbered fleets has the responsibility to patrol its section of the world in order to support the concepts of forward presence, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, sea control, power projection, and deterrence.²

In recent years, the SWO community has come under immense critique, especially following the ship collisions in 7th Fleet. The collisions of the USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) and the USS John S. McCain (DDG 56) are regarded as two of the most shocking peacetime incidents in the history of the U.S. military. Within the Navy, they were the deadliest disasters in the last 40 years. Just two months after the USS Fitzgerald collision took the lives of seven sailors, 10 more were claimed from the USS John S. McCain due to similar circumstances. These incidents followed years of warnings by sailors and top leadership alike, voicing concerns about the lack of manning, training quality, and sleep. These concerns were not only relevant and prevalent in 7th Fleet, but existed on surface vessels across the globe. The robust operation cycle of a ship forward deployed to Japan was notorious across the fleet as being one of the most demanding duty stations for surface navy sailors. As concerns arose, Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin, then 7th Fleet Commander, voiced them repeatedly to his superiors, in detail, with no resolution. Vice Admiral Aucoin was not alone in sounding these distress alarms, as reports, memos, and notes from many others were met with silence for years. In 2010, retired Vice Admiral Phillip Balisle assessed the readiness of the Surface Force and found that, while attempting to create efficiencies, the Navy had actually sacrificed staffing, training, and maintenance, which was had, in turn, inadvertently harmed the fleet.³ A few years later, then-Undersecretary Robert Work tried to convince the then-Deputy Defense Secretary, Ash Carter, that the fleet was overtaxed and the pace of operations were proving to be too demanding. Carter was quoted to not believe in the

² James T. Conway, Gary Roughead, and Thad W. Allen, "Naval Operations Concept," United States Marine Corps, 2010, accessed September 9, 2021, [https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/Naval Operations Concept 2010.pdf](https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/Naval%20Operations%20Concept%202010.pdf).

³ Phillip M. Balisle, "Fleet Review Panel of Surface Force Readiness Findings," SailorBob, February 26, 2010, accessed September 9, 2021, [http://www.sailorbob.com/files/Attachment 2 - Systemic Findings.pdf](http://www.sailorbob.com/files/Attachment%20-%20Systemic%20Findings.pdf).



data, no matter how many reports he received. In May of 2014, the Commander of Naval Surface Forces, Rear Admiral Thomas Copeman, wrote another memo to the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Jonathan Greenert, saying that “if [they] continue to invest in the latest and greatest equipment and the most capable weapon systems without making an equivalent investment in [their] workforce, [they would] move further away from being a ready force.”⁴ Similarly to Rear Admiral Copeman’s memos, Admiral Greenert did not respond. After the USS John S. McCain collision in August of 2017, Vice Admiral Aucoin was promptly fired. The collisions were widely seen as a culmination of the “get it done” attitude that had permeated throughout the surface navy community. Rear Admiral Copeman was also asked to retire after publicly voicing his concerns. After retirement, he said “if you’re an admiral in the Navy, you may have to make that decision to send people into combat, and you better not have blood on your hands the rest of your life because you didn’t do everything you could in peacetime to make them ready.”⁵ These sentiments and experiences continue to echo throughout the fleet and are just as important today as they were then. Now, four years after the fatal collisions, the surface community has seen little substantive change. SWOs still lack formal training, sleep, and direction. The Navy’s response to these incidents have been muted at best, as their efforts have resulted in an even more redundant training cycle, bridge watch logbooks for SWOs, several new instructions and administrative burdens, and a haphazardly enforced circadian rhythm policy. A common theme repeated all too frequently in the surface community is their inability to implement change when it counts.

For 245 years, through the Age of Sail to Modern Surface Warfare, the U.S. Navy has safeguarded the country’s economic, diplomatic, and military security interests. The strategic environment is fast-moving, has become progressively complex, and is usually uncertain. In the aftermath of the 7th Fleet collisions, fleet readiness issues became inevitably public. A Navy stretched thin by operational requirements that grew after the

⁴ Robert Faturechi, Megan Rose, and Christian Miller, “Years of Warnings, Then Death and Disaster: How the Navy Failed Its Sailors,” ProPublica, February 07, 2019, <https://features.propublica.org/navy-accidents/us-navy-crashes-japan-cause-mccain/>.

⁵ Faturechi, Rose, and Miller, “Years of Warnings.”



attacks on September 11th, while the fleet itself simultaneously shrunk by about 1/5th in size, dealt with maintenance funding cuts, and had ship's crews working themselves to exhaustion through longer and more frequent deployments. The collisions in 7th Fleet should be viewed as a turning point for the SWO community, their processes, and culture at large. By refocusing on warfighting excellence that the community believes is required to lead, fight, and win at sea, the SWO community can transform their culture to reflect warfighting competence that have proven successful in the past as well as adopt modern characteristics that will sustain them in the future.

Naval warfare is human combat in and on the seas, the oceans, or any other battlespace involving a major body of water that comprises the tactics of military operations. It has been several decades since the U.S. Navy has been challenged by a peer or near-peer battle. The last time this happened was during World War II with the Imperial Japanese Navy and, since then, the U.S. has not even had the prospect of a peer or near-peer enemy since the downfall of the Soviet Navy in 1991.⁶ Peace time has afforded naval officers the luxury to engross themselves in operation scripts, ship movements, strict adherence to processes and orders, administrivia, sweepers, and various other matters that have little to do with honing battle efficiency.⁷ The United Kingdom's Royal Navy faced similar circumstances to this during the Great War. The Royal Navy assumed it would always succeed as their history and legacy often reflected. However, the Battle of Jutland in 1916 exposed their overstated sense of prowess and showed their vulnerabilities.⁸ After many years of uncontested greatness, the Royal Navy had effectively forgotten the realities of war, especially against a rival competitor. In the Battle of Jutland, they lost 14 ships and over 6,000 men to German gunners.⁹

⁶ James R Holmes, "The U.S. Navy Has Forgotten What It's like to Fight," *Foreign Policy*, November 13, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/13/the-u-s-navy-has-forgotten-what-its-like-to-fight/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Battle of Jutland," accessed September 09, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Jutland>.

⁹ "What Was the Battle of Jutland?" Imperial War Museums, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-battle-of-jutland#:~:text=The%20Germans%2C%20now%20outgunned%2C%20turned,control%20of%20the%20North%20Sea.>



Comparatively, the U.S. Navy may have fallen into similar circumstances that once doomed the Royal Navy. Apart of this realization for a recommitment to warfighting competence and professional proficiency is the understanding of the human condition in such environments. Sailors of naval combat past lived in a state of constant fear of never seeing their families again, frequently combating kamikazes, sleepless nights, and adrenaline. With this in mind, combined with the current state of the world’s great powers, the focus on developing the warfighter mentality is as necessary and as relevant today as it was back then.

A. GEO-POLITICAL

Top leadership throughout the chain of command, to include the president of the United States, has expressed concern regarding the rapid rise of China’s maritime forces. Until recently, China had always been a low-tech ground power who did not have a realistic option to even conquer Taiwan, let alone be a near-peer to the U.S. Today, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has set their objectives to become a “world-class” military by the end of 2049.¹⁰ In his address to Congress, President Biden listed his priority of threats to the nation, with China coming in third after COVID-19 and climate change. Afghanistan came in fifth which reflects the changed priorities of American defensive powers. The Department of Defense’s 2020 report entitled “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China” found that “China has already achieved parity with – or even exceeded – the United States in several military modernization areas, including shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems.”¹¹ The People’s Liberation Army and Navy have grown in capacity as well as capability and continue to exercise naval power to enforce Chinese interests within the contested territories in the South China Sea. With approximately 350 ships and submarines, including over 130 major surface combatants,

¹⁰ Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

¹¹ Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*.



the Chinese Navy has surpassed the United States in this area.¹² However, the U.S. Navy, though smaller en masse, has much larger and more sophisticated ships, and continues to transit disputed areas in order to push back against Chinese efforts to consolidate their presence in the South China Sea, despite the PLA establishing military installations. So far, the U.S. has avoided any major confrontations, even with U.S. Navy conducting routine “freedom of navigation” operations in the area. Chinese spokesman, Senior Colonel Wu Qian, recently stated that the Chinese military reserved the right to direct force towards enemies who seek to divide Taiwan from mainland China, referring to the cross-strait situation as “complicated and severe.”¹³ He also stated that China’s positive economic growth during the COVID-19 pandemic induced economic turmoil for the rest of the world, while allowing China to increase their military budget by 6.8% to meet their defense goals.¹⁴

In March of 2021, the White House released President Biden’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance which described China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”¹⁵ Similarly, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Gilday, also identified China as the top strategic threat to the U.S. and forewarns that the balance of maritime power could shift in the next 10 years, and that the time to act is “now.”¹⁶ The CNO identified his number one priority to be “readiness,” calling for a “more ready and lethal” fleet, which is

¹² Harry Lye, “China Boasts World’s Largest Navy: U.S. DOD Report,” Naval Technology, November 9, 2021, <https://www.naval-technology.com/features/china-boasts-worlds-largest-navy-us-dod-report/>.

¹³ Huang Panyue, “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on July 29 – China Military,” August 02, 2021, http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2021-08/02/content_10069849.htm.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” The White House, March 03, 2021, accessed September 09, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>.

¹⁶ “CNO Speaks with Bradley Peniston for the Defense One State of the Navy Online Event Keynote Interview,” Chief of Naval Operations Public Affairs, October 14, 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Briefings/display-pressbriefing/Article/2382053/cno-speaks-with-bradley-peniston-for-the-defense-one-state-of-the-navy-online-e/>.



effectively reflected in his 2021 Navigation Plan.¹⁷ In my opinion, that should include more ready and lethal service members, and their ability to mentally and emotionally sustain combat at sea.

Regardless of the current geopolitical climate with China at the forefront of maritime concern, the Navy should invest in and have expressed interest in the readiness and lethality of every aspect of the fleet, to include the individual. Technically capable and professional mariners are crucial in defining readiness, just as much as closing the gap in the lack of emotional and mental attention in the development of the ultimate surface warfighter.

¹⁷ “CSBA Webinar with ADM Michael M. Gilday, USN,” CSBA, April 27, 2021, accessed September 09, 2021, <https://csbaonline.org/about/events/csba-webinar-with-adm-michael-m-gilday-usn>.



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III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. INTRODUCTION

There is limited empirical research that focuses on the warfighter mentality in the SWO community. However, the SWO warfighter mentality can be informed by the ways in which adjacent maritime military communities, such as the United States Marine Corps or the Naval Special Warfare Command, conceptualize the warfighter mentality. This literature review calls upon source documents from those communities and elsewhere to frame the content of questions I asked during one-on-one interviews intended to shed light on the current state of the SWO community's warfighter mentality.

B. THE WARFIGHTER MENTALITY

1. FMFM 1 Warfighting

On 06 March 1989, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Alfred M. Gray Jr., published his philosophy on warfighting which has been used as Marine Corps doctrine for how they prepare to fight. General Gray established a common view of the nature of war as “a state of hostilities that exists between or among nations, characterized by the use of military force” and “a violent clash between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other.”¹⁸ Throughout the text, he emphasized the human dimension and its centrality in war. Because war is shaped by opposing human wills, it “is subject to the complexities, inconsistencies, and peculiarities” that “characterize human behavior” and is “shaped by human emotions.”¹⁹ As an extreme moral and physical event, war cannot be fully understood without the consideration of the effects and toll it has on the actual warfighters; danger, fear, exhaustion, and deprivation are all elements of war that impact the human will and, consequently, the conduct of war. General Gray describes war to be “among the greatest

¹⁸ Alfred M. Gray, Jr., “Warfighting,” U.S. Marines, https://theusmarines.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/FMFM_1-1.pdf.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.



horrors known to mankind.”²⁰ In such settings, leadership is crucial in overcoming that horror and the fear that comes with it. They must study, understand, and cope with fear to limit the effects of it within them and within their units

Chapter 3 of FMFM 1 is entitled “Preparing for War” and indicates that the most important thing a military can do during peacetime is to prepare for war. In the context of the Marine Corps, preparation and the ability to respond rapidly are essential as marines must be ready for short notice employment in any circumstance. Therefore, General Gray believed that all activities should focus on achieving combat readiness. The concepts of warfighting should be at the forefront of Fleet Marine Forces and adapted for peacetime as warranted. Marine leaders are expected to hold the standard as military professionals and true experts in the conduct of war. “Officers particularly are expected to be students of the art and science of war” tactically, operationally, and strategically; grounded in their foundation in military theory and history.²¹ They are required to be intelligent, bold, willing to act, and able to take initiative. Errors by junior leaders are understood as a necessary part of their learning and are dealt with accordingly. The “zero defects” mentality is specifically mentioned to not exist in the Marine Corps. Inaction or timidity are dealt with severely as to encourage the boldness required by marine officers. It is the duty of each marine to take the initiative as the situation demands, with or without orders for justification. To foster this culture, the relationship between all ranks in the Marine Corps is designed to be based on honesty and frankness. In addition to this boldness and initiative, it is considered the subordinate’s duty to provide their commander honest and professional feedback until a decision is made; the “yes-man” culture is not tolerated. Once the commander makes their decision, however, subordinates are required to support it despite their difference of opinion.

There is a large emphasis put on the professional development of marines. Professional military education in the Marine Corps is designed to develop creative leaders who can think through problems. Each marine receives “a foundation in

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 44.



professional theory and concepts that will serve [them] throughout [their] careers.”²² Leaders are developed to focus on understanding the requirements, learning, and applying procedures and techniques in their particular fields. With further development, they are expected to become experts in the tactical level of war. Military judgment is valued over mechanical learning. Leaders without interest or knowledge in the history and theory of warfare are considered leaders “in appearance only,” as an officer’s principal weapon is their mind.²³ This emphasis on development is absorbed by commanders and executed within their units, guided by tools such as the Commandant’s reading list.

The Marine Corps Warfighting Doctrine, FMFM1, gives insight into the universal understanding of warfare in an infantry and combat centric community, particularly as it pertains to the human condition in combat, the “take charge” culture, well-rounded and intentional professional development of their officers, and expectations of proper execution of the development process.²⁴ There are several noticeable differences in approach and mindset to warfighting and the development of warfighters compared to the Surface Warfare community, which I investigate further in my research.

2. Stress, Mindsets, and Success in Navy SEALs Special Warfare Training

A research study was conducted following 174 Navy SEAL candidates during U.S. Navy SEAL training, evaluating whether mindsets were beneficial to participants’ performance in situations of intense physical and mental stress environments. Longitudinal and objective performance measurements were collected to understand whether stress mindsets greatly impact holistic functioning and success in the program. The study also addressed “where mindsets [had] the most impact, and where they may

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Ibid.



