

Navy changes sleeping policies on aircraft carriers after fatal collisions

Aircraft Carrier Gerald R. Ford departed Newport News Shipbuilding Saturday, April 8, 2017 for sea trials. The Ford is shown here as it passes King Lincoln Park in Newport News. (Adrin Snider / Daily Press)

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All Navy sailors working aboard aircraft carriers are now being given the chance to get eight hours of uninterrupted sleep per 24-hour period after a change in policy in the wake of two fatal collisions that killed 17 crew members in the **Pacific Fleet** in summer 2017.

The change extends to all carrier sailors, not just those working in aviation-related jobs, said Lt. Travis Callaghan, a spokesman for the Pacific Coast-based Commander, Naval Air Forces. It also makes it mandatory that all aircraft carrier sailors are not to be scheduled for more than 18 hours of continuous duties requiring them to remain awake. Previously, that was a recommendation that only applied to flight crews.

The Navy completed reviews of the entire force after the separate collisions of the guided missile destroyers USS Fitzgerald and USS John S. McCain, on June 17, 2017, and Aug. 21, respectively, as well as incidents involving two other ships. Fatigue or ineffective management of sleep were found to be contributing factors in all of the incidents. That's led the Navy to look at sleep's impact on readiness.

The Navy's surface fleet has moved to a circadian rhythm-based schedule, in which sailors work, eat and sleep at about the same time daily. Lt. Bobby Fedele, the plans and tactics officer aboard the Norfolk-based USS Winston Churchill oversaw part of the rollout of the new policy during the guided missile destroyer's deployment from April through earlier this month. In addition to ensuring that sailors got time to rest, it set a regular routine rather than constantly having to shift sleep schedules, he said.

It also helped with planning and establishing patterns. Sailors who were used to standing watch at a set time daily could become accustomed to what was typical or what was not, Fedele said, like fighter jets leaving a military base at a set time.

"I knew weeks out who was going to be on watch for what evolutions," Fedele said.

The Navy's policy shift for carrier sailors was made in August. It was first reported by the Navy Times.

Capt. G. Merrill Rice, the senior medical officer aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, said studies have shown that working more than 18 consecutive hours can have the same effect as having a blood alcohol content of .08 or .10.

"The longer you're awake, you're just basically, essentially, performing under the influence of your own fatigue, but just not alcohol," Rice said. "No one would say, 'I'm driving a little drunk,' to your skipper but we often will say, 'I'm a little tired.' "

The challenge is shifting the culture for all carrier sailors while maintaining performance, said Cmdr. Bill Lane, who, as the Lincoln's "air boss," runs the ship's flight operations. Solutions could include reducing operation tempos during noncritical times and reducing flight schedules, he said.

"The reality is, a carrier is a 24-7 operation," Lane said. "When the nation calls on us to execute the mission, they don't call on us to execute the mission at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the call on us at 3 o'clock in the morning.

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