ASSOCIATED PRESS: A Japan Coast Guard ship guides the USS FITZGERALD to the U.S. Naval base in Yokosuka, Japan, after the U.S. destroyer collided with a container ship on June 17.

In Defense of the U.S. Navy: A Response to Captain John Konrad's Article, "The USS FITZGERALD is at Fault. This is Why."

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Access Captain Konrad's article by clicking here.

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In the aftermath of the USS FITZGERALD collision there has been an abundance of criticism from the maritime community regarding the U.S. Navy's watchstanding practices, how they differ from the wider maritime world, and their contribution to collisions and mishaps involving naval vessels. Neither the merchant community nor the naval community sufficiently understand the other and significant misconceptions exist on both sides. It is critical that both sides take the time and effort to gain the necessary level of knowledge and context if we are to have productive discussions designed to make our seas safer for mariners. The following is my personal response to some of the claims made by the CEO of gCaptain John Konrad.

Mariner and his contribution to the maritime world as a whole. I am a graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point and sailed as a mate on container ships before serving my country as a Surface Warfare Officer aboard navy ships. I have spent extensive time aboard destroyers deployed to both the Middle East and the Western Pacific. During my shore tour, I taught navigation and COLREGS at the U.S. Naval Academy. It is worth noting that I am an advocate of requiring our Naval Officers to obtain STCW qualifications which are obtained by Naval Officers of most other countries. In general, the amount of training Officers of the Deck (OOD) receive, along with their sea time, varies from ship to ship. There is no set standard outside of Personnel Qualification Standards (PQS) signed off by another qualified OOD and a board by the Captain of the vessel. I do believe that the lack of comparable standards which the rest of the industry are required to maintain is a contributing factor for many of the Navy's accidents.

One thing the Navy has done right is hire former Master Mariners to run simulators, navigation, seamanship, and Rules of the Road classes for the entire community of Surface Warfare Officers who compose almost all the bridge watchstanders in the entire fleet. These merchant mariners take training our Navy seriously and do their best to ensure that the fleet receives the finest education and training possible within the limited confines of the courses they teach. We don't currently have the time, funding, or facilities to meet the requirements necessary to pass a Third Mate's exam; however, the merchant mariners entrusted to train up these Naval Officers do an excellent job overall. Many of the descriptions in Captain Konrad's article regarding watchstanding practices on the bridge of a naval vessel were factually inaccurate and others deserved explanation and context:

1) Claim: Bridge-to-bridge communications are answered by a radioman who passes them to a Communication Watch Officer who then passes it to the OOD.

Discussion: Bridge-to-bridge communications are in fact answered by the OOD who oversees the navigational watch. The Junior Officer of the Deck (JOOD) is not a required watch position, but is essentially an OOD in training. The comparison on a merchant ship would be the Deck Cadet. The mate on watch might allow the Deck Cadet to make a bridge-to-bridge call but it would be under close supervision. The same would happen with the JOOD. The OOD would make most bridge-to-bridge calls; however, if the JOOD was competent enough the OOD might allow him to make the call. The Captain is not normally required to be on the bridge except for restricted water transits. He would only be consulted when the Closest Point of Approach (CPA) is small enough that he warranted a call. The Communications Watch Officer referenced in the article oversees all tactical communication circuits are up and running. He is not involved in bridge-to-bridge communications at all.

Conclusion: There is no more loss of information on a naval vessel for bridge-to-bridge communications than there is on any merchant vessel.

2) Claim: Operating a RADAR requires you to have been selected for a school wherein you are taught to operate the RADAR.

not have to attend any school for the RADAR. The only other person monitoring the RADAR would be the JOOD just as a deck cadet might.

There is a RADAR school that an Electronics Technician (ET) might attend as part of their "A" school but is mainly a technician course where they are taught how to maintain and repair in case of damage. For a merchant ship if your RADAR breaks down you will wait until the vessel reaches port where a technician makes the necessary repairs. On warships we require the ability to repair the RADAR underway so that during a naval battle we can return that RADAR to operating condition and support vital ship's weapons systems.