[have] become irrelevant or maladaptive” to performance success.²⁵ Using multiverse analysis, the study consistently found that “stress-is-enhancing” mindsets, the assumption that stress enhances health, performance, and wellbeing, predict greater performance in training as it related to persistence, obstacle course times, and performance evaluations.²⁶ Conversely, “failure-is-enhancing” mindsets, the assumption that failure is beneficial to “learning, growth, and performance,” were seen to have negative effects to candidates’ performance in the same categories.²⁷ In addition to “stress-is-enhancing” and “failure-is-enhancing” mindsets, a “non-limited willpower” mindset, the assumption that “willpower and energy” are sustained or improved with effort, was found to be relevant to performance success in highly stressful situations.²⁸ The study also explored whether failure and willpower mindsets impacted success.²⁹ Smith et al., hypothesized that “stress-is-enhancing” mindsets identified prior to SEAL training would outperform those with “stress-is-debilitating” mindsets overall. These findings provide insight into the importance of certain mindsets in uniquely stressful environments and “what their stress, efforts, and failures indicate about their ability to succeed” in that level of stress.³⁰

The training required to become a U.S. Navy SEAL is “known to be one of the most challenging training regimens in the world.”³¹ In addition to the extremely physical aspects of the job, SEALs are required to have immense mental discipline and a warfighter mentality. While the entire training pipeline for a SEAL is quite long, many regard “Hell Week” during the first phase of training, Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S), to be the most grueling. Candidates are put through non-stop

²⁵ Eric N. Smith, Michael D. Young, and Alia J. Crum, “Stress, Mindsets, and Success in Navy SEALs Special Warfare Training,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, January 15, 2020, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6974804/>.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 3.

³¹ Ibid., 2.



drills, tasks, and training over 5.5 consecutive days with only 45 minutes of sleep per night. Due to the intensity of this evolution, only about 10% of people successfully complete it.³² The study followed 174 candidates starting from their first official day of training. By “Hell Week,” only 44 candidates remained, and only 25 candidates completed all 7 weeks of phase one training.³³ The primary outcomes of the study were persistence, success, and performance. Persistence was measured as the amount of time candidates spent in BUD/S. Success was measured by whether they graduated phase one or not. Candidates that were “rolled” to the next class due to medical reasons were not included in these numbers as they did not necessarily reflect the mindset of the candidate during training. Performance was measured in completion times for the obstacle course during week 1 of training.³⁴

Regarding persistence, it was found that candidates with a greater “stress-is-enhancing” mindset had a 12% better chance of staying in the training than those with average mindsets.³⁵ They were also found to have an overall 54% chance of completing phase one successfully. Those with greater “stress-is-enhancing” mindsets were also faster in completing the obstacle course by 4.2% or 27 seconds.³⁶ “Failure-is-enhancing” mindsets were marginally less persistent, had 52% fewer candidates complete phase one, and were slower on the obstacle course by 4.2% or 28 seconds.³⁷ Those with “non-limited willpower” were not predictive of primary outcomes.

As the research shows, “stress-is enhancing” mindsets are better predictors of success and performance in extremely demanding and stressful situations, while other mindsets can prove to bear negative or unfavorable outcomes. Understanding our mindsets and those of our peers and subordinates may impact performance, leaders may

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.



use this knowledge to encourage and develop their people and their organizations to use stress as an important aspect of building towards mission success. SWOs in particular may consider incorporating these findings in developmental and training programs that are meant to cultivate the warfighter mentality, warrior toughness, or mission success.

C. STATE OF THE FLEET

“Fight the Ship: Death and Valor on a Warship Doomed by Its Own Navy”

USS Fitzgerald and the Philippine containership ACX Crystal collided on 17 June 2017, killing 7 U.S. sailors. While the official collision report determined numerous failures by the leadership and relevant watch-standers, it did not go into the human aspect of the collision, how people reacted, and what they experienced. The official report found that USS Fitzgerald failed to “plan for safety,” “adhere to sound navigation practices,” “execute basic watch-standing practices,” “properly use available tools” and resources, and respond “effectively” in extremis, among several other issues.³⁸ It did not, however, go in depth to the longer list of issues that the ship, crew, and superior commands endured. ProPublica published a report that reconstructed USS Fitzgerald’s collision, put together from over 13,000 pages of confidential Navy records, public reports, interviews with members of the crew, and maritime experts.³⁹ The report outlined critical lapses by bridge watch-standers and shows them to have been done casually, routinely, and in violation of the Commanding Officer’s standing orders. It highlighted issues of morale, culture, and the nonchalant approach to operations that were later found to be, not singular issues within this command, but issues that spoke broadly to the experiences of SWOs across the fleet. The report also revealed extraordinary acts of valor and endurance shown by the crew on a typical underway that turned deadly in a matter of less than 24 hours.

³⁸ “USS Fitzgerald, USS John S. McCain Collision Report,” USNI News, November 01, 2017, accessed November 05, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2017/11/01/uss-fitzgerald-uss-john-s-mccain-collision-report>.

³⁹ Christian Miller, Mega Rose, and Robert Faturechi, “Fight the Ship: Death and Valor on a Warship Doomed by Its Own Navy.” ProPublica, February 06, 2019, <https://features.propublica.org/navy-accidents/uss-fitzgerald-destroyer-crash-crystal/>.



The crew fought in less-than-ideal conditions to keep the ship afloat. It was the middle of the night, there was no power, no steering, and no communications. Sailors from the flooded berthing saved the lives of their shipmates by alerting them and working together to egress the compartment. They searched desperately for floating shadows as the rushing water edged towards the lip of the hatch. Eventually, it would be time to seal it whether their shipmates were still down there or not. In the captain's quarters, Commander Bryce Benson was awoken by the collision. The ACX Crystal hit right at the foot of his bed, crushing his bedroom and office together. He was buried under steel and wire, there was water rushing in from a broken water pipe, and electrical sparks were raining everywhere. As he looked out through the gaping hole to the open Pacific, he could hear "the shouts and groans of his sailors."⁴⁰ Commander Benson went into shock and couldn't even remember the short 4-digit code to call the bridge, a number memorized by all SWOs onboard warships. Once he could recall it, he called the bridge to tell them he was trapped. Carlos Clark, a Sailor in Navigation Department recalls that the Commanding Officer (CO) sounded scared. Several people ran down to the captain's cabin with a sledgehammer to free him, one officer splitting open his hand in the process. When Commander Benson finally reached the bridge, he found the Officer of the Deck (OOD) sobbing. "Captain, I fucked up" were her words to him as the bridge was in chaos, the ship was listing, and the radar screens were all black. The emergency lights, moon's illumination, and cell phones revealed the faces of a stunned watch team with blank expressions. The Conning officer, Ensign Francis Womack, appeared to be in a daze while Lieutenant Junior Grade Sarah Coppock, the OOD, was sobbing, berating herself, and inconsolable. Soon after, Commander Benson's body started to break down due to a traumatic brain injury sustained during the collision. He was drifting in and out of consciousness and eventually began to cry. Meanwhile, in Berthing 2, sailors were awoken to the collision and shouts of "water on deck!" One sailor described the collision sound akin to a bomb going off followed by the sounds of a large waterfall; water was rushing into the compartment quickly. The compartment held 35 sailors and would be the place where 7 of them would lose their lives. One of the two exit routes was blocked due

⁴⁰ Ibid.



to the debris. Sailors asleep near the impact point were jolted out of their bunks and thrown to the other side of the compartment. Quickly, the sailors rescued their shipmates, grabbing them out of their racks and guiding them to the exit. It took 90 seconds for 27 sailors to make it out of the compartment.

The report also spoke to the effects of SWO culture on operations. Commander Benson brought his crew in to work the morning of the underway at 0600 for training. Most of the crew did not finish the day's events until 2300 that night. Fatigued and sleep deprived, the captain extended his normal 500-yard deviation call requirement to 1,000 yards, giving officers on the bridge more leeway to maneuver the ship around traffic as they saw fit. Although the ship was maneuvering through a strait between the Izu Peninsula and Oshima Island, an area dense with merchant vessel and fishing boats, the captain decided to get some rest and leave it to a very junior watch team. The CO wasn't the only tired person onboard. Coppock, the OOD, and Lieutenant Raven Parker, the Junior Officer of the Deck (JOOD,) started their days almost 22 hours before assuming the watch with only an hour of rest before. Previously, after a series of previous near misses, an officer approached the Executive Officer (XO) about concerns he had about the ship's dysfunction. He believed that "the only way for things to get better [there was] for [them] to have a serious accident or someone to die."⁴¹ Although, the XO denies that this conversation ever occurred. This was not the first instance where the safety of the ship was in question by a junior officer. At another point, on the bridge, while in formation with a multi-carrier armada, a junior officer was concerned about maneuvers and their distance to nearby vessels. His hesitation was met with a kick in the back of the heels by the CO and a direct order. The night of the collision, Coppock decided to take matters into her own hands without consulting the CO or the Combat Information Center (CIC.) Once the ship was in extremis, her words were, "Oh s**t, I'm so f***ed! I'm so f***ed!"⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.



Investigators would blame the previous captain, Commander Robert Shu, for the culture of complacency and gaps in training, as Commander Benson had taken command just a month prior to the collision. While operating undermanned, the crew’s majority was new and unseasoned. But due to the real-world priorities of Forward Deployed Naval Forces – Japan (FDNF-J) ships, USS Fitzgerald was constantly assigned new missions. This high operational tempo worried officers onboard who believed that necessary training and repairs were being ignored to meet these incessant missions. In this instance, the “get it done” and “make it happen” attitude of the SWO community applied. Lieutenant Commander Ritarsha Furqan, the ship’s Combat Systems Officer and the third highest ranking, testified that operations sometimes felt “unsafe or wrong.”⁴³ Of the hundreds of open maintenance items, several of them were for the ship’s primary navigation system, some dating back to 2012.

The night of the incident, in a state of panic, Coppock defied her naval training and ordered the ship to all ahead flank and a hard left rudder. No collision alarm was sounded to warn sailors onboard of the impending collision. The helmsman-in-training froze and had to be relieved by a Petty Officer 1st Class. This maneuver would put USS Fitzgerald directly in the path of the ACX Crystal. Coppock explains that she was “so wrapped up in trying to do anything that [she] had to just drop the ball on everything else...”⁴⁴ Eventually, the collision would occur, hitting the CO’s stateroom and Berthing 2. In the weeks after returning pier-side, the sailors onboard USS Fitzgerald were scattered around 7th Fleet to address manning shortfalls on other units. However, many of them would be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Eventually, Navy investigations would conclude the accident to have been avoidable with most of the blame put on the CO, the OOD, the bridge team, and the CIC team. Training deficiencies, manning issues, and overconfident leadership were also to blame, leading to the firing of several high-ranking officers to include the 7th Fleet Commander, Admiral Aucoin and the most senior Surface Warfare Officer, Admiral Thomas Rowden.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



While this was not an incident resulting from surface warfare, it was a fight all the same. The report published by ProPublica goes into the harrowing details of first-hand accounts that cannot be found in the Navy’s official reports. It also serves as one of the most recent instances of a ship being in extremis at sea, fighting for the life of the ship and the lives of shipmates; an experience that cannot be recreated by drills, exercise, or training. The elements of human emotion, adrenaline, instinct, execution of training, fear, and decision-making are all encompassed in this report and can speak to the state of the fleet, its preparedness to fight in perilous conditions, what to expect, and how to improve.

D. HOW DID WE GET HERE?

1. Fleet Review Panel of Surface Force Readiness

In 2009, the Navy convened a panel that assessed Surface Force readiness and provided recommendations for corrective actions. “The panel reviewed and assessed the impact of Navy-wide manning,” “training,” “equipping,” “and maintenance decisions that were made” over the decade before and their impact to “structure, process, and cultural barriers.”⁴⁵ The final report concluded that Surface Force readiness had degraded in several ways. It appeared that the Navy’s effort to optimize had overtaken the culture of effectiveness. Particularly, it found that ships could not “maintain an acceptable level of shipboard material readiness,” training deficiencies “resulted in the misalignment of authority and accountability,” maintenance reductions adversely affected shipboard material readiness, and Type Commander (TYCOM) authority, accountability, and responsibility were ambiguous.⁴⁶ The material readiness of the surface fleet was found to be “well below acceptable levels to support reliable, sustained operations at sea as well as preserving the ships to reach their full-service life expectancy.”⁴⁷ Cultural barrier problem areas included “the lead-TYCOM construct focus on the waterfront, the

⁴⁵ Phillip M. Balisle, *Report On Fleet Review Panel of Surface Force Readiness*, Final Report (Washington, DC: 2010), <https://www.scribd.com/document/43245136/Balisle-Report-on-FRP-of-Surface-Force-Readiness>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.



SURFPAC ‘redlines’ initiative to combat the ‘underway at all costs’ mentality, and the surface force support for developing maintenance expertise.”⁴⁸

The surface Navy experienced significant changes since the 1992 Persian Gulf War. The force was reduced from 574 ships to 283 in 17 years and manning was reduced by 170,000 personnel.⁴⁹ Although these changes were intended to improve efficiency throughout the force, it failed to do so. “The panel produced a chronology that identified changes across the man, train, equip, and maintain” spheres that had unintended consequences to surface force readiness.⁵⁰ Particularly relevant to my research are the consequences endured by manning, manpower, and training.

Manning and Manpower: Shipboard and shore manning levels had been reduced to such low levels that the surface force was not able to meet minimum standards of material readiness.⁵¹ This issue stemmed mainly from the 2001 CNO Optimum Manning (OM) initiative that cut 4,052 sailors from ships across the fleet.⁵² The OM initiative intended to improved efficiency by providing the “right people, with the right skills, at the right place, at the right time.”⁵³ However, the manning levels were derived without fully considering the effects it would have on certain requirements such as preservation and maintenance, areas that take up a significant amount of time and manpower onboard ships. In response to the CNO’s initiative, ship’s Required Operational Capability (ROC) and Projected Operational Environment (POE) were revised to reflect the changes to manning requirements.⁵⁴ However, while manning was reduced, maintenance responsibilities were not. As a result, the Navy standard work week afloat increased from

⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵² Ibid., 11.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.



