**CHAIRMAN COURTNEY’S OPENING REMARKS**

**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON SEAPOWER AND PROJECTION FORCES**

**HEARING ON “NAVAL SURFACE READINESS: ARE NAVY REFORMS ADEQUATE?”**

**February 26, 2019**

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***(As prepared for delivery)***

Thank you Mr. Chairman and welcome Ranking Member Lamborn. I look forward to continuing the close and ongoing work between the Readiness and Seapower subcommittees that we have conducted over the past year and a half on the issues before us today. To new members of the subcommittees, today’s hearing is the fourth in a series of engagements our subcommittees have jointly held since a series of tragedies at sea claimed the lives of seventeen sailors in 2017, a number that far surpassed the number of U.S. casualties in Iraq and Syria that year. Every Navy analysis has concluded these collisions were avoidable, which underscores the need for change. These hearings have given our committees and the public a greater understanding of both the immediate and systemic issues that contributed to this stomach-turning loss of life. The hearings also resulted in significant statutory provisions enacted in last year’s 2019 National Defense Authorization Bill that codified a variety of changes to surface fleet operations and procedures.

Today’s hearing is the first review by the new Congress of how those changes are being executed. For the record, I want to publicly note that professional staff at the Government Accountability Office has been diligently investigating the work of surface fleet forces and the Indo-Pacific Command’s efforts in the last year and has provided a good report card that I would encourage members to review as a measurement of the Navy’s follow-through on some of its own recommendations.

Today’s hearing also follows a new round of press articles on the collisions of the USS Fitzgerald and John S. McCain. These articles describe in great detail the many individual tragedies that occurred and the broader systemic issues that contributed to the collisions. I commend the reporters for their contributions to the public’s understanding of readiness challenges facing our fleet.

In the wake of last year’s inquiries by the Navy and Congress there were a number of critical deficiencies identified, including the lack of crew certifications for critical tasks, very long workweeks and conflicting authority for tasking and readiness. One particular area identified that I remain concerned about is the challenge of manning the fleet – do we have enough sailors on board our surface ships and are they qualified for the roles they are expected to take on? The Navy and Congress have worked together to turn the strategic requirements for Navy presence in to long-term shipbuilding plans, authorization bills, and funding as we begin a drive towards a 355-ship Navy. At the same time, there are more than 8000 open billets across the current Navy and recent reporting to Congress show that manning issues continue to persist across the fleet. As we’ve learned from previous hearings and from GAO, ships operating without mission certifications have been significantly reduced but at the expense of a lack of progress on work and sleep schedules, with many sailors continuing to work 100+ hour weeks.

As we continue to invest in the new construction ships needed to grow the fleet, we must also ensure that we are making a concurrent investment in personnel to ensure we have the proper number of sailors to man these ships.  We must be prepared to plan for and make the investments in the personnel necessary to operate a growing fleet. I will be interested to hear from the witnesses on how they are working to address the manning shortfalls before them and I look forward to seeing in the FY20 budget the investments needed to man the growing surface fleet in the coming years.

Finally, while it is clear that major mistakes were made on individual ships, I think it is also clear that there were broader problems that existed within our forward deployed forces. These issues did not exist in a vacuum of a select few. Readiness and over-tasking concerns had been voiced at the highest levels of leadership. The American people must have the confidence in their leaders that when alarm bells are rung, they will be followed by action. Our sailors, and their families, deserve nothing less.

Thank you.