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'Painful' budget cuts loom

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

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Thousands 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 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 fleet," 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 many defense analysts 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 look like.

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. Work-ups 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



MC3 ROB AYLWARD/NAVY

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 budget.

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 is 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 safe."

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."



'We're going to tie the ships up at the pier. We're going to shut air wings down ...'

ADM. BILL GORTNEY, HEAD OF FLEET FORCES COMMAND