67 productive hours to 70 per Sailor.⁵⁵ These changes ultimately resulted in the reduction of manning onboard. Destroyers, for instance, lost approximately 12 sailors. Though the standard work week only reflected a three-hour difference, it was shown to have caused widespread implications for the fleet. After the attacks on 11 September 2001, the Navy “supported combat support and combat service missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with individual augmentees (IA)” further reducing shipboard manning.⁵⁶ In addition to “unplanned manning losses due to legal, medical, school, and pregnancy,” shipboard manning in the reduced state were even further reduced by an additional 8.4% before OM targets.⁵⁷

Training: “Significant changes in training” adversely affected the surface force’s ability to “maintain readiness standards.”⁵⁸ Changes such as the disestablishment of Readiness Squadrons (READRONS) who were involved with professional development and training, the elimination of the Senior Officer Ship Material Readiness Course (SOSMRC) from the Prospective Commanding Officer (PCO) pipeline, and the elimination of a significant amount of external command inspection visits that “provided over-the-shoulder training to crews” were mentioned in the report to have damaged readiness.⁵⁹ In 2001, The Revolution in Training (RIT) was established.⁶⁰ “This led to the promulgation of the Surface Force Training Manual,” “learning centers,” the “disestablishment of SWOS Division Officers Course,” and the “introduction of Computer Based Training (CBT) Basic Engineering Common Core (BECC.)”⁶¹ This new hands-off approach to training has been shown to have left SWOs with an insufficient baseline of, surface warfare specific, fundamental knowledge. The majority of the burden of training and qualifying young SWOs was put on Wardroom Officers and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 14.



Chief Petty Officers at each unit.⁶² This change, in particular, was seen to have affected an entire generation of SWOs that has adversely affected the overall readiness of today's Navy.

The reduced manning onboard ships and on shore had placed an “unmanageable workload burden on smaller, less trained crews, and, consequently, the ships...”⁶³ Overall, the panel concluded that the efficiency sought over effectiveness approach had reduced surface force readiness altogether. This panel's report, while published over 10 years ago, gives insight into the state of the surface fleet when the current senior leadership were either starting out as ensigns or already indoctrinated into the system as mid-grade lieutenants and above. Understanding the circumstances senior leadership were indoctrinated and operating in as young officers could make sense of the state of the surface fleet today.

2. The Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan – January 2021

Admiral Michael Gilday's 2021 Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan (NAVPLAN) outlines the modern challenges the Navy faces, their “role in meeting those challenges,” and the “four priorities to focus their efforts: readiness, capabilities, capacity, and sailors.”⁶⁴ With a clear focus to maintain the maritime balance of power throughout a long-term competition, Admiral Gilday aims to use sea control and power projection to deliver, operate, and maintain naval supremacy. He stated that America's “security—and way of life—are under threat.”⁶⁵ China was identified as the U.S.'s most pressing long-term strategic threat as they already possess the world's largest fleet, have built, and continue to build, modern surface combatants and the world's largest missile force, harass global shipping, exert power on regional countries, recently “strengthened all dimensions of their military power,” and have extended “their infrastructure across the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Michael M. Gilday, “NAVPLAN,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 2021, accessed November 7, 2021, [https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/11/2002562551/-1/-1/1/CNO NAVPLAN 2021 - FINAL.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/11/2002562551/-1/-1/1/CNO_NAVPLAN_2021_FINAL.PDF).

⁶⁵ Ibid.



globe to control access to critical waterways.”⁶⁶ For the first time in decades, the seas and U.S. naval supremacy are being contested. In this new reality, Admiral Gilday cautioned that the fleet must be ready to maintain control of the seas on their own terms. “Sea control provides the joint force freedom to maneuver and strike, protects friendly shipping, and denies the use of the sea to adversaries.”⁶⁷ He committed the force to rules-based order by deploying dynamic and combat-credible forces, challenging excessive maritime claims, and holding competitor warfighting capabilities.⁶⁸ However, in the event that deterrence fails, he stated that the force should be “ready to confront aggression and decisively win the fight” should conventional conflict occur.⁶⁹ Due to the scale of the threat and rapid technological change, it is imperative for the U.S. Navy to prioritize improving their advantages over China over managing other global demands and challenges that they have experience in recent history.

Admiral Gilday listed several guiding principles to achieve these goals and aligned them with his focus areas. A few of them are especially relevant to my study and are listed below.

Table 1. CNO’s Guiding Principles

<p><u>Lethality and Readiness:</u> “We cannot deter our competitors with raw capabilities alone. We must field a force that has demonstrated the skill and will to win.”⁷⁰</p>	<p>This principle shows the importance of effective training and confidence in winning the fight. A part of preparing for lethality is to prepare well for both the expected and unexpected. There is no such thing as an effective warfighter without the proper training, understanding, and readiness.</p>
<p><u>Training and Education:</u> “Our sailors must be able to outthink and outfight any adversary. They will remain the best trained and finest</p>	<p>This principle goes hand in hand with the first listed principle. It takes incredible focus and toughness to think and make decisions in the midst of battle. Often, there are psychological and physiological effects that act as barriers to decision making. In order to be the best</p>

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.



educated naval force in the world.” ⁷¹	trained and finest educated naval force in the world, we must ensure that our crews are being dynamically and realistically trained to handle immense stress.
<p><u>Warfighting Excellence:</u></p> <p>“Our relentless approach to warfighting excellence will remain grounded in our core values”⁷²</p>	<p>Honor, Courage, and Commitment have served as the bedrock principles of naval service since the days of John Paul Jones. These core values are to serve in every decision process regarding successful and effective warfighting. Honor is the decision to value others and ourselves with devotion and to conduct ourselves in the highest ethical manner, even in wartime. Courage is the mental and moral strength required to face danger, fear, or difficulty. We use this courage to meet the demands of the profession, especially in wartime. Lastly, commitment is the principal structure of moral value and virtue. It is a duty to declaration, others, and ourselves.</p>

This CNO NAVPLAN stressed that the decisions and investments the Navy makes “in this decade will set the maritime balance of power for the rest of the century.”⁷³ The standard is success, and Admiral Gilday is not going to accept anything less. For this reason, it is essential for top leadership to consider the true state of the SWO community and identify where and how improvements can be made to facilitate the development of the most ready and lethal naval force in the world in capabilities, execution, and toughness.

3. A Report on the Fighting Culture of the United States Navy Surface Fleet

By the direction of Senator Tom Cotton and Congressmen Jim Banks, Dan Crenshaw, and Mike Gallagher, Lieutenant General Robert E. Schmidle, USMC (Retired), and Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery, USN (Retired), researched and published a report that examined whether the recent series of events within the surface fleet, such as the catastrophic fire on the USS Bonhomme Richard, the 7th Fleet collisions of the USS Fitzgerald and USS John S. McCain, and the surrender of two U.S. Navy

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 1.



small crafts to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy in the Arabian Gulf, were due to unit-level breakdowns or results of larger underlying issues. 77 interviews were conducted with numerous active-duty and recently retired or detached officers and enlisted service members who represented a cross-section of Navy personnel.⁷⁴ Interviewees spoke about their personal insights into the culture of the Surface Warfare community with an emphasis on funding, maintenance planning, administrative management, and operational employment.

The results of the interviews were unambiguous with a broad consensus on several issues, cultural and structural, that seemed to be impacting the Navy's surface force. In particular, many believed that there is an insufficient focus on warfighting skills. The report regarded this to be the most concerning observation gathered from interviewees. Many believed that the Navy "does not promote or advance surface ship warfighting in a meaningful way" due to leadership being distracted from the principal purpose of the Navy: "finding and sinking enemy fleets."⁷⁵ They described leadership to be "captive to bureaucratic excess" and "rewarded for the successful execution of administrative functions rather than their skills as a warfighter."⁷⁶ The report expressed that there was considerable alarm that the surface fleet had lost its fighting edge. Most interviewees also believed that sailors and officers alike are distracted by administrative tasks that are unrelated to their ship's lethality, "lack sufficient resiliency and are unprepared for the difficulties of combat."⁷⁷ An O-5 CO was quoted saying that, as a CO, his job consisted of 1,000 requirements and that his "real" job was figuring out which ones to "blow off."⁷⁸ One mid-grade officer expressed the experiences of many in the lack of fighting spirit in the surface community as well as the lack of purpose many feel. In his opinion, the non-combat curricula that the Navy focuses on, such as diversity

⁷⁴ Robert E. Schmidle and Mark Montgomery, *A Report on the Fighting Culture of the United States Navy Surface Fleet* (Washington, DC: U.S. Congress, 2021), https://www.cotton.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/navy_report.pdf.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6.



initiatives, human sex trafficking prevention, suicide prevention, etc., has consumed Navy resources and increased administrative burdens.⁷⁹ The mission, at least in the eyes of the average sailor, was seen to have become increasingly administrative and non-combat related. Frustration with “nonessential” “training was found to be overwhelming,” leading a career commander to say that the “Navy treats warfighting readiness as a compliance issue.”⁸⁰ He went on to say that even “combat lethality and ship fighting” exercises are treated as check in the box exercises.⁸¹ Some suggested that this was due to a lack of proper prioritization.

The report also highlighted the culture of micromanagement in the surface community. This overwhelming culture of micromanagement seems to be “creating officers that are less confident and less competent and less comfortable exercising command.”⁸² There was a deep concern that these micromanagement practices at the higher levels were worsening with technological advances and over the horizon technology. The ability to communicate instantly with ships across the globe was said to have slowly taken command autonomy away, as far away bosses had become more interested in the metrics, day-to-day activities, and operations of their units. While the U.S. Navy once had wholly autonomous and independent ship COs, the command autonomy that people used to aspire to seems to have drastically changed. The level of micromanagement has hindered leadership development in their ability to manage risk and employ essential decision-making skills. Many interviewees expressed concerns about this specifically and the subsequent increasing danger of paralysis in high intensity conflict. It is thought that peacetime training often breeds cautious leaders, unable to improvise, make on demand decisions, and take the fight into their own hands. The consensus is that the surface force has not yet “adjusted to the realities” brought about by “peer competitor [s] like China.”⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 18.

⁸³ Ibid., 20.



One recent destroyer captain said that one's priorities are shown by where they put their time. According to this report, many of the overwhelming requirements of a CO are administrative in nature. These requirements, whether pertaining to material issues, training, or warfighting readiness, have been "exacerbated due to the absence of a peer threat" and has bred a lack of an "apparent operational imperative to support a commander's decision to prioritize warfighting."⁸⁴ With the rise of China's competitive fleet, the decisions we make now will affect our force's ability to combat adversaries and maintain maritime superiority in the future. The normal day-to-day work and mentality of the current fleet, focused on non-combat and non-warfighting tasks, has degraded that warfighter mentality in the surface community.

This report is useful to my research as it is similar in structure and validates, at least partially, that the warfighting mentality might be seen as a concern throughout the surface fleet. I also conducted lengthy interviews, one-on-one, averaging about 1.5 hours in duration. I focused on priorities of SWOs, from the O-2 to the O-6, and attempted to reveal the realities of SWO culture, training, and professional development. From the responses of my interviews, I aimed to answer the questions concerning SWO culture, the community's focus, and how the warfighting mentality fits in. As expressed in both the CNO NAVPLAN and this report, it is imperative that we align our priorities with combat mission success. We must train how we will fight and focus our efforts on effective training and development of warfighters. Where we spend our time and money now will directly impact the surface force's abilities and performance future combat.

4. The Fundamentals of Surface Warfare: Sailors and Ships

In 2012, the outgoing Commander of United States Fleet Forces command, Admiral John C. Harvey Jr., USN (Retired), sent a parting message to his fellow admiralty throughout the surface Navy community. This letter was sent only two weeks before Admiral Harvey's retirement and was the only message of its kind that he sent to the leaders of the SWO community while serving as the senior SWO on active duty. The primary focus of this letter was to address the "serious wake-up call" regarding the future

⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.



of the surface force and the risks associated with the culmination of “decisions made over long periods of time.”⁸⁵ As he looked back on his time in the SWO community, 12 of which were as an admiral, he identified three changes in particular that he believed to have led the SWO community off track.

The first change was the shift from focusing primarily on sailors and ships to finding efficiencies and reducing costs. In doing so, he believed that the force had lost the control of the “fundamentals of surface warfare.”⁸⁶ Even on the deck plate level, the entire enterprise was primarily focusing on efficiency measures vice operational effectiveness. As trends and the effects of focus shifts are developed over several years, in hindsight, Admiral Harvey believed that the community had “walked into the future looking at [their] feet.”⁸⁷ Eventually he realized that, over time, the community had trained their people to improve efficiency above all else, something that seemed to be contrary to the community’s previous culture of ownership and readiness.

The second item identified was that the community did not course correct once it realized that decisions previously made were not proven to be valid. He believed that they failed to “routinely, rigorously, and thoroughly evaluate the products of the plans [they] were executing.”⁸⁸ He gave examples such as when they reduced manpower requirements to 90% of the lower requirements based on incomplete technology initiatives and failing to fully fund shore maintenance facilities after shifting more shipboard maintenance responsibilities ashore. Failure in these types of decisions were manifested in the marked increase in the Board of Inspection and Survey (INSURV) Material Inspection failure rate, an inspection designed to measure the performance of sailors and ships against established standards.⁸⁹ The lack of an effective feedback loop

⁸⁵ John C Harvey, “Adm. John C. Harvey Jr., USN, Author at USNI News,” USNI News, September 14, 2012, <https://news.usni.org/author/jharveyjr>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.



over time and failure to sustain and invest in the force had led to the “serious wake-up call” he mentioned at the beginning of the letter.

Lastly, he believed that a combination of the first two observations led to sailors taking the “easy way out” and “short-cuts,” which had subsequently led too many sailors astray. “Day-to-day standards and expectations had become dependent variables based on available resources...standards dropped with every cost cutting measure.”⁹⁰ One measure of this related back to the INSURV inspection, which is meant to be a routine and “come as you are” inspection. The ship’s “normal” and day-to-day standards of operation were seen to be drastically substandard.

Admiral Harvey acknowledged that he could have done more to “fully evaluate the impact the actions” described had on overall mission effectiveness, admitting that he too focused on the “tasks and responsibilities immediately at hand and did not take sufficient time to ‘step off the pitcher’s mount’ and reflect more broadly.”⁹¹ In recognizing this, he implored the admiralty to do better with the information that they now had and to continue the momentum in attempting to get the Navy back on track. He believed that repositioning the operational force and assets of the surface community as the primary focus should come first in achieving effectiveness. Admiral Harvey closed out his letter by urging his peers to take the wheel and continue steering the proverbial ship into a successful future, keeping ships and sailors at the helm, and “never, never, never giv [ing] way on the standards of excellence that [had] made [them] the greatest Navy in the world, bar none.”⁹² Lastly, he references the volatile world, new threats, the nation’s security, and how the Navy will be responsible for responding to these issues all across the globe. These sentiments written 10 years ago seem to still ring true today, and while institutional change does take time, it is important to keep the words of Admiral Harvey in mind as surface leaders propel the community into the future.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.



