Pentagon Base-Closing Plan Takes Down Northeast Submarine Industrial Base

by Carl Osgood

The Pentagon plan to close both the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and the New London Submarine Base not only eliminates most of the active Naval presence in New England, but also takes down a sizable chunk of the U.S. submarine industrial infrastructure. Both facilities have played an important role in the development of the U.S. Navy's submarine capability since 1915. In that year New London was founded, and the Navy determined that it needed to start building submarines at Portsmouth. Both facilities are nuclear capable and both, if closed, would result in the loss of not only considerable infrastructure, but also a skilled workforce with institutional knowledge.

Retired Admiral Albert Konetzni warned the Pentagon's BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) Commission, during its July 6 Boston hearing, that "the action of shutting down this infrastructure will make sure that this [submarine] force is minimal and is minimized as an instrument of national defense."

Submarine Base New London is located four miles from the Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Conn. John Casey, the president of Electric Boat, testified to the close working relationship between his shipyard and the sub base. Electric Boat employs 12,000 people, 8,600 of them at the shipyard, and it does business with 4,000 vendors in 47 states, making it an anchor of the local economy. The construction tolerances for submarines are so tight, that, for example, the three-foot diameter propeller shaft, which passes through the hull, can't let any water into "where the people are," all the way down to the sub's deepest operating depth.

"In order to build those in some sort of modular fashion, we have to have extremely tight dimensional control, where we align sonar spheres and components to within 1/32nd of an inch to the ship's centerline before the ship's centerline even exists, so we can bring components together from three separate facilities," Casey said.

When a new submarine is being built at Electric Boat, Casey said, the Navy crew actually lives on it for the last six months before it goes to sea for the first time. "So our ability to integrate with the Navy is very important," Casey said. This ability would be lost if the sub base is closed, and the submarines now based there are sent to Kings Bay, Ga. "I am deathly concerned," he said, "that our nation will allow our submarine industry to atrophy like the United Kingdom did." He called on the commission to "carefully consider the submarine design construction life cycle support capabilities inherent with Electric Boat and the unique synergy between Electric Boat and New London Submarine Base. . . ."

George Sawyer, a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Ronald Reagan, noted that the capabilities of New London, including training, tactical employment, development, and its regional linkages, predate World War II. "Culture matters, and the integration of the 20,000 people, represented full-time, dedicated, working on submarine problems and the multi-billion dollars of facilities that it represents, is something that is unique and special, one of a kind." He warned that deconstructing this complex would be a disaster. "The unquantifiable results of this deconstruction are essentially priceless in terms of impact on people, on their capability, on how they work together, and a deterioration of a culture."

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard presents nearly identical cultural issues. Like New London, Portsmouth has built up its present capabilities over decades, and the workforce contains an institutional knowledge and skills base which will be lost if the yard is shut down. Earl Donnell, a 37-year employee of the shipyard who is now a senior manager, testified in Boston that it takes 8 to 10 years to train a shipyard worker. "Our workers are skilled crafts people," he said, who start in a four-year apprenticeship program, move on to a minimum of two years of working as journeymen, then get about two more years of specific nuclear and radiological training before becoming a fully qualified nuclear workers. "There is no national labor pool to go procure these folks, either public or private," Donnell testified. "They have to be trained in the shipyard where they will work because our facilities are different and often our processes are slightly different."

Donnell also debunked the Navy's notion that 40 percent of the workforce would relocate to one of the Navy's other shipyards if Portsmouth is closed. "We believe that number is closer to 400," or about 8 percent of the workforce, based on the experience of prior BRAC rounds, Donnell said. The result will be that it will take 8 to 10 years to replicate the skills that will be lost with the closing of Portsmouth and during that time "efficiency will be lost."

The closing of Portsmouth will exacerbate skills shortages that already exist across the Navy's four shipyards, Donnell showed. He used the example of painters and blast-

U.S. Navy

Nuclear shipyard workers with the docked nuclear submarine George Washington. *The BRAC closures would disrupt 90 years of knowledge, skilled workmanship, and culture of excellence that built up the U.S. submarine capability.*

Base-Closing Plans Would 'De-Construct' Economy

The end of July marked the close of a two-month round of 13 regional hearings by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC), concerning the Pentagon's plans for relocating or shutting down at least 33 major bases, and more than 180 installations and functions of all kinds.

The hearings raised fundamental questions of constitutionality, competence, and military and national security policies involved in the BRAC process—serious questions that have been covered in past issues of *EIR.* They were also rightly used as platforms for state delegations to present expert briefings on vital military-civilian economic concentrations associated with the bases. These national assets range from nuclear technology, to medical research, nanotechnology, and machine tooling.

As one Connecticut expert said on July 6 in Boston, concerning the New London, Conn., nuclear shipyard: "De-constructing this complex would be a disaster." The regional summaries here are taken from testimony at the hearings.

ers, a crucial skill absolutely necessary for getting ships back into the fleet. "If you don't have enough painters and blasters, you will absolutely impact docking duration of an availability," he said, "because much of the work that they do is exterior to the ship, and in tanks that are flooded when the boat goes in the water, and that work must be done before it comes out of drydock." He reported that if Portsmouth is closed, the Navy would have to struggle with a 1,700-person-per-day shortage in skilled crafts people, who do the critical maintenance on Navy ships. Even with Portsmouth, the Navy is still running at about 300 to 500 workers short across the four shipyards, necessitating the deployment of groups of skilled workers among the shipyards in order to do critical work.

Paul O'Connor, the president of the Metal Trades Council, highlighted the cultural environment at the shipyard that makes Portsmouth the most efficient shipyard in the Navy. "More than a decade ago, we began to mold relationships of trust and respect between labor and management," he said. "And what began all those years ago as individual relationships has evolved into a cultural metamorphosis where today labor is woven into the shipyard fabric." As a result, the workforce is part of the management of the shipyard and is therefore much more able to focus on its mission. "This approach to labor management relations has taken years to cultivate," he said, "and it can't be replicated at other shipyards simply by sprinkling meager numbers of our workforce across the country." He noted that building this kind of relationship has been very hard work and has not happened at other shipyards. "You can transfer the billets," he said, "but you cannot transfer the culture."

Mid-Atlantic Center of R&D: Fort Monmouth

Fort Monmouth, N.J., only 30 miles from New York City, is the home of the Communications and Electronics Command of the U.S. Army Materiel Command. Other tenant commands on the base include the Program Executive Office Command, Control and Communications Systems, Program Executive Office Intelligence, Electronic Warfare and Sensors, and the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School. Fort Monmouth was originally established as an Army Signal Corps installation in 1917, and named Camp Vail, after Alfred Vail, an associate of Samuel F.B. Morse, who invented the system of dots and dashes used in Morse code. It soon became a center of research and development in radio communications with the establishment of the Radio Laboratory in late 1917. The Radio Laboratory operated

U.S. Navy

A nuclear submarine crew manning the sