

Worrisome signs in training our Navy

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IN MY LAST COLUMN for The Journal, I maintained that rising Asian navies should be judged not only by the quality of the ships, planes and missiles they build or buy, but by the skill, élan and entrepreneurial spirit of their people. Lest you think I was picking on India or China: the U.S. Navy is not exempt from such criticism.

In the words of that strategic thinker, Han Solo: Don't get cocky, kid. While the outlook is hardly disastrous, the Navy also has little room for complacency.

Our navy is famously the best in the world in hardware terms. The fleet boasts a panoply of gee-whiz systems, including nuclear submarines, big-deck aircraft carriers and Aegis destroyers. But accumulating evidence hints at problems that go well beyond perennial woes such as skyrocketing shipbuilding costs and dwindling numbers of ships and aircraft.

Those problems fall largely in the human domain. Seamanship and tactical acumen are traditional strengths for the U.S. Navy, as they were for the Royal Navy at the zenith of its

power. But training cutbacks, competing priorities and intolerance of mistakes work against shiphandling, tactical proficiency and ultimately high morale.

Here, as in Asia, the human factor counts in maritime pursuits. Let's review some worrisome signs. First, the Navy has reduced the amount and quality of training provided to officers and sailors, presumably to offset high costs.

Newly commissioned officers destined for tours on board surface ships formerly reported to Newport for months of intensive training. My accession training was typical. It involved about six months of classroom and simulator training, complete with specialty training in engineering and damage control. While not perfect, it provided invaluable exposure to Navy life.

The building where I attended the Division Officer Course in 1988 stands empty because the Navy now deposits new college graduates aboard ship to learn their high-tech craft on the job.

Yikes.

To expect busy captains to school their junior officers effectively is a bridge too far. Writing last year in the Navy's professional journal, the *Naval Institute Proceedings*, Capt. Lee Kaiss, a former skipper of the battleship *Missouri*, deplored the shutdown of division-officer training. Kaiss urged the Navy to restart some variant of this training.

Nor are such trends confined to the surface community. Submariners are engaged in soul-searching following several mishaps, most dramatically the grounding of the attack sub *USS San Francisco* in 2005. Submariners spend an inordinate amount of time refining their engineering skills, assuring safe operation of their boats' nuclear propulsion plants. Nuclear safety is good.

But there are only so many hours in the day, and time spent learning the intricacies of nuclear power is time not spent practicing basic seamanship. A retired submarine skipper observed in *Proceedings* last year that submarine officers often lack the intuition needed to maneuver their vessels in stressful situations at sea simply because they have too little practice.

So the opportunity costs of engineering proficiency are high.

And finally, there are the baleful effects of the Navy's "zero-defects mentality." The Navy's last big fleet battle was at Leyte Gulf, in 1944. Without actual combat to evaluate individual units' performance, other measures — especially peacetime inspections — have come to absorb a huge share of a crew's time and effort.

Another effect of the zero-defects syndrome: Naval officers are reluctant to risk costly vessels, since they know even minor errors place their careers in jeopardy. The Navy's latest guided-missile destroyers, or DDGs, visit Newport regularly to support senior-officer training. DDGs handle beautifully, but one rarely ties up at Pier Two without the help of a tugboat.

Still less will risk-averse captains let junior officers — those most in need of seasoning — perform complex maneuvers without stifling oversight. A veteran officer who commanded three

of the Navy's frontline Aegis cruisers explains senior captains' exodus from the service in part as a consequence of micro-management and risk aversion.

The Navy could do worse than look to an Air Force officer, the late Col. John Boyd, for guidance on refreshing its institutional culture. A cult figure in military circles, Boyd proclaimed that "people, ideas, and hardware — in that order" were the most important factors not only in warfare, but in countless fields of endeavor.

Just so. The Navy's leadership must rededicate itself to fostering a culture that produces bold, skilled mariners.

This may seem like a mundane matter of reforming training and personnel policies within the service. But the international system is in flux, and sorely in need of a steadying hand like the one the U.S. Navy has provided since World War II. Keeping American seafarers — not just American hardware — the best in the world will pay off handsomely in foreign-policy terms.

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