E. WHAT TO EXPECT

Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal

Quickly following the U.S. naval victory at Midway, Allied forces landed on the island of Guadalcanal on 07 August 1942 for what would be the first major campaign of the twentieth century. It was the first Allied offensive of the Pacific War that would leave the Japanese defeated just three months later with their withdrawal by February. While the campaign was being fought on both land and sea, the Navy suffered losses three times the number of sailors compared to the marines and army soldiers on land. Throughout the battle, both Japanese and American forces lost 24 warships and more than 430 planes each.⁹³ Hornfischer's *Neptune's Inferno* provides a complete and descriptive account of naval operations throughout the campaign that pulls from historical accounts as well as primary sources from those who experienced it themselves. Five of the seven major naval battles were ship-to-ship and fought at night and are lauded as some of the most vicious of the entirety of the Pacific War. They were so deadly, in fact, that the Americans nicknamed the waters surrounding as "Ironbottom Sound." Ironbottom Sound took the lives of over 5,000 American sailors and approximately 4000 Japanese sailors.⁹⁴ The book recounts successes, failures, lessons learned, the experiences of those who fought deadly battles at sea and provides wisdom for what is to come if the U.S. Navy sees deadly combat at sea again.

Hornfischer recounts the stress, pressures, and the experiences and decisions made by leadership in war. He included a quote by Hanson W. Baldwin: "The regular Navy enlisted man is today the highest type in our history; he is intelligent, aspiring, and has initiative, albeit a ready and cheerful susceptibility to discipline...Properly handled, he will go through fire and water. He is not always properly handled."⁹⁵ There were clear heroes of the Pacific War who held a will to fight, maintained the necessary battle-mindedness required to win, and properly handled their sailors. Men like Admiral Chester

⁹³ James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2012), xix)

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 189.



W. Nimitz, Admiral Ernest J. King, and Rear Admiral Norman Scott displayed heroism, bravery, and a war-focused mindset and are still renowned as some of the most distinguished Naval officers in U.S. history. Though different in approaches and personalities, these men were able to effectively lead, make sound decisions, and positively contribute to a U.S. victory. Nimitz was described as stoic yet inspirational, demanding yet fair. Some believed he was never afraid.⁹⁶ King, on the other hand, was described to be very conceited and self-praising. Despite his vanity, he kept a formidable level of battle-mindedness at all times and lead unrelentingly.⁹⁷ Another example of a leader with a war-focused mindset was Vice Admiral Halsey. He understood that battles were not won with paperwork, diplomacy, or engineering ratings aboard ships. Unafraid to take risks, he ordered his forces to seek battle and “strike – repeat, strike.”⁹⁸

The Pacific War would also highlight timidity, poor judgment, and the reflection of the trauma of war in its leadership. Several key players were either relieved of their positions or were victims of trauma from sustaining such horrific battle. For example, Rear Admiral Fletcher displayed actions that have been since described as “cowardice” and “yellow.”⁹⁹ He made very cautious and safe decisions with his forces, whether it was withdrawing carriers who were supposed to be standing a defensive capacity or not releasing destroyers to go pursue the Japanese carrier force, Fletcher was timid. And then there were people like Captain Bode, who was as intimidating and ruthless as Admiral King, but only had ambitions of advancing his career and making flag. While tyrannical and demanding, he lacked courage and good decision-making judgment. During the Battle of Savo Island, Bode took his ship in the opposite direction (west) to where he “thought” the primary fight was and never reported inbound enemy ships to the other squadron of ships to the east.¹⁰⁰ This may have been due to the frazzle of combat, fear, or confusion. Nevertheless, U.S. ships were wholly caught off guard and suffered

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 222.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.



significant casualties as a result. Vice Admiral Bob Ghormley's was relieved as Commander of South Pacific Forces during this time. He lacked the tough, hard, and ruthless nature of a good operator. His remote leadership style, attitude of defeatism, and nerves led him to hold his forces in hesitating and passive hands, eventually leading to his relief by Vice Admiral Halsey.¹⁰¹ Throughout the approach to Guadalcanal, we see that that "fast-thinking, quick-acting men" were the true warriors who weren't afraid to overthrow the reassuring and comfortable rhythms of Navy life, prioritizing the "fighter's way."¹⁰²

Much like today's fleet, the U.S. Navy, at that time, enjoyed the luxury of peacetime. This safety produced caution and minimized risk; as a result, the realism of the fight had been eliminated in both training and way of life. After the defeat at Savo Island, also known as the "Battle of the Sitting Ducks," the Navy reshuffled its leadership and made the valuable distinction between battle-minded officers and those who were only concerned with advancing their own careers. They learned quickly that the qualities they cultivated and succeeded within peacetime fell short of the officers who were "forward-leaning, balls-of-the-feet bearing," and those who "professionalized aggression."¹⁰³ It was the duty of officers to display and demand a contagious spirit of victory and live through the strain to a Japanese defeat.

Hornfischer does a phenomenal job depicting the atrocities of surface-to-surface combat; the fears, experiences, actions, and realities distinctly reserved for war at sea. The Battle of Savo Island involved five cruisers and seven destroyers and was fought in the early hours of the morning.¹⁰⁴ Sailors recall that most people onboard, especially the new ones, were feeling thrilled, defiant, and unnerved, while those who had experienced the wrath of the Japanese before felt like they had had enough. Ships and their crews had been at general quarters (GQ) for several days, fighting off several attacks, went days

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰² Ibid., 135.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 58.



without sleep, experienced rushed adrenaline, fear, and exhaustion. Most sailors, asleep in the middle of the night, were woken up to bugles blaring and the synthetic alarm bells of the ship setting GQ. The disorder of setting GQ was described to be “absurd and tragic chaos” and time-critical “musical chairs” as precious and decisive minutes were passing by. One Sailor recounted that by the time he was starting his descent to take his GQ station, the ship had already been hit by several salvos and was on fire.¹⁰⁵ The sounds of battle come from torpedoes in the water, ships getting hit, dying shipmates, soaring planes overhead, constant and concentrated barrage of weapons, drowned out orders on the bridge, burning metal, the vibration of the ship’s hull, and the overtone of mumbled prayers to name a few. The sights of battle accompany these sounds and illuminate the atrocities of war at sea. Air filled with shrapnel, bodies of fallen men, fires, smoke, exploding 5-inch shells being turned into rockets and projectiles, rushing water inside the skin of the ship, the darkness of the ship’s electrical grid going out, limbs hanging on by a thread, and slippery blood on deck from gruesome injuries. As ships and their crews endure such horror, it is crucial that both sailors and officers alike make sound decisions based on training, good judgment, and courage. Emotional duress, confusion, and less than ideal conditions do not excuse the obligation of proper execution of the mission. Within the first paragraph of the book, Hornfischer writes that sailors knew “that technology was important, but that guts and guile mattered more.”¹⁰⁶ One lesson many learned was that the right thing to do often clashed with their worst biases and fears.

What is particularly relevant to SWOs today are the incredible insights of the human experience during combat at sea; something that the U.S. Navy has not had to experience since World War II. Hornfischer showed in gory detail the realities of life at sea during the campaign and how the strain of war affected the men fighting it. It is the job of leadership onboard ships to direct their sailors and accept the necessary risks that come with naval operations with a warfighter mentality. “Guts and guile” were said to be key in sustaining and winning in combat; attributes that can be encompassed in the warfighter mentality. The demands of war at sea, such as feelings of uncertainty, fear, the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., xvii.



immense physical and psychological toll, heroism, and cowardice were prevalent then and can be expected again in future naval surface battles.

F. DEVELOPING THE WARFIGHTER MENTALITY

1. Enhancing Operational Effectiveness

Military personnel are required to sustain high levels of performance as their tasks are often complex, stressful, and demanding of substantial cognitive readiness. Optimizing, enhancing, and leveraging cognitive readiness is imperative in achieving overall effectiveness in operational performance. This study presents the behavior profiles of military personnel in extreme and demanding environments and how certain factors contribute to performance in these settings.¹⁰⁷ Understanding that optimized cognitive readiness can enhance performance while under stress can provide a basis for development and sustainment of optimal performance throughout the military.

The study, conducted at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory (ARL), served to establish a theoretical framework for evaluating stress on human performance and prediction. They created a suite of readiness measures (Readiness Assessment and Monitoring System (RAMS)) that may be used to predict and assess performance in operational environments. Soldiers are assumed to always be in a baseline state of readiness, due to their training and experience, however, they may not always be proficient in the necessary skills required to perform multiple functions and adapt to diverse threats. One's cognitive readiness is dependent on their susceptibility to stress and their ability to adapt. The concept of stress encompasses the variability of the stressor as well as the variability of the experience. The interaction of the two was used to define the stress experience where total stress response was measured. "The level of stress that can be tolerated without any effect on output is the 'maximal adaptability' region" and is a part of a continuum of effects on performance under stress.¹⁰⁸ The RAMS captured the

¹⁰⁷ Keryl A. Cosenzo, Linda T. Fatkin, and Debra J. Patton, "Ready or Not: Enhancing Operational Effectiveness ...," June 2007, B98, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6289886_Ready_or_not_Enhancing_operational_effectiveness_th_rough_use_of_readiness_measures.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.



key environmental and individual characteristics, which affect adaptability, as well as the response of individuals and, by extension, groups as well. The effects of stress on performance are dynamic and a function of both the task at hand and the characteristics of the individual. One's characteristics influence their ability to adapt to the demands of said task. While minor stressors can be absorbed by the person's intrinsic adaptive mechanism without significantly affecting performance, stressors that exceed the adaptive mechanism exceed their capacity to adapt and will subsequently affect their performance.¹⁰⁹

The study addresses the effect of variability in individual's personality characteristics as they related to several situational and organizational factors. The RAMS includes a psychological stress assessment, a field practical, physiological measures of stress, and various cognitive performance assessments.¹¹⁰ By administering the RAMS instruments, data was captured and used to create profiles of the type and intensity of one's responses to various levels of stress. Certain contributing traits and psychological states were identified in the process as well. Trait characteristics were captured using a battery of four different assessments to identify one's personality, general affect, coping efforts, and cognitive process in uncertainty. Trait measures were used to assess one's inherent personality characteristics known to predict performance.¹¹¹ Psychological state characteristics were captured using a battery of five assessments to identify how one felt at the time of assessment, one's perceived ability to master new situations and perform effectively, how much stress one experienced during a specific period on various events, levels of stress and adaptability, and cognitive readiness. State measures were used to assess stress responses and identify the primary component of the stress that correlated with performance.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., B98.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., B101.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., B102.



An analysis on the variability in personality characteristics in response to situational and organizational factors was done by looking at performance in marksmanship, cognition within sustained operations, recruiter productivity, multitasking, and uncertainty. For marksmanship, it was found that aptitude for marksmanship accounted for 11% of performance, while 34% was explained by the state of one's anxiety during the evolution.¹¹³ Cognition during sustained operations was measured throughout a 48-hour field exercise; it was found that personality characteristics significantly correlated with cognitive performance. Those with high scores for Neuroticism-Anxiety were shown to perform worse on logical reasoning and working memory. Those with high Impulsivity-Sensation Seeking traits were shown to perform better on short-term memory and logical reasoning assessments.¹¹⁴ Recruiter productivity was shown to correlated with certain dysphoria (anxiety, depression, and hostility) profiles: high and low. Recruiters with low dysphoria were shown to be more successful, accomplishing 91% of the mission. Within this category, two subgroups emerged, high-stress and low-stress, showing that recruiters with low levels of life stress were even more successful, accomplishing 105% of the mission.¹¹⁵ Multitasking performance was identified using 2 categories: high self-efficacy and low self-efficacy. Those in the high self-efficacy group were shown to perform significantly better as they were less fearful, insensitive to criticism, sustained high energy, and preferred challenging work. There were also strong positive correlations with the personality traits of Energy-Activity and Neuroticism-Anxiety.¹¹⁶ Lastly, performance in uncertainty was identified using trait factors used to cope. Those with a high need for cognitive structure and high ability to achieve cognitive structure may experience less stress. Those with a high enjoyment for uncertainty, novelty, and change were identified to perform better under uncertainty as well.¹¹⁷ These results show that trait and state measures are able to

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., B103.



capture individual factors that can influence performance in both the positive and negative directions.

One's state of readiness to perform can be used to help mitigate stress responses and enhance overall operational performance. Responses can reveal individual factors that influence performance and can be used to direct modifications in training practices, enhance performance, garner consistent results, and maintain physical and cognitive readiness for longer durations. Optimal performance is critical in military operations, whether it is in training or in action, therefore, it may be beneficial to understand these factors on the individual and group levels as the force prepares itself for real life stressful situations.

2. Training and Motivation on Performance

There are several factors that contribute to overall employee performance. This study investigates the impact of training on performance. According to this study, training and motivation are shown to contribute to the performance of employees greatly in comparison to other performance related factors such as technology, management behavior, or working environment. While this study looks at incorporate performance, the human aspect of the study can be useful to military applications and personnel management.

In this case, performance is measured as the ratio of output to input and a “process of continuous improvement in the production/supply of quality output/service through efficient and effective use of inputs” and is defined as the function of skills.¹¹⁸ Training is said to be a key element to the performance of employees and the ability to increase performance while still emphasizing teamwork and the betterment of all. Training is defined as the learning process involving “the acquisition of knowledge, sharpening of skills, concepts, rules, or changing of attitudes and behaviors to enhance the performance

¹¹⁸ Muhammad Ikhlas Khan, “The Impact of Training and Motivation on Performance of Employees,” *Academia.edu*, October 31, 2014, 84, accessed November 30, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/9055815/The_Impact_of_Training_and_Motivation_on_Performance_of_Employees.



of employees.”¹¹⁹ Employees who are trained well are aware of their responsibilities, equipped with the skills to perform their duties, and are able to use new technology to their advantage. As a response to being well trained, motivation is expected to increase, benefiting overall performance, the working environment, and personnel management; motivation being the intrinsic driver of achievement. The organization wanting to maximize performance and maintain a competitive edge has an interest in proper training and motivation of their employees.