Conclusion: The main operator of the RADAR is the OOD. There is no designated enlisted operator on the bridge, only a technician.

3) Claim: [On a merchant ship] "with the help of one officer he (the mate) has to watch the RADAR and AIS, plot the relative courses of nearby vessels, communicate with the Engine Room, talk with other ships on the VHF radio and issue orders."

Discussion: In fact, the OOD does all the things discussed above and does not have to rely on any other watchstanders to receive reports. As previously discussed OOD monitors RADAR directly along with AIS and normally makes all VHF radio calls just as a mate might. If he has a report to make to the engine room, the OOD can call the engine room directly, or the OOD could allow the JOOD to communicate with the engine room the same way a Deck Cadet might call down for the mate.

Conclusion: This process for an OOD on a Navy ship operates similarly for a Third Mate on a merchant ship. On the Navy ship there were four people on the bridge with the OOD. It is analogous to having two deck cadets (Conn and JOOD), and an extra person helping to plot and fill out the log book. Otherwise, standing watch in the middle of the ocean felt much the same. I don't argue that the extra three people have potential for clutter and confusion, but it is not nearly the issue that many merchant mariners make it out to be.

4) Claim: "On a Navy ship each of these jobs is performed by a small team of sailors who report changes to, and obey orders from, the Officer of the Deck (OOD)."

Discussion: In reality, the small team of people the Navy might have on the bridge of a common warship during an ocean transit would be as follows:

OOD: Officer in charge of the navigational watch

JOOD: Assistant to the OOD, essentially an OOD in training.

CONN: Usually a brand new Ensign who is beginning his bridge watchstanding training and getting his bearings. While he observes on the bridge, he gets hands-on training giving helm commands to the helmsman.

of the watch, the QMOW will plot any other fixes during the watch along with DR's, and fill out the log book. The OOD will oversee the accuracy of his work. Due to many of the extra duties placed on the OOD of a warship, he has the QMOW to help him maintain the navigational picture; however, he is overall responsible for its accuracy and the QMOW is not a part of traffic encounter decisions.

HELMSMAN: Steers the vessel. Equivalent is obviously your Able-Bodied Seaman on watch.

Boatswain's Mate of the Watch (BMOW): This watch really has no impact on daily bridge operations as it pertains to a navigational watch in today's Navy. He pipes announcements throughout the day, rings bells, and maintains the order and discipline of any enlisted watchstanders on the bridge.

Conclusion: There are five watchstanders on the bridge that have an impact on the navigational watch. While that's three more than most merchant mariners ever have, we have lots of officers who require training and need to cycle through. A ship generally has about twelve to fifteen months to train them up to be a qualified OOD. To get them to that point, they need to be on the bridge for practical experience. The CONN and JOOD positions provide that opportunity but the OOD does not need to rely on them to receive reports.

5) Claim: "Merchant captains prefer true bearings based off the compass but Navy COs prefer relative bearings based off the centerline of his own ship."

Discussion: This is in general not true. The Navy uses true bearings and relative bearings just as merchants do depending on the application. I have experienced no significant difference operating on a Navy ship or a U.S.-flagged container ship in this regard. In the merchant marine, we use relative bearings when the situation warrants such as the practice of using points (on the compass) when referring to the relative location of ships nearby. We sometimes do the same in the Navy only we may say the relative degree number instead.

Conclusion: I would argue that both the merchant marine and the Navy use relative and true bearings similarly. There is no significant difference that I observed in years operating on both platforms.

6) Claim: The Arleigh Burke class destroyer has a highly advanced AN/SPY-1 three-dimensional RADAR, and a hull mounted sonar array tied into an Electronic Warfare Suite capable of tracking objects of small size moving at a high speed in real time.

Discussion: The SPY Radar mentioned is an air fire control radar and not for tracking ships. The hull mounted SONAR and Electronic Warfare Suite are not tied together. The former is not used for navigation and the latter is not an accurate summary of the suite's capability. We have other systems that can track objects at high speed in real time.

Conclusion: This was brought up in the article to make the argument that we had more resources at our disposal. While we certainly had more engine power and the ability to

warship and place no additional resources at the OOD's disposal.

