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Painful budget cuts

Fleet Forces chief: **Expect long** deployments, reduced training — and mistakes

By Tony Lombardo

and Sam Fellman

housands of sailors deployed indefinitely with their flight hours slashed. They'll be at sea longer, but with fewer chances for port visits.

Meanwhile at home, training is crushed. Family and support programs face cutbacks. And for those wanting a chance to get out to sea — for a deployment, or even just an exercise — it's not looking good.

For months, Congress' resistance to pass a fiscal 2013 budget has forecast havoc on all the services. Now, in a series of memos, all-hands meetings and interviews, Navy leaders

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Safe

are finally speaking out on what that actually could mean for sailors.

The reason they're speaking out? The worst-case scenario is starting to look like the most likely scenario.

Right now, Congress is funding the government at 2012 levels, under a continuing resolution. If Congress decides to extend that for the rest of the year, that would mean \$4.6 billion in cuts.

The Navy has already taken certain measures, effective immediately. These include:

- Curtailing fleet training events, including training unrelated to units preparing to deploy.
- A civilian hiring freeze.
- Slashing nonmission-essential travel.

But these measures are only the opening act. The Navy faces an additional \$4 billion in automatic spending cuts in March.

These cuts come as result of a 2010 law that set up a legal trigger, known as sequestration, which would reduce the Pentagon's budget by \$55 billion every year over a decade. It was a measure intended to force lawmakers to reach a long-term debt deal. But that deal never happened.

The Navy was cautious at first and hesitant to describe the ramifications of sequestration. To do so would be premature, officials said. But now with another deadline bearing down and lawmakers deadlocked, leaders like Fleet Forces Commander Adm. Bill Gortney have lost faith that Congress will avert disaster.

"I think they want sequestration," Gortney said in an exclusive interview with Navy Times on Jan. 28.

The Fleet Forces chief, who's been the fleet's top boss for about four months, spoke candidly about the risks of sequestration and the devastating effects it will have on the deck plates.

This CR, sequestration debate has fallen on the Gortney acknowledged, adding that the "most dangerous" scenario is looking likely.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jon Greenert has said that these steep cuts would "hollow" the fleet, cuts that defense analysts manv believe Congress will put off again. But the CNO offered alarming new details in a Jan. 25 Navy budget planning document — the first extensive picture of what a shortchanged fleet would

The only upside: Military pay and benefits will not be immediately affected by the cuts.

Deployed operations will suffer, but the hardest hit may be those back home. Workups will be curtailed and all ops other than cruise preparations will be shelved as the Navy's available funds flow to ready deploying ships and squadrons. All exercises will

be canceled. And four of the nine carrier air wings will be grounded — it would take them as long as a year to regain their normal readiness.

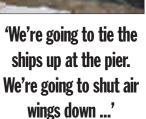
Gortney said training gaps will lead to a stressed fleet and increased risk to his sailors.

"I know from history, from personal experience, I know this is going to be painful and cost a lot," he said in the sit-down in his Norfolk, Va., office. "What I don't want to do

> experience those mishaps.

> These mishaps could occur should the Navy be forced to meet operational demands too quickly, after these cuts have wrecked the force. When the money does return, Gortney estimates it will cost three times the savings and take untold months to return the fleet to the proper readiness level.

> "I can tell you, there will be mishaps. Airplanes will crash because aircrews will not have the proper skill set," Gortney said. "That's one of the reasons we will not go any faster than is



ADM. BILL GORTNEY, HEAD OF FLEET FORCES COMMAND



Ships tied at the pier

The Navy's priority will be to fund fiscal 2013 and 2014 deployments, Gortney said. The Harry S. Truman Car-

rier Strike Group is set to deploy early this year. The carrier Dwight D. Eisenhower returned home in late December and is getting a deck resurfacing before deploying again.

Greenert's memo states that should sequestration occur, the Ike and Truman CSGs could be "extended indefinitely."

Aviation Boatswain's Mate 3rd Class Adam Goetz directs the landing of an MH-60S Seahawk aboard the carrier Harry S. Truman on Jan. 26. The Truman is in workups for a deployment this year. The sailors could face an extended deployment due to inaction by Congress to pass a 2013

Gortney, however, said that funding is in place to train up sailors aboard the carriers George H.W. Bush on the East Coast and Nimitz on the West Coast. It may be those sailors who get stuck at sea, providing the two-carrier requirement in U.S. Central Command.

There are many details that need to be fleshed out over the next weeks to months, Navy officials concede, and fleet commanders will make the final decision in terms of what ships deploy and the length of those deployments.

"They may be out there awhile," Gortney said of the CSGs.

So, how long is that?

"Well, until someone relieves us of the requirement, or they're no longer missioneffective," he said. "At the end of the day, I've invested in their training. They're forward-deployed. I don't have to retrain them. The problem is, how long can we keep them ready at a proper level out there on deployment until their reliefs are properly

That's a big question mark, especially since training is one of the key savings the Navy is planning to make in the event of the steep automatic spending cuts.

The normal maintenance and crew rebuilding that usually occur once a ship returns from the deployment will not

"We're going to tie the ships up at the pier. We're going to shut air wings down, and they're just going to do the absolute minimum," Gortney said. "Because I have to preserve the training and readiness dollars to



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