Performance was the dependent variable that depended on employee training. Motivation and training were the independent variables that effected performance. A sample of 100 employees from Habib Bank and Federal Urdu University of Arts and Science and Technology Islamabad completed a questionnaire and the data was used to formulate conclusions using reliability statistics analysis, descriptive statistics analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression statistics analysis.¹²⁰ The study showed that there is a positive relationship to both training and motivation on performance of employees. An increase in any of the independent variables showed an increase in performance.

In the context of the warfighter mentality, performance can be measured by actionable and measurable items such as level of knowledge, training, ability, adaptability, stress management, and completion of tasks under stress. Being well and effectively trained can lead to the intrinsic motivation to perform better and work harder to achieve professional goals and requirements. It is assumed that, if one must fall back on their training, a good foundation is required. Intentional, effective, and motivated training propels performance in action. For this reason, it behooves the SWO community to ensure such training is taking place in preparing their SWOs for combat.

3. “Beyond Technical Competence”

Coach Vincent Lombardi, former coach for the Green Bay Packers, once said “mental toughness is many things and rather difficult to explain. Its qualities are sacrifice

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 91.



and self-denial. Also, most importantly, it is combined with a perfectly disciplined will that refuses to give in. It's a state of mind – you could call it character in action.”¹²¹ It is the “between the ears” toughness that is useful and crucial in stressful situations. While there may be a battle to face in front of you, the mind is where those battles are won or lost. This paper expands on the importance of mental toughness, explains techniques to practice such toughness, and establishes a philosophy for sustained performance and success in stressful environments.

When it comes to dealing with ruthless bosses or coworkers, it is worth considering why they are the way that they are. Generally unhappy, insecure, and fearful, these types of people use the power of their positions, not their skills, to bully or take credit for others' work. Often, when things go wrong, they look for someone to blame. Competent and highly capable people unnerve them; they do not like to look foolish or incompetent in comparison. Often, their objective is to please their bosses and attend to their own careers. While these bosses or peers seem to ask for a lot, they are not to be confused with the demanding but fair types who keep realistic expectations and foster an environment centered around the success of the organization, vice their own personal gains. The difference is that one boss gets far in the organization by tearing people down and the other by building people up.

During World War II, millions of people became prisoners in German concentration camps. Many lost their lives by execution, disease, suicide, or simply by losing the will to keep living. However, through the terrible atrocities suffered by these prisoners, there were some who simply refused to die. Some who never gave up nor lost their will to live. Those survivors had incredible mental toughness. One former prisoner, Viktor Frankl, believed he survived by mental toughness and resolve alone. While every trace of humanity was stripped away from him and his fellow prisoners, the one thing that

¹²¹ James T. Scarnati, “Beyond Technical Competence: Developing Mental Toughness,” Career Development International, June 01, 2000, 171, accessed December 02, 2021, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/13620430010371928/full/html>.



they couldn't take was his attitude. "With mental toughness, when the going gets rough, you don't give up and you don't give in, you assert your will over the enemy."¹²²

Much like one builds physical stamina through consistent exercise over time, one builds mental toughness through practice and discipline. The U.S. Army teaches that one "must have an honest understanding of who they are," what they know, and what they can do.¹²³ To cultivate mental toughness, a well-rounded and thorough understanding and appreciation for "your strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, and limitations" must be had so that you are able to lead effectively.¹²⁴ There are several ways to help develop mental toughness. A few that are especially relevant to the SWO community are:

- Develop competence – competence leads to self-assurance and those who are competent tend to cope better in stressful situations. Developing competence requires you to look thoughtfully into your weaknesses and work to improve them.
- Learn to say no – too often, leaders fall into the trap of trying to please everybody and getting everything done. In the process, priorities are not managed and the "get it done at all costs" attitude sinks in. Sometimes being a leader requires you to say no and prioritize appropriately to benefit, not just the mission, but your people.
- Conquer emotions with rational thinking – emotional maturity is a necessary characteristic in developing mental toughness. Often, emotions can take over for rational thinking in high stress and panic inducing environments.¹²⁵

Mental toughness is when "rational thought processes and self-discipline take precedence over emotional reactions."¹²⁶ It is to be calm, deliberate, patient, and controlled in the face of chaos. It is to fight irresponsible and knee jerk urges, manage emotions, and to be able to make good judgments, employ rational reasoning, and overcome. It is the key to survival in the most difficult settings, whether you're battling

¹²² Ibid., 174.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹²⁶ Ibid.



the operational tempo of a deployment work up cycle or forward deployed in harm's way on the high seas.

4. Physical Fitness and Resilience

Physical fitness is “a set of health or performance-related attributes relating to the activities and condition of the body” and is associated with successful coping mechanisms to stress and resiliency.¹²⁷ Physical fitness can be categorized into “work related” and “health related” activities. Work related activities increase one’s ability to meet the physical demands of their work, while health related activities are associated with the reduction of morbidity, mortality, and chronic health conditions. Whether work related or health related, physical fitness and “activity can provide considerable benefits to physical and mental health.”¹²⁸ This report was originally designed to support U.S. Air Force leadership in “promoting resilience” in their force.¹²⁹

There are a variety of stressors that may plague service members daily. Stress related to deployment, fear of confrontation, long work hours, or separation from friends and families are a few examples of the laundry list of stressors that can cause considerable impact on one’s mental health. Physical fitness is a principal aspect that can affect one’s resilience and readiness by helping service members cope with the stress of military duties. Resilience is defined as “the ability to withstand, recover from, and grow in the face of stressors.” Fitness is defined as a “state of adaptation in balance with the conditions at hand.”¹³⁰ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011, Admiral Michael Mullen, outlined the concept of Total Force Fitness (TFF) with the goal of a “healthy, ready, and resilient” force. The TFF included medical, nutritional, environmental, physical, social, spiritual, behavioral, and psychological domains,

¹²⁷ Sean Robson, “Physical Fitness and Resilience: A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being,” RAND Corporation, October 03, 2013, ix, accessed December 01, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR104.html.

¹²⁸ Ibid., ix.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹³⁰ Ibid., iii.



conceptualizing resilience by connecting the physical and mental realms.¹³¹ Physical fitness is defined as “the capacity to perform physical exercise, consisting of the components of aerobic capacity, muscular strength, and muscular endurance in conjunction with body fat content within an optimal range.”¹³² Physical health can “facilitate the performance of physically demanding tasks” as well as “promote general health” and wellness.¹³³ It was found that regular exercise can reduce reactions to stress. Fitter individuals show decreased physiological reactivity and recover pulse baselines at faster rates following a stressful circumstance. Physical activity and fitness can also diminish the adverse effects of stress if maintained over time.¹³⁴

The report also identifies interventions to promote physical fitness in service members. Some effective and relevant interventions for SWOs are:

“Explore cognitive and behavioral factors associated with behavior change including beliefs about the cost and benefits of physical activity, reinforcement of changes in physical activity, perception of the health risks of physical inactivity, confidence to engage in physical activity.”¹³⁵

“Ongoing verbal support.”¹³⁶

“Not dependent on attendance at a facility.”¹³⁷

Approaches to encouraging physical fitness can be done informally through promotion, motivation, and helping maintain the change, behaviorally or socially by managing personnel in a way that supports physical fitness and increasing opportunities for physical activities within the community. Whether it is to build in time to exercise during the workday, make it socially acceptable to take the time to do so, or encourage different kinds of helpful activities that don’t require a gym membership or extensive

131 Ibid., 1.

132 Ibid., 5.

133 Ibid., 6.

134 Ibid., 14.

135 Ibid., 17.

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.



ship's gym, the important part is to support a shift in priorities and culture to embolden and inspire one to take charge of their physical fitness.

Physical activity is strongly linked to better fitness in various categories including medical, physical, psychological, and behavioral. Medical fitness includes cardiorespiratory health or reduced risk of serious clinical illnesses. Physical fitness includes body composition, muscular fitness, or physical ability. Psychological fitness refers to stress-buffering, reduced likelihood of depression and anxiety, or increased self-esteem. Lastly, behavioral fitness refers to good sleep practices, and emotion control.¹³⁸ All these benefits can contribute to optimal mission performance by a strong and resilient fighting force. They serve as reasons to prioritize physical health in the day to day lives of service members.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 23.



IV. ANALYSIS

A. INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with SWOs from the ranks of O-2 to O-6 to capture and understand their experiences and perception of the warfighter mentality in the SWO community. Interviews were also conducted with various combat arms officers serving in the U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army, and U.S. Navy to gain insight into their approach to warfighting and identify any similarities or differences compared to the SWO community. All officers answered questions pertaining to professional development practices; stress, training, and drills; institutional focus on physical and mental fitness; institutional focus on tactical and technical acumen; preparation for kinetic warfare; priorities, culture, and what “warfighter” means to them. Interviews followed a set list of questions and deviated uniquely per interviewee response for elaboration or clarification.

My objective was to generate insight from the responses of interviewees that were based on their unique or collective experiences in their communities. From these responses, I was able to interpret the data and answer the primary and secondary research questions of this thesis. My experience as a SWO informed the collection and analysis of the data with the ambition to impact the SWO community’s approach to developing the warfighter mentality.

B. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected through 23 officers from the ranks of O-2 to O-6. Interviews were completed in approximately one hour, some running as short as 45 minutes to as long as three hours. 20 interviews were conducted via video-teleconference on Microsoft Teams and three were conducted via telephone due to connectivity issues or interviewee’s convenience.

C. SAMPLE

All SWO interviewees had gone through at least one operational tour and a varying number of deployments and experiences. Interviewees outside of the SWO community were all O-3 or above with at least one operational tour and a varying number



of deployments and experiences. The sample included 18 SWOs and 5 combat arms officers of differing communities. Of the total sample, 18 were White, three were African American, one was Asian, and one was Hispanic. 7 females participated in the study in total.

Table 2. Sample

	Community			
	SWO	NSW	USMC Infantry	USA Infantry
Gender				
Male	11	2	2	1
Female	7	0	0	0
Race				
White	13	2	1	1
African American	2	0	1	0
Asian	1	0	0	0
Hispanic	1	0	0	0
Rank				
O-2	4	0	0	0
O-3	4	2	0	1
O-4	3	0	0	0
O-5	3	0	0	0
O-6	4	0	0	0
First Choice				
Yes	8	2	2	1



	Community			
	SWO	NSW	USMC Infantry	USA Infantry
No	8	0	0	0

Participants were selected for this study by availability and interest in participation. Initially, I created a convenience sample by drawing upon participants from various social networks of SWOs and non-SWOs and contacted them via email to inquire about voluntary participation in my study. My work email was also provided to be disseminated to their professional peers. Participation was voluntary and all individuals who volunteered were interviewed.

D. DATA ANALYSIS

Each interview was recorded and transcribed for review and analysis. Over 1,400 pages of transcribed text were documented in the process. Each transcript was read several times to identify key themes, shared or unique, and to identify significant words, sentences, or phrases that aided in answering the primary and secondary research questions of this study as well as background that could be used in explanation. Comparative analysis was also done across ranks, experiences, and designation to compare the themes found in the SWO community and those found in the Combat Arms communities.

The first review of the transcripts was used to isolate pertinent information in the responses of the interviewees. The objective was to summarize the responses to the interview questions to create a workable document of data, consolidating 1,400 plus pages of transcript to 43 pages of summaries and direct quotes. The consolidation was organized by rank for SWO data, while the Combat Arms data was organized all together. The second round of review was used to identify any overarching themes in both categories, SWO and Combat Arms. I found that while some experiences and perceptions were constant throughout the SWO community, regardless of rank, others were grouped in smaller circles, whether it be by junior officers (O-4 and below), or



senior officers (O-5 and above.) I found common themes within the Combat Arms group as well; some themes were shared amongst both categories, while some differed. 14 themes were identified across both categories. The data was then reviewed a third time to re-group themes into broader categories. From the 14 themes, data was organized into six overarching themes, some with several subthemes. The fourth, and last, round of review was used to form the discussion chapter and answer the research questions set out by this study and help in formulating recommendations for the future.



V. FINDINGS

Throughout the research process, there were several key themes identified and shared amongst interviewees. Some themes were overwhelmingly shared by all participants, while others were grouped into smaller categories like rank, job description, or experience. These overarching themes have been categorized into seven findings, some with multiple sub-themes associated. From these themes, I will attempt to answer the research questions outlined in this study to assess the state of warfighter mentality in the SWO community.

A. FINDING 1: ATTRACTION TO THE SWO COMMUNITY

There were certain aspects and characteristics of the SWO community that were appealing to interviewees who served as SWOs. Whether they wanted to be a SWO from the beginning, became a SWO after not qualifying for another community, or ended up becoming a SWO due to having no other options, there were several shared thoughts on how the structure of the SWO community was beneficial. Most frequently stated was the fact that SWOs started their service obligation almost immediately and “got to the fleet” faster than any other community. Unlike pilots, submariners, special warfare, or even the Marine Corps, who go through lengthy training pipelines before entering the fleet, the SWO community traditionally sent their officers straight to ships with minimal schooling required. However, this has recently changed and newly commissioned SWOs are now being sent directly to the Basic Division Officer’s Course and follow-on schools before starting their time onboard their first ships. For those who intend [ed] on resigning their commissions after their initial service obligation or those who intended on laterally transferring to a different community after earning their SWO pin, the immediate start was appealing.

58% of SWOs interviewed did not originally want to be SWOs. Instead, they aspired to serve as pilots, in the Marine Corps or in Naval Special Warfare, or they did not know exactly what they wanted to do, so they defaulted to SWO. Of those who did not have SWO as their first choice, 73% were male. Of those who wanted to be SWOs, the male to female ratio was split 50/50. On the other hand, all combat arms officers



interviewed wanted to be a part of their communities from the beginning and worked towards being selected into those fields. Above all, the marine, army, and Navy SEAL officers were attracted to the challenge and high standards associated with serving in their communities.