7) Claim: The Navy uses yards instead of nautical miles like merchant ships.

Discussion: This was initially a source of frustration for me during my first few months on a naval vessel but as I spent more time on the bridge of a naval vessel I began to see some of its usefulness. In general, we would use yards when the distances being reported were shorter, changing fast and in small increments. It also makes for quick math using the three-minute rule and radian rule which can be useful. It's logical to use yards when reporting lateral distance to an oiler while performing an underway replenishment. Separation from the oiler changes constantly. Can you imagine shouting, "Captain, .09 nautical miles from the oiler! ... .095 nautical miles from the oiler!" Sometimes yards as a unit of measurement makes sense when reporting small distances that are changing rapidly.

Conclusion: If naval vessels are not using yards in communications with other non-Navy ships this is not a significant issue.

8) Claim: Navy ships don't answer to their hull number.

Discussion: This is exactly what the Navy is trained to answer to. I would submit that if an American warship is not answering to their hull number they either don't hear you due to some sort of VHF failure or there is a tactical reason not to answer up. Under normal circumstances, this is how most ships contact us and even how we often communicate with each other on bridge-to-bridge.

Conclusion: The issue comes up because Navy ships often don't transmit AIS (we definitely listen passively) so that foreign countries can't use it to track our ships' movements. We do have the name of the vessel on the transom, just like a merchant ship, or you can use the big white hull number on the side. Or you can just call over bridge-to-bridge with your location relative to us the same way as a Third Mate I might have called a container ship at the entrance to a channel near a specific buoy. There are, of course, a myriad of ways to accomplish this. If ships aren't answering to their hull number it's likely there's a practical reason.

Overall, I would like to reiterate that I am in favor of increasing our standard of training for OOD's throughout the fleet through instituting a sea-time requirement and level of knowledge examination. However, it is important to understand that our Navy does not operate the way that it does simply due to incompetence or poor procedures. We currently don't have the amount of funding it would take to train all the bridge watchstanders in our Navy sufficiently enough to enable them to pass United States Coast Guard (USCG) license examination given the size of our Navy. We do the best we can within those constraints.

Often there are tactical parameters not readily apparent to non-Navy ships. While sometimes a naval vessel's strange or seemingly reckless behavior might be due to inexperience or incompetence, often there is a sound reason for their behavior that maybe just needs some context. Perhaps the carrier sped up and turned quickly because

deck. Conceivably it did not want to advertise to all foreign warships in the area that it was about to conduct flight ops. Or perhaps the naval vessel didn't make a significant course change (when it seemed expected) because it was avoiding announcing over VHF that it was deploying an acoustic listening device for subs. There are a myriad of reasons a naval vessel might be behaving in a way that gives the impression of negligence to a merchant vessel. I only contend that not all are due to insufficient training or lack of comprehension of basic rules of seamanship.

I would argue that, like many of you, I served with mates who were themselves hazards to navigation. Not all who hold a license are great mariners. While acting as a husbanding agent in between ships, I observed a Philippine-flagged ship that had officers of one nationality and crew of another. The Captain communicated to his helmsman via hand signals. The potential for disaster in that situation is obvious. At this point in time I refuse to debate who is more likely at fault. There are too many unknown variables and I won't malign the reputations of either party without more facts. Certainly, as Captain Konrad pointed out, both vessels will stand at least partially at fault in the end.

I understand Captain Konrad has found this to be the most controversial article he has ever written. Praised by merchant mariners and criticized mostly by Naval Officers. Having been part of both communities, I have critiqued this article not for the overall point he was trying to make, but for the factual inaccuracies concerning operations on the bridge of naval vessel. As a former merchant mariner, I do have occasional issues with the way we do things on the bridge of naval vessels; however, if we are going to call out the Navy for poor error inducing procedures we need to ensure that that we are not spreading misinformation and publicizing false narratives. Without clearing up these misconceptions we can never have an honest productive discussion leading to better, more qualified officers who will make our seas safer for future mariners.

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1 article

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