**Opening Remarks for Congressman Joe Courtney**

**Ranking Member**

**Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee**

**Navy Readiness – Underlying Problems Associated with USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) and USS John S. McCain (DDG 56)**

Thank you Mr. Chairman.  And thank you to Admiral Moran, Rear Admiral Boxall, and Mr. Pendleton for your testimony today.    I would also like to recognize Ms. Rachel Eckels, mother of the late Information Systems Technician 2nd Class Timothy Eckels Jr.  who perished onboard the USS John S. McCain, for joining us today.

The circumstances that bring us to today’s hearing are painful and tragic. As Admiral Moran pointed out in his order to  the Navy’s Fleet Forces Command dated August 24, 2017, in the span of 65 days, 17 sailors were lost in ship collisions and accidents on Naval vessels. These were not, as he pointed out, “limited occurrences” but part of a disturbing trend of mishaps in the Asia Pacific Region that since January involved the USS Antietam (CG 54), USS Lake Champlain (CG 57), USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S. McCain. To put that in perspective, these heartbreaking casualties are more than the number of servicemembers we have lost in the Afghanistan war zone in 2017.

Two of those sailors are from my state of Connecticut. Sonar Technician 2nd Class Ngoc T Truong Huynh (pronounced “Nop - Troong - When”) of Watertown was lost aboard the USS Fitzgerald. More recently, Electronics Technician 2nd Class Dustin Doyon from Suffield, Connecticut in the north-western portion of my district was lost on board the USS John S. McCain. Their families and the entire state are mourning the loss of these two patriots and are intensely watching the response of the Navy and Congress to fix this disturbing trend.

Several reviews by the Navy and the Secretary of the Navy are underway right now to dig deep into this disturbing trend.  I applaud these efforts and I know I speak for all my colleagues here today that we expect to the Navy to be fully transparent with our panels as these efforts move forward, and that we will convene again, as many times as needed, to provide support to fix this problem.  Indeed, Article I, Section 8, Clause 13 of the Constitution is very clear; it is Congress’ duty “to provide and maintain a Navy” which certainly means a Navy that is well equipped, well trained and adequately manned.

What does seem to be clear at this early stage is that these incidents are a glaring manifestation of the sharply increasing demand being placed on our forward-deployed Navy vessels particularly in the Asia Pacific Region and declining readiness of these forces.

We ask these forward-deployed ships to do difficult work that is often times not well understood by the public at large. For instance, prior to her collision, the USS John S. McCain conducted a highly visible freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea. Likewise, the USS Fitzgerald was a pivotal player in providing needed presence in response to Kim Jong Un’s recent threats and missile tests.

Simply put, these are not the kinds of ships and crews we can afford to lose to preventable mishaps.

As my colleague Mr. Wittman correctly pointed out, one obvious response to this high operational tempo is to grow our fleet and shorten the backlog of repair and maintenance for the existing fleet to take pressure off the “heel to toe” operations of our forward deployed ships in places like Yokosuka, Japan and Rota, Spain. These two committees have pushed more aggressively on a bipartisan basis to add funding to ship construction and readiness than any other entity in Congress.  This year’s House NDAA plussed up these accounts significantly above the White House budget in May and passed with the biggest bipartisan vote since 2008.  We have more work to do to complete the 2018 process and I am sure this hearing will increase the members determination to get the best outcome possible.

But today is not just about resources it is also about whether Navy systems and policy need to be realigned to improve readiness.  Unfortunately, concerns about systems and policy are not new.   As the GAO has repeatedly reported over the last several years, and as our witness today will discuss, a growing number of our forward deployed vessels are operating without the certifications expected of a ship heading out on deployment. The trend has worsened since the last report in 2015 and needs to be corrected.

Similarly, in 2010 the Navy conducted a review by Vice Admiral Phillip Balisle which outlined shortfalls and concerns about surface force readiness that are strikingly relevant today in looking at these incidents and the larger state of Navy fleet readiness. One of his priority recommendations includes clarifying who in the chain of command specifically has the ultimate say in whether a ship is manned, trained and equipped to the level needed to safely do their job before being sent on deployment. To put it another way, the certification process which covers key competencies in seamanship, surface warfare, ballistic missile defense to name just a few need to be reviewed and approved by an accountable decision maker.   Unfortunately, this recommendation raised by Vice Admiral Balisle, has not been addressed in the seven years since his report came out.

Readiness is not a topic that most Americans or, franky, most of our colleagues in Congress know too much about. But we know too well on the Seapower and Readiness subcommittees, the training and repairs for our ships and our crews is fundamental to having a Navy that can do all that the nation asks it to do.

We expect a lot of the Navy, and with good reason. Our sailors are the best in the world and the sight of a US Navy vessel in a foreign port or operating in international waters sends a powerful message of protection for a rules based order in the maritime domain.  And those Sailors do what they need to do to keep the peace and the sea lanes of the world’s great oceans free and open.

In return, our sailors and their families should expect that the leaders who send them out onto the seas have done all they can to provide the tools, resources, and training they need to conduct their work and return safely.

I hope today’s hearing will focus on the steps that the Navy will take to fulfill that expectation, and what it needs from us here to get it done.

Thank you and I yield back my time.