B. FINDING 2: NOT ALL SWOS ARE CREATED EQUAL

One's professional development, outside of the formal schooling provided by the Navy, greatly depends on the officer's circumstance. "Right place, right time" can be used to describe the luck of the draw approach to professional development that SWOs experience up and down the chain of command. One young O-2 SWO stated that they had "no mentorship" and "no personal growth" in their first year as a SWO. Along the same lines, an O-5 admitted that "the system does not have a good way of offsetting the lack of mentorship. SWOs need to seek it out." Additionally, there is no real standardized training for major qualifications like OOD, SWO, Engineering Officer of the Watch (EOOW), or Tactical Action Officer (TAO). While Personnel Qualification Standards (PQS) exist, the rigor and standards of qualifications are set at the command level, meaning that the quality of your qualifications and professional development are very much dependent on the standards set by your CO. Several officers interviewed expressed concern about "give me" qualifications awarded by their previous COs even though they did not feel proficient, capable, or knowledgeable enough to "sit the seat." Certain qualifications can be seen as career progressors, such as the EOOW qualification. Upon record review, showing the ability to achieve advanced and high levels of technical and tactical knowledge early is looked upon favorably by the community and is often used an indicator in identifying "hard chargers." It can look very good on the CO who awards these qualifications as well, as it signals to higher ups that professional development is a priority in their wardroom. When the young officers were asked why they got their EOOW qualification even though they were not ready to stand the watch, one replied, "I'll take it if you're giving them out" knowing that it would benefit them later on. This approach to professional development was described by another officer as "degrading warfighting because it makes being a SWO mean less." Professional development also depends on the quality of your wardroom and chief's mess. If there are knowledgeable



and respectable leaders in your command to help mold, develop, and guide you through mentorship, you are much better off than those who cannot rely on their command for that level of attention. This concept applies to every rank and billet across the fleet. Often, one's job responsibilities overwhelm their time and deliberate professional development is crowded out due to other priorities. One O-6 stated that "the hardest thing to do is to prioritize that training and hone that edge."

Formal schooling is widely seen as ineffective as much of it is PowerPoint based with little emphasis on active learning. Many see formal schools like Advanced Division Officer's Course or Department Head School to be "equalizers" and a way for the Navy to ensure their SWOs are moving forward with the same baseline level of knowledge. Current mid-grade officers, namely the O-4 lieutenant commanders, went through "SWOS in a Box" as ensigns, as this was meant to help the Navy economize and put more of the initial burden of developing young SWOs on ship COs. One's professional development also seems to rely heavily on personal interest and self-seeking work ethic. Every SWO interviewed expressed that the bulk of their development was a product of a personal interest in learning and developing themselves as professionals and better leaders. This was primarily done through OJT, self-help books, self-study, and seeking out and maintaining mentorship. Most officers interviewed believed that personal and professional development, as well as mentorship, were more valuable than formal Navy schooling. Like the SWO community, the combat arms officers placed a lot of value in OJT, mentorship, and the importance of personal investment into their own development. Although, the initial training pipelines and qualification processes in the combat arms communities are more rigorous and standardized compared to the SWO community. Officers go through the same intense, lengthy, and involved training which is seen to raise the baseline knowledge of the officer corps, their skillsets, and the abilities required for the job. In addition to this standardized training, the institution values self-study and personal development as well. There seems to be a larger institutional emphasis put on developing and bettering oneself as an operator, leader, and officer supported by all levels of the chain of command. Four out of five combat arms interviewees, O-3 to O-4, expressed that they felt "supported by the institution" to learn and progress. One officer stated that "you can't progress as an officer without some type of continual professional



development. You're going to quickly get left behind as your peers out cycle you." Topics ranging from military history to developing technology to the global politics, it is expected that you continue to read and learn in order to contribute to the team and successfully complete the mission.

From the most junior O-2 to the most senior O-6, every SWO interviewee had experienced at least one mishap or near-mishap, ranging in severity, while serving on a ship. The majority of them were near-miss, close quarters situations due to negligence, complacency, training deficiencies, or confusion. Many of the officers interviewed had experienced similar situations in Replenishment at Sea operations in particular, where their ship came too close to the replenishing ship, one ship coming as close as 60 feet. While some SWOs expressed that they remained calm and control throughout their situations, others admitted to feeling flustered or panicked alongside their watch teams, some scenarios to include the CO or XO. An idea shared throughout the ranks is that "everything we do is dangerous and as you get older, you realize that." Several officers across ranks also expressed that the pressure of performing sometimes led to putting the ship and crew in precarious situations, even when it was not mission critical nor time sensitive. "What's not acceptable is when you knowingly make bad decisions and put yourself in a situation just because you're not willing to say 'no.'" One O-6 stated that on their first underway as a destroyer CO, their ship came dangerously close to hitting a buoy while attempting to offload ship-riders in the middle of the night. Although conditions were not ideal and their gut was telling them that something was wrong, they continued with the evolution. It wasn't until they could hear the buoy ringing loudly in close range that they had a "wake up moment" and realized the ship was not where the bridge team thought it was. In that moment, the CO decided to turn the ship around and wait until the weather cleared. When asked why they continued in the first place, they replied that they "felt pressure to do something that didn't necessarily have to happen." The pressure might have come from their own willingness to accomplish operations no matter the circumstance or the fact that they were offloading members of their Immediate Superior in Command. Conversely, only a few combat arms officers interviewed had experienced mishaps or near-mishaps while serving in their units. However, those who had experienced a mishap or near-mishap described them to be unfortunate products of



inherently dangerous operations; none of which were due to negligence or incompetence. It seems to be understood that there is a level of risk accepted when conducting airborne operations, live fire exercises, in theater troop movements, and other operational requirements.

Training and drills are thought to be effective only when they are realistic and taken seriously. While all the SWO interviewees saw and understood the intent of the training cycle structure, most mentioned that they did not feel it was being executed appropriately onboard ships. In their experience, training and drills were done more so to be able to say a requirement was met (e.g., “check in the box”) rather than to prepare crews for operational employment; some described them as “rehearsals” for inspections and assessments rather than actual training. Most training scenarios were seen to be “unrealistic, poorly constructed, and a series of people going through the motions.” One O-6 stated that “we don’t want to make drills challenging because we don’t want ships to fail.” All interviewees believed that “check in the box” trainings were not taken seriously and that there needed to be a connection to operational applications. One officer said that “people don’t take it seriously because they don’t truly think that something like this is going to happen.” Along these lines, another officer said that “the mindset that combat is not in our future breeds complacency.” Generally, SWOs believe that officers in the community are preoccupied with doing what is required to pass and employing as much gamesmanship as necessary to ensure their crews can move on to the next objective. Some even expressed that even the culminating event before deployment, Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX), could be executed as a “check in the box” depending on who was running it. Realistically, training and focus is broken up into whichever warfare area is being assessed currently or in the immediate future. Once the assessment is complete, they shift focus to the next one. One junior officer stated that when it came to certifying their warfare area of Strike Warfare, their team was “sleep deprived, not ready, nor trained anywhere near the level [they] were supposed to be.” On top of that, they expressed that no support was given by their command leadership until they were in danger of failing. “Then everyone was down our throats” but before then “we weren’t a priority, and nobody cared.” Another widely shared perception was that SWOs are focused on the wrong things and have lost sight of the real purpose of what



SWOs are supposed to be doing, which is “creat [ing] a good fleet and kill [ing] the enemy if we need to.” One officer stated that “it’s better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war, and right now, we are just a bunch of gardeners.” 14 out of 18 SWOs, 11 of whom were O-4 and below, believed that there were too many aspects of the job that took away or distracted from effective warfighter development. Aspects such as administrivia, the zero-defect mentality, flaws in the maintenance system, unforgiving ship schedule and deployment rotations were just a few examples mentioned. One O-4 stated that their “biggest worry should be preparing for a kinetic fight, but ... it’s not.” From the top down, SWOs believed that training and drills were done better and more effectively while already out on deployment, when, conceptually, the ship and crew were supposed to already be at their peak capability. SWOs across the board considered deployment to be “the easy part” of the ship’s life cycle. One O-6 stated that “deployments give you a lot more leeway to do realistic and effective training. This is great for a peacetime Navy. You have the time. But in wartime, there won’t be that expectation of free time. They have to be ready when they leave.”

There were mixed responses as to command emphasis on the tactical and technical acumen of SWOs. Most of the senior officers interviewed believed that there was a lot of emphasis placed on it, while the junior officers did not believe was a priority at all. Officers who were O-4 and below generally believed that there was no investment in keeping up tactical skills on a command level. They described certain skills required to pass certifications as “use or lose” and ones that, without attention, degrade over time. One junior officer who earned their SWO pin in the last year said that they’ve “forgotten most of what [they] learned for the SWO pin.” Due to being “inundated” with other things like personnel management, operational tempo, program management, maintenance, repairs, non-combat related training, etc., the emphasis was seen to be placed more on “memorization and regurgitation” than on long-term learning. A shared thought across several ranks was that “SWOs are more technically focused because there are tangible things that tell them what to know. They make tactical thinking technical.” One O-3 stated that they did not have confidence in SWOs to think outside the box because “they board themselves up by the margins of the text.” Another officer, an O-4, expressed that they “never felt like an expert on any warfare area” nor an “expert ship



handler” nor an “expert TAO.” They stated that they “knew some stuff, but didn’t know all the books, the memos, the tactics, warfighting profiles of different nations, etc. You kind of learn them ad hoc on the fly.” Contrarily, senior officers, particularly those who have had command, generally believed that their ships were trained properly and that they invested in the skills that make competent mariners and warfighters. One post-command O-5 stated that “every captain has sailed underneath someone else’s cruise missile zone and has thought about how their team is going to perform. And if it kept him up at night, they’re not running enough drills and they don’t have the right people in the seat.” While all interviewees agreed that warfighting should be an integral part of being a SWO, the training timeline and execution were seen to degrade the focus in developing SWO warfighters. One O-6 who was post major command stated that “due to the heavy focus on maintenance and repairs, flaws in the maintenance contracting system, and delays, the ship is left with little time to focus on watch team building and warfighter training.” They went on to say that “when maintenance runs long, deployments are not delayed. Instead, we shorten the timeline allotted to complete training and work ups. The ship CO and crew shoulder all responsibility for poorly executed industrial repairs.” Along the same lines, another O-6 stated that “we have to do a better job training on the important stuff.”

Conversely, the combat arms communities put most of their focus in technical and tactical training. It is considered the job of the infantry officer or Navy SEAL to be qualified, proficient, and experienced in these areas as they believe it is their sole job. Therefore, thorough and realistic training and drills hold more significance and priority in these communities. While there is currently a shift happening surrounding the end of the global war on terror (GWOT) to the great power competition (also known as the strategic competition), the training they received was considered to be helpful, useful, and realistic if they were ever to encounter such combat-centric circumstances in real life. While only 1/5 of the combat arms interviewees had ever experience combat, all were confident in their abilities, the abilities of their teammates, the training they were given, and skills they took with them on deployments.



C. FINDING 3: PRESSURE TO BE SEEN AS “READY” FOR COMBAT IS LEADING TO UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Several officers shared instances of unethical behavior conducted by themselves or others in their commands in response to external pressure to remain operational. Even for major certifications like COMPTUEX, several officers stated that their assessors sometimes modified certain parts of the scenarios to give ships the “green light to deploy.” Nobody wants to be the ship that fails and cannot go on deployment, and nobody wants to be the one to fail a ship and burden another ship with a no-notice deployment in their place. One officer who experienced this stated that they took issue with it because they could have potentially been sent on deployment ill-prepared to deal with dangerous situations. Fortunately, nothing dangerously eventful transpired. Due to the overwhelming and compressed schedules of the training cycle, constant turnover, and undermanned crews, ships are forced to complete integral training and development at faster rates, making it difficult for SWOs to successfully manage every program simultaneously. One officer, an O-3, recalled that training was especially and uniquely difficult to conduct during COVID-19. Due to COVID restrictions, certain close quarters trainings could not be completed. Similarly, another officer expressed that the “get it done attitude” was detrimental because “it doesn’t seem like ‘Big Navy’ cares about how we get it done. They just want it done and a green spreadsheet...this leads to people cutting corners and presenting a false state of readiness to higher ups just to make them happy and to make themselves look like good leaders.” One officer shared that they experienced difficulties keeping up with required drills due to COVID. “When I looked in TORIS (Training and Operational Readiness Information Services), everything was red for every warfare area. But one day, all of a sudden, I looked again, and everything was green...I’m thinking: how did that happen? Even my warfare area was green, and I know we hadn’t run a single drill at all.”

Interviewees expressed that there was very little room to fail without creating more pain and suffering for the crew; some ships not even able to send their sailors home on leave before deploying for 7 to 9 months. Therefore, meeting requirements, keeping up with the ship’s operational tempo, and doing it all “in the green” were all sources of stress felt by SWOs across the board. One O-6 stated that “nobody wants to be red; we



want to be green” alluding to the colors of ship’s training trackers. Another SWO expressed that they had to do their best and certify in dangerous conditions just to “get it done and deploy.” They went on to say that “basically all of [their] watch standers were ‘pencil whipped’ and qualified the day before the assessment.”

D. FINDING 4: SWOS ACROSS THE BOARD ARE STRESSED OUT ABOUT THE SAME THINGS

Whether the most junior O-2 or the most senior O-6, SWOs shared in the roots of what made their job stressful. Almost every interviewee expressed that they put an immense amount of pressure on themselves to do a good job. The community is described to be made up of “type-A” personalities who want to perform and succeed. Similarly, as many SWOs keep high standards of performance for themselves, they also expect the same level of performance from their subordinates. Pressure from higher ups was seen to perpetuate the “get it done” attitude, an attitude that has existed in the SWO community through decades of experience, every budget cut, optimization plan, support for landlocked wars, maintenance backlogs, and others. This pressure, in addition to the tight deployment work up schedule, created “high stakes” for ship captains and their crews to complete evolutions, drills, assessments, and certifications without fail. One officer, an O-5, described the sheer pace of evolutions to feel like they were “all burning the candle at both ends.”

Another source of stress was the feeling of being out of control. The unknown seemed to be an unnerving place for type-A people as it is very difficult to prepare for. 8 out of 18 SWOs, felt stress or worry about having to adapt to things that were out of their control. Aspects like the nature of the training schedule being in constant revision, schedules changing all the time, sometimes day by day or even hour by hour, depending on what you are doing and what you are being tasked with, or the idea of having to respond to a threat, whether it be a casualty or an adversary, were all examples of what brings SWOs stress. The goal of training is not to prepare for every possible scenario, but to prepare for likely ones or ones to help you adapt to situations that you might find yourselves in. However, due to the realities of executing the training cycle, some SWOs felt completely unprepared to adapt to situations on deployment. Some officers were put



in situations where they were forced to “figure it out” with little to no baseline experience or training. COs experienced this stress more intensely as they were ultimately responsible for the entire command. One O-6 stated that “you make decisions that affect other people’s lives. The reality is, you’re 40 years old and there is a lot of pressure to take care of your people. So many people depend on you to do the right thing. Being out on a ship is dangerous and plans change constantly. People could get killed. It’s a lot.” Another CO shared that they “could almost feel everyone looking at [them] wondering ‘what are you going to do about this? How did you let this happen?’” Similarly, the combat arms officer communities are stressed about similar issues.

