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## Surface chief underscores unmanned-vehicle revolution

### Robot boats near top of warfare needs

**By David Brown**

*Times staff writer*

Coming soon to a davit near you: remote-controlled boats.

In an internal message detailing spending priorities for an upcoming budget cycle, the Navy's top surface warfare officer put tactical unmanned vehicles near the top of the list, ahead of some prominent shipbuilding programs.

The message, sent Nov. 10 to Fleet Forces Command by Naval Surface Force Commander Vice Adm. Timothy LaFleur, said unmanned aerial, surface, subsurface and ground vehicles "hold promise to revolutionize" anti-submarine warfare, force protection, surveillance and reconnaissance.

Around the time the message was sent, a cruiser operating in the Persian Gulf began using the Spartan Scout, a seven-meter-long unmanned rigid-hull inflatable boat. The use of the boat "portends transformation, one limited only by imagination," Rear Adm. James Stavridis, Enterprise Strike Group commander, wrote in a column published in the Nov. 17 edition of Defense News, a sister publication of Navy Times.

"Spartan Scout meets a need for ship force protection," he wrote. "It now operates with the U.S. Navy strike group built around the aircraft carrier Enterprise less than three years after development began."

Stavridis said the vehicle made it to the fleet so quickly because it's in an advanced concept technology demonstration phase, or ACTD. "The ACTD program helped get Spartan Scout out of the lab and to our carrier strike group," he wrote. "It funded continued development, until more Navy funding followed, thus providing scheduling flexibility and enabling Spartan Scout to meet deployment timelines."

What's notable about LaFleur's mention of the unmanned vehicles in his list is its level of priority. After ranking the Littoral Combat Ship as the No. 1 recapitalization priority, unmanned vehicles came next, before other major programs such as the DD(X) destroyer and LPD 17 amphibious ship programs.

The list also details several other program priorities as Navy officials prepare their Program Objective Memorandum for 2006, which serves as

a blueprint for the eventual budget submission.

Among other things, the list recommends decommissioning all 12 of the Navy's Osprey-class coastal minehunters beginning in 2006. The message did not give a reason for retiring the ships, which were commissioned between 1993 and 1999, although a major effort is underway to deploy portable minehunting systems to current warships, and one of the prime missions of the LCS will be counter-mine warfare.

A spokesman for LaFleur would not comment on the message, saying it involves ongoing budget negotiations.

Besides naming LCS, unmanned vehicles, DD(X), LPD 17 and auxiliary ships, the surface warfare priority list also ticked off other areas that require funding and attention.

•**Modernization.** No. 1 on the list is the drive to improve anti-submarine warfare capabilities. To that end, leaders want to install acoustic sensor processing systems, periscope and torpedo detection equipment and digital fire-control upgrades for the Mark 45 torpedo.

The oldest of the fleet's 40 Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are reaching the midpoint of their service lives and will need combat systems and hull, mechanical and electrical upgrades, the message said. A funding package should include Smart Ship technologies and an undersea combat system, it said. Midlife upgrades for amphibious assault ships and dock landing ships also should continue to be a priority, especially modernization of expeditionary strike group command ships.

A test last summer of shipboard force-protection equipment also received a confidence boost. Called Task Force Hip Pocket, the initiative used available technology to rapidly install equipment on a destroyer. The message backed "rapid fielding" of stabilized minor-caliber guns, nonlethal devices, radars and swimmer detection systems.

For mine countermeasures, the list recommends investing in air and unmanned systems and converting engines for the Navy's Avenger-class mine countermeasures ships, along with engineering upgrades.

•**Readiness.** Additional five-inch gun rounds, full-service charges and small-arms rounds for the fleet need to be restocked. The message also pointed out that readiness can be improved by fixing "troubled or high-cost systems." Those include parts for Close-In Weapons Systems, improving the reliability of SLQ-32 electronic warfare systems, improving NATO Seasparrow Surface Missile Systems, upgrading air-search radars and installing new inertial navigation systems.

•**Training.** By fully funding ship training simulators, fleet leaders can meet the new requirements of the Fleet Response Plan without increasing steaming days, the message said. The plan requires ships to train immediately after finishing maintenance periods and keeping the level of readiness high should those ships need to deploy early.

•**Manpower.** The fleet needs to continue its optimal manning initiative, which reduces shipboard billets by combining existing jobs, using technology to do other jobs or deciding some jobs aren't needed. The message said the fleet must continue plans to trim billets from destroyers, amphibious assault ships and auxiliary ships.

Leaders also need to address “manning deficiencies” at afloat training groups.

•**Savings.** Besides retiring coastal minehunters, the message recommends studying force-structure requirements for Landing Craft, Air Cushion vehicles. “Based on historical [amphibious ready group] usage ... there may be potential for savings by laying up or divesting six or more LCAC on each coast,” the message said.

David Brown covers weapons and warfare issues. His e-mail address is [dbrown@navytimes.com](mailto:dbrown@navytimes.com).

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