E. FINDING 5: PHYSICAL FITNESS IS NOT A PRIORITY WHILE MENTAL FITNESS HAS MADE STRIDES

Apart from a few experiences, physical fitness was not seen to be a priority in the SWO community. The responsibility of getting, being, or staying in shape was largely put on the individual to be done during personal time. Although the nature of surface warfare differs from traditional combat, such as the experience and preparation required for the infantry or other combat arms communities, the consensus was that physical fitness was still an important component of surface warfare. Not only does physical fitness give one the strength to run up and down ladder wells, drag shipmates to safety, hold one’s breath under water, fight fires, or stand a watch at General Quarters for hours, if not days, on end, it also gives you mental clarity, a relief in stressful times, and an opportunity to push yourself past your comfort zone. However, SWOs agreed that it was the easiest thing to drop off the radar. Simply put, there was “too much work to do and too little time,” and with everything else being a priority, physical fitness could not be one of them. The few times when physical fitness was described to be widely encouraged was during “PRT season” which started with an obligatory 10-week notice. A post major command SWO said that “as a ship captain, I will admit that my emphasis on physical fitness was limited to following the requirements on the PRT/PHA instruction...the expectation was that physical fitness be an individual responsibility that should occur on your way home.” Demands on ships during the training cycle often overrode the ability for SWOs to focus on anything else. Depending on what phase they were in, it was difficult for commands to make the time. One officer said that there was time carved out in the Plan of the Day



(POD) for physical training (PT), but it seemed to only be there for the optic of making it a priority, when, in reality, there were meetings and briefs and other things planned for the same timeframe. Even though it was there on the POD, “it wasn’t really an option, especially for officers.” The maintenance phase, when the ship is in the yards or pier side for extended periods of time, was seen as an ideal time to prioritize it. On the other hand, SWOs who had experienced commands that tried to make physical fitness a real priority stated that their COs were physically fit themselves, which created a positive, trickle-down environment to work out, at least for a period of time. One officer said that “the state of the fleet in physical fitness shows how much we prioritize the warfare part of surface warfare.” Much like technical and tactical aspects of the job, combat arms interviewees placed a lot of value on physical fitness. Being in shape and healthy, in mind and body, was seen to be engrained in their communities’ cultures and understood as a necessary part of the job. Not only was it considered important militarily, but it is also implicit as part of mission success.

Mental fitness, on the other hand, had become more and more of a priority. The stigma of seeking help for mental health was viewed to have lessened and the message of taking care of yourself increased along with the availability of programs and resources. Mental health was generally taken seriously at all levels of the chain of command. However, while many people believed that mental fitness was a priority, they also believed that it was very reactionary. There seemed to be little to no emphasis put on developing mental toughness, fitness, or health, rather, doing something about it once the degradation of mental fitness has already happened. In the combat arms communities, mental health was also becoming increasingly more relevant. Going hand in hand with physical fitness, it was part of the culture to ensure your mental and cognitive functions were balanced and being sharpened in training. While one Army officer described that the “old school” philosophy of “suck it up and shut your mouth” still existed, he also described the culture of “embracing the suck” and allowing it to fuel and motivate you. In the Navy SEAL community, mental health and cognitive function were seen to be a top priority. It was crucial to be in a healthy and effective headspace and not be distracted. They actively worked on mental toughness and cognitive development through activities such as incorporating cognitive drills in the midst of physical exercise.



F. FINDING 6: THERE IS A STARK DIFFERENCE IN THE ASSESSMENT OF THE FLEET AND ITS ABILITY TO ENDURE A KINETIC FIGHT BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR OFFICERS

Throughout my research, there was no greater divide across ranks in the SWO community than the assessment of fleet readiness to endure combat. The divide happened at the O-5 level, where junior officers had little faith and senior officers had more confidence that their ships, shipmates, and themselves would endure combat and be successful. At the junior levels, the majority admitted to not seriously thinking about preparing for a kinetic fight. Their reasons ranged from the fact that the surface fleet has not seen real combat in a very long time to being more worried about the day in and day out functions of their jobs unrelated to preparing for the realities of combat. However, starting at the senior O-3 level, the thought of needing to prepare became more prevalent. While it's was an infrequent thought, most junior officers said that they thought about it more, while still infrequently, on deployment. One officer assessed from their experience that "the average SWO is wanting in terms of tactical and combat proficiency. We just aren't ready to handle a war at sea...including myself." Another officer said that "sailors are not ready to hear 'missiles inbound' over the 1MC. When I was in the Gulf of Aden, I genuinely felt that my ship could not respond. Not because we weren't smart, not because we weren't trained, but because we had absolutely no experience." At the senior levels, SWOs were more confident in their abilities and the abilities of their crews, but some still had their reservations. They thought about it more frequently as a possible reality. A few senior officers did admit that the culture of risk aversion may be a cause of concern in battle. If the surface fleet is required to go kinetic, the majority of interviewees believed that it would be an occasion for people to rise to. One junior officer stated that "the exception shouldn't be those who are extremely willing, able, and capable. The exception should be those who aren't." Another officer believed that "if and when we do see conflict at sea, the force will be very risk averse like we've seen recently and in World War II, and those people will get weeded out, and the Navy will start to value the warfighter over the manager. We will get back to 'damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.'" Most interviewees hoped and assumed that they would do well in battle, while some were unsure of how they would react. One post-command O-5 believed that "if things go kinetic, about 20% will be all in. They're going to do the right things and take



the right actions. 40% could go either way. The challenge of a leader is to get the 60/40 split to do the right thing.” They went on to say that the “vast majority of the SWO community is not ready.” Another O-5 stated that while they believe that many ships are able and capable of defending themselves, only “one of the six ships [they’ve] served on would have been a good hunter/killer surface combatant.” Although the state of the fleet and its ability to sustain combat is up for debate, an O-6 interviewee stated that “at the O-5/O-6 level, SWOs are working hard to ready their ships and crews for battle. However, we are working under a structure that is not supportive of the end goal.”

In tandem with the other aspects of culture already addressed, the combat arms communities felt that they were prepared for a kinetic fight. The preparation, training, and personal development in those communities were all centered around kinetic warfare as their communities had experienced “the fight” in more recent years. The importance and real-world application of their training was seen to be closer to home and more of a reality for those communities, even though most have gone their entire careers without seeing combat. Even though many officers, especially relatively new ones, had not seen combat associated with GWOT, the approach to training and preparation are still as intense as it was 20 years ago, if not better. Some would argue training is better now due to the incorporation of all the lessons learned from the past 20 years.

G. FINDING 7: THE DEFINITION OF “WARFIGHTER” IS GENERALLY SHARED, AS WELL AS ASPECTS OF SWO CULTURE THAT AID AND HINDER THE WARFIGHTER MENTALITY

The framework and characteristics of a “warfighter” were universally shared amongst SWOs as well as in the combat arms communities. Characteristics such as tactical proficiency, sound and timely decision making, calm under pressure, physically and mentally fit, confident, competent, and leader were all used to describe and define a good “warfighter.”



Table 3. Warfighter Characteristics Mentioned by Rank

Warfighter Characteristics	Rank				
	O-2	O-3	O-4	O-5	O-6
Tactical Proficiency	3	2	2	2	1
Sound and Timely Decision Making	2	0	3	1	1
Calm Under Pressure	2	1	1	0	0
Physically and Mentally fit	1	2	0	0	0
Confident	2	3	2	1	0
Competent	1	4	2	1	1
Leader	0	3	1	1	1

From my research I found that the culture of the SWO community took away from the warfighter mentality more than it added to it. The approach to developing the warfighter mentality seemed to be done passively, through little to no direct or active efforts outside of indoctrination. Although, those who possess a personal interest in developing and honing their warfighting edge are better off and have impacted their spheres of influence as a result. As mentioned previously, the SWO community was seen to be made up primarily of type-A personalities. Due to the immense workload, these type-A personalities were described to become “workaholics” who were afraid to fail or make mistakes. “They do everything in their power to do it all, often at the detriment to themselves as a person and their well-being. But don’t worry, the work is getting done.” With this comes a tendency for micromanagement, perception control, competitiveness, and politics. One officer stated that “the calmness required by the warfighter is not frequently found in the SWO community.” Perception and optics of doing good work from higher ups is considered one of the most important parts in doing “good work” rather than mission-centric, operational-centric, or crew-centric issues. They wanted to ensure their bosses knew they are doing a good job and working on the things that their boss believed to be important. One officer stated that “it’s all about optics. My last CO



was obsessed with recognition, perception, and social media.” Another officer stated that because of this, they “never want to be a CO because they do not have autonomy for anything. Everything needs permission from DESRON. We used to joke that our last CO emailed DESRON to ask permission to put his pants on in the morning.” This willingness to appease has been seen to create a level of favoritism by working alongside “yes-men” who are willing to do anything, even at the expense of morale and a positive work environment. Additionally, the zero-defect mentality has become a staple in SWO culture, perhaps from multiple generations of these “yes-men.” Whether this mentality was grown purposefully via direct orders or socially via personal experiences and word of mouth, the zero-defect mentality seems to plague the warfighter mentality throughout the community. In general, SWOs were afraid to take chances and make mistakes for fear of ruining their careers. One officer stated that this mentality hindered “people from taking risks, going outside the box, and thinking creatively. It encourages passivity at all costs.” One O-6 stated that even at the Flag level, officers are interested in the next promotion which was often seen to drive decision making. They went on to describe this mentality as a “dynamic disincentive to ‘leaning into’ making decisions for improvement. There is risk associated with change. If it goes poorly, then career progression is impacted... as a result, the thirst for more information and more analysis before making a decision paralyzes action, which is exactly the opposite of what Flag leadership expects of their ship captains.” Additionally, as mentioned previously, it contributed to officers being dishonest or afraid of being upfront about their mistakes. Several SWOs had experienced fear of reprisal or punishment for a myriad of actions which led them and their peers to hide their mistakes. Almost every SWO interviewee could recall a time where a reportable incident went unreported.

While favoritism is seen as an unfair leadership practice by those not included, it was also seen to create more work and pressure for those who were included. “Good work breeds more work” and as bosses learn that they can rely on you, you are often stuck picking up the slack. This behavior has attributed to creating a lack of trust and resentment within the wardroom. “A lot of what we do in the Navy is driven by not wanting your boss to be mad at you.” One O-5 stated that the “you’re making me look bad” attitude drove a lot of what COs did on the waterfront, sharing that when he was the



CO of a ship, staff members from Naval Surface Force, Atlantic (SURFLANT) would grade ships up and down the piers in Norfolk based on their preservation. “You would get flame sprayed by the commodore for topside preservation just because you didn’t look pretty.” On top of this, SWOs believed that there was too much administrivia throughout the day to day which shifted the focus from creating lethal, capable, and decisive warfighters to administrative officers who were distracted by the immediate tangibles like checklists, spreadsheets, and color coated charts. One O-6 stated that they knew their junior officers “felt burdened by the admin side of things, but [they] just can’t get around it.” Another O-6 stated that “somewhere along the line, we decided to be more specific and more formal and more in the weeds about everything. When something bad happens, we handcuff ourselves to it and put it all in an instruction. Navigation briefs used to be two pieces of paper. Now it’s a 60-page brief.” Across the ranks, it was universally understood that “the grind never stops” and it was often be seen as “a badge of honor in the SWO community.” 8 of 18 SWO officers believed that the community was “running [their] people into the ground,” partially placing blame for the retention issues that the community is experiencing and the exacerbated workload on culture. One O-3 stated that the community drove out top performers by making them pick up the slack of underperforming officers. Retention has become a high-ticket problem in the community, leading to an increase in the Department Head Retention Bonus to \$105,000 for officers who screened for Department Head on their first look and a O-4 Retention Bonus of \$46,000. One O-6 believed that these kinds of incentives, have “enticed some people to stay who probably shouldn’t. It impacts the warfighting capability of the force because people stay for the good deal.”

In addition, several officers across the ranks mentioned that the community was not very good at maintaining the higher order operational picture. One O-5 said that “a lot of ships go off and do box ops of the coast of a country, but they don’t really do anything else. They don’t really get how it fits in and why it’s important.” An O-2 similarly said that deployment made them cynical because they “didn’t feel like [they] were contributing much despite what was being advertised.” SWO culture did not seem to support job satisfaction or provide a clear connection to the “why.”



On the other hand, the level of dedication seen in the SWO community can be seen as an aid to the warfighter mentality. “There is a lot of goodness on the waterfront.” SWOs are dedicated to their work and will do anything to succeed. Homing in, exploiting the best parts of the community, and shifting focus to operational readiness as the system intends can create confident, competent, and able crews to deploy and achieve mission success in combat. One senior officer stated that “SWOs are driven, they are proven, they understand endurance, perseverance. They are multitaskers, they can prioritize. They are leaders.” Often, the lives of SWOs are tied to the ship and the ship wins more than other priorities should. The concept of “ship, shipmate, self” is preserved and perpetuated within the community. Several interviewees stated that they knew officers who missed the birth of their babies just to be with the ship and crew. However, whether that was the right decision is undetermined, along with why the officers felt that they had to choose the ship over their own families. One O-6 stated that “SWOs are the hardest on SWOs. We are very hard on ourselves. There are a lot of great people in the community. If we took the time to recognize the good work that we do, we’d be a lot better off.”

The term “warfighter” was defined similarly to how the SWOs defined it in the combat arms communities. Each community had their gripes about how aspects of their community’s culture detracted from that definition and the development of the warfighter mentality just as the SWOs had. Generally, the marines and Navy SEALs, especially, took issue with group think, the sense of entitlement, and humility.

What someone is worried about may show insight into what drives their priorities. Overwhelmingly, SWOs are worried about their reputations, letting the ship or crew down, failing inspections, and being put in a bad situation. This shows that perception is one of the most important factors in the way SWOs conduct business. They want to be seen as reliable, competent, and able to “get it done” no matter what. It also shows that SWOs put a lot of pressure on themselves to get it right the first time, all the time. Several interviewees expressed worry over doing something that would directly and negatively impact others, whether it was a piece of equipment failing, financial decisions, impacting the ship’s schedule, or putting the ship in harm’s way. Similarly, the combat arms officers expressed worry about the same concepts.



One indicator of the state of the warfighter mentality in the SWO community is the level of trust that SWOs have for one another. Positively correlated with their assessment of how they would do in a kinetic fight is their trust in each other. There is much more distrust and cynicism in the lower ranks. The majority of junior officers (O-2 to O-4) would only follow a few people, ranging from 1 to 2 individuals to about 10% of all SWOs that they know, into battle with zero reservations. At the senior levels, trust improved significantly, especially at the O-6 level where the majority of them said they would follow 60–90% of all the SWOs they know. One junior officer stated that the distrust in the wardroom hindered mentorship. While there was an informal mentorship program in place for junior officers, “it wasn’t very effective because nobody trusted the Department Heads.” Another junior officer stated that they had not met a single SWO during their commissioned time to whom they looked up to or wanted to emulate. While the majority of the O-6 interviewees were highly optimistic and faithful in their fellow SWOs, one officer shared a recent experience that indicated an opposing view on the state of the fleet. “I recently went to sea with a SWO Admiral for a Fleet Exercise. The Admiral was so timid, so risk-adverse, so indecisive, and so disconnected from the scenario that it would have been impossible to go into actual battle under this officer’s leadership... this, of course, is not the nature of all SWOs. However, the fact that this SWO reached the Flag level is worthy of reflection.” Trust within the combat arms communities varied depending on the individual and their experiences. Considering all combat arms interviewees were of O-3 to O-4 paygrades, most had positive experiences in their communities which were reflected in their trust percentages. However, those with negative experiences were much more critical of their communities and trusted the people in them less.

H. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Each finding was formulated by overarching trends, themes, or observations made through my research. While some findings were agreed upon by all interviewees, some were not due to personal experience, perspective, or personality. Compelling viewpoints shared by multiple interviewees were included while one-off responses were not. My findings should be interpreted as general views of specified populations. Each finding is



seen to contribute to addressing the state of warfighter mentality in the SWO community and comparing it to combat arms communities who have experienced combat in recent history.

From my research, I've found that most insights into the SWO community degrade the warfighting mentality. In particular, the following findings exclusively degrade:

- Finding 2: Not all SWOs are created equal
- Finding 3: Pressure to be seen as “ready” for combat is leading to unethical behavior.
- Finding 4: SWOs across the board are stressed out about the same things.

The following findings can both aid and/or degrade the warfighting mentality:

- Finding 1: Attraction to the SWO community.
- Finding 5: Physical fitness is not a priority while mental fitness has made strides.
- Finding 6: There is a stark difference in the assessment of the fleet and its ability to endure a kinetic fight between junior and senior officers.
- Finding 7: The definition of “warfighter” is generally shared, as well as aspects of SWO culture that aid and hinder the warfighter mentality.



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VI. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research Question 1: What is the warfighter mentality as it pertains to SWOs?

The term “warfighter” was universally defined, by SWOs and combat arms officers alike, by several choice characteristics. A warfighter is someone who is:

- Tactically proficient
- Able to make sound and timely decisions
- Calm under pressure
- Physically and mentally fit
- Confident
- Competent
- A leader

Recommendation: The Navy must publish doctrine that includes SWO warfighter behavioral and cognitive characteristics. Neither I, nor anyone I interviewed, could recall or locate official Navy doctrine, publication, or manual that explicitly describes the values and characteristics of a warfighter as it pertains to the SWO community. It is important to standardize the vision for who the Navy wants the average SWO to be as far as leadership and warfighting. Publishing and disseminating the key warfighting tenants that the community values can help directing SWOs in the same direction and focusing commanders and wardrooms in cultivating the SWO warfighter as well as the warfighter mentality as the community intends.

Research Question 2: In what ways does the warfighter mentality exist in the SWO community?

Based on the results of my research, it appears that the SWO community could benefit from putting more emphasis on developing these characteristics in an active way. The divide between perception and assessment of readiness amongst the different ranks of the SWO community is particularly interesting as they all serve in the same Navy, on the same ships, and will inevitably have to go into battle with one another when the time comes.



While many can argue whether or not the SWO community fosters a strong warfighter mentality, there are several qualities that most agree to be beneficial in warfighter development. For example, almost every interviewee liked the idea of getting to the fleet immediately. Whether they wanted to start their time clock as soon as possible, laterally transfer to a different community, or bypass lengthy and rigorous training commands, the concept of starting your job, learning as you go, and working with sailors was appreciated by all. There was an overwhelming appreciation for sailors in general, working with them, for them, alongside them. A common motivation within the SWO community was to serve and work for their subordinates, even when times were tough. While it is agreed that the life of a SWO is demanding, most welcomed shouldering the burden and pain in an attempt to lessen the strain on their people. This leadership trait is extremely apparent at the junior officer levels. This quality can be seen as aiding the development of warfighters.

The structure of the training cycle in the SWO community is seen to have a lot of potential to be effective. The intent of how SWOs, their crews, and ships are meant to train for deployment makes sense to interviewees, utilizing the “crawl, walk, run” approach to surface warfare. SWOs also believe that training and drills are most effective when they are realistic, relevant, taken seriously, as well as met with a motivated and bought in crew. SWOs across the board would like to see better and more effective training onboard ships at all levels of the training cycle. SWOs recognize that there is a deficiency in the execution of the system and would like to see improvements. This shift in focus and executing the training cycle as it was intended can enhance almost every warfighter characteristic identified previously.

The “type-A” personality was frequently mentioned throughout the interview process. SWOs work hard, often referring to “the grind never stops” mentality that they endure. While much of the pain SWOs suffered was attributed to pressure from higher ups to “make it happen,” the mentality of wanting to do good work, doing it right the first time, every time, and having high expectations speak highly to the thoroughness and dedication of SWOs in general. These are qualities, if shaped and aimed in the right direction, that can do more help than harm in the community. Focusing on operational development, completing quality training, getting the little things right so that you are



ready for the big things when they come, or incorporating the “why” in everything that you do can bring SWOs that much closer to the fight and closer to being ready without completely overhauling who they are as people. Several interviewees displayed a conscious and active interest in developing their warfighter mentality, warrior toughness, capabilities, or edge, attributing it to a product of an internal drive. It is also important to note that the strongest of these convictions came from SWOs who were originally interested in the Naval Special Warfare community, have seen or experienced life-threatening situations, or were O-5s.

Recommendation: Redirect and leverage positive aspects of the average SWO in order to help change negative aspects of SWO culture. Certain aspects of SWO culture can affect the confidence and competence of SWOs as warfighters and as leaders. Many would attribute the type-A personality to be a negative part of the SWO community or a contributor to the low morale and harsh SWO culture. However, by prioritizing warfighter training, education, and development, the community stands to only gain in its strength and capability. As it stands, many view SWOs to “care too much about unimportant things” or to be “burnt out” because they are forced to juggle so many competing priorities and requirements. Taking a step back, reassessing what is important, where to put your day-to-day effort in order to reach long-term goals, and being okay with taking the pressure off to do the impossible will bring clarity to the SWO community and allow them to thrive and further develop and leverage their strengths.

Research Question 3: Do SWOs have what it takes to withstand kinetic warfare at sea?

There is generally a positive relationship between assessing the state of one’s readiness and the readiness of other SWOs to seniority. More of the higher-ranking officers, starting at the O-4 and O-5 levels were seen to be optimistic and confident in the state of the abilities of themselves and other SWOs across the fleet. **In general, however, SWOs do not believe the fleet is ready for a kinetic fight at sea.** Most believe that, in the event of kinetic action, it will be an occasion to rise to; with some stepping up and leading the charge, some needing leadership and direction, and some being rendered completely useless. Much of this had to do with the way that SWOs believed they are



preparing themselves and being prepared by “Big Navy.” The majority of SWOs did not believe they are trained for the realities of combat, whether that meant in tactics, guile, versatile skills, or pure bloodshed. The fact of the matter is, very few SWOs have ever seen combat, and even fewer have seen combat at sea. Deployment has become “the easy part” of the deployment cycle, which in theory should be a good thing: “train hard and the real thing will be easy.” However, SWOs believed that the insufficient training they received, the “check in the box” approach to assessments and certifications, and excessive administrative burdens were causing ships and crews to deploy without the necessary skills to sustain a high-end fight. Many SWOs, including ship captains, expressed that deployment was the ideal time to conduct “effective and realistic training” as there was no pressure from outside entities, their Immediate Superior in Command (ISIC), or competing priorities. The issue with this reality is that ships are being sent out on deployment administratively “ready” but end up doing their best training and development already in theater. Many argued that their ship was not at the peak of their capabilities and readiness as they left for deployment, rather, when they get back.

The risk averse culture of the SWO community also contributed to why SWOs don’t believe they are ready for a kinetic fight. SWOs, in general, expressed a fear of making mistakes as they believed it would negatively affect their career projection. Whether it was a junior officer who has aspirations of commanding a warship at sea, a department head who was close to retirement, or a ship captain who had aspirations of major command or a star: One mistake, one bad fitness report could have derailed their careers. This inevitably was seen to manifest itself in timidity, hesitancy, and micromanagement. It also manifested itself in added pressure and stress by all. Not only did they feel that their careers were on the line by their own actions, decisions, and judgments, but also by the actions, decisions, and judgments of their subordinates. Innumerable and infamous cover stories on Navy Times of entire chains of command being fired or officers being taken to courts martial are on the extreme side of the continuum, but the more glaring and realistic circumstance for most SWOs was considered to be performance at each command and in comparison, to others within the same summary group. This kind of pressure was seen to keep SWOs on edge, competitive, and unwilling to take risks. While taking the slow, smooth, methodical, and



careful approach to operations did not lead them into too shallow of waters, it left many wondering whether or not they would be able to exercise the grit, toughness, and quick thinking in times of extremis and threat.

As for personal performance, most SWOs were hopeful that they would do well and fall back on their training if the time came. A few, however, were unsure how they would react. When recalling mishaps and near mishaps experienced underway, all interviewees described to have remained calm and composed throughout, even if those around them were described to have been flustered or panicked. All interviewees were asked to rate themselves compared to other SWOs at their commands. The vast majority rated themselves as above average, at least eventually.

Recommendation: Conduct a large-scale, independent assessment into why there is such a large disconnect between the perceptions of senior leaders and junior officers when it comes to readiness. The assessment should include identifying large scale inefficiencies for elimination, such as program evaluations of training and education effectiveness. It should also use this research as a basis for identifying areas for improvement in developing warfighters on a fleetwide level. SWOs on ships go through the same quality of training, work in watch teams, and experience similar stressors. Whether it was that junior officers were extremely pessimistic or senior officers had inflated opinions on the state of the fleet, the discrepancy was quite large. By also employing the recommendations from Research Question 2, overall readiness for a kinetic fight at sea may increase. Focused training, education, and culture geared towards warfighting skills and mentality will only aid the community's readiness for a kinetic fight.

Research Question 4: How does the SWO mentality compare to communities that have seen combat in recent years?

Although only one of five of the combat arms interviewees had ever experienced combat, their approach to maintaining readiness and fostering a warfighter mentality differed considerably from the SWO community. Starting with community attraction, every combat arms interviewee wanted to serve in their specific communities and worked diligently to be selected. Particularly, the challenge, high standards, and community



mindset of their communities (Army infantry, Marine Corps infantry, and Naval Special Warfare (NSW)) were the most attractive aspects. Within these communities, there were longer, more involved, and rigorous training pipelines. The Navy SEALs went through an intense 56-week initial training pipeline before being assigned a SEAL team and training for deployment. Army infantry officers go through a 17-week Infantry Officer Basic Course and then are typically expected to volunteer for and complete Ranger School, which can last from 60 to 180 days. Marine Corps Infantry officers go through six months of training at The Basic School, followed by the 13-week Infantry Officer Course. Training and qualifications were seen to be much more standardized, every officer going through the same training and standards as the generations before. SWOs, on the other hand, have experienced revisions in their officer training pipelines throughout several generations. From 1975 to 2003, SWOs attended an initial training course at Surface Warfare Officers School (SWOS) called Surface Warfare Officer Division Officer Course (SWOSDOC) that was 16 weeks long. In 2003, SWOSDOC was terminated and SWOs were sent directly to their ships without any formal training. Instead, all trainings were converted to CDs which were to be completed while working onboard. Eventually, in 2012, the community transitioned to an in-person training in the form of an 8-week Basic Division Officers Course (BDOC.) Most recently, following the incidents in 7th Fleet, the community introduced a 4-week Junior Officer of the Deck course that is to be completed after BDOC and before stepping foot on their first ship. After initial training, SWOs are required to earn the rest of their qualifications onboard their ships through self-study, OJT, and mentorship. Often, due to work requirements and competing priorities, professional development is pushed to the wayside and SWOs struggle to grow as well-rounded warfighters.

Another difference is the approach to risk. In the combat arms community, while interviewees had experienced serious mishaps or near mishaps, none were described to be a result of negligence or incompetence. There was a level of comfortability in accepting risk in inherently dangerous evolutions that was shared up and down the chain of command. Mishaps and near mishaps were acknowledge as just that and often not considered a career killing mistake.



The primary focus of their communities revolved around physical and mental fitness as well as technical and tactical acumen. Officers in these communities were confident in their abilities and attributed their competence to their training. The preparation for a kinetic fight seemed to be embedded in their training and personal preparations and something that was of the utmost importance in conducting day-to-day business. Although only one had experienced combat, the reality of combat seemed to be closer to home and was reflected in the approach to training in those communities. Of course, every community has their issues and distractions. Even still, it seemed as though the quality and focus of officer development was more effective in developing warfighters in the combat arms communities.

Recommendation: Standardize the qualification process in the SWO community. This would ensure that each SWO is being trained and assessed by the same rigorous standards across the fleet at all levels. While OJT is an integral part of experience and practical knowledge, the difference in the quality of training throughout the fleet was apparent, particularly when considering one’s duty stations, coasts, or countries. The SWO community has historically been seen as a “catch all” community as it seemingly does not require great skill or aptitude to join the community. There does not seem to be as much prestige or allure in comparison to other communities. Those who fail out of other programs like flight school or nuclear school end up redesignating as SWOs, creating the perception of “those who can’t... become SWOs.” As much as the Navy has tried to revitalize the community’s reputation, it is not as desirable as other communities with higher standards. Creating a rigorous training pipeline to include shipboard watch station qualifications would not only help rehabilitate the community’s reputation, but it would also raise the baseline level of knowledge of the SWO community, delivering ready and capable officers who are ready to contribute to the team the moment they step on their ships.

A. LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations regarding my qualitative research. As this research was based primarily on opinions, judgments, and experiences, it was, at times, difficult to analyze. With the time and scope of this thesis, I was only able to interview 23 subjects.



Additionally, participation was completely voluntary. Responses to questions were uncorroborated and unverified. Subjects had the liberty to share whatever they wanted and from the viewpoint of their own experience which are inarguably biased in nature. Another impact could be my own bias as a former SWO and my experiences in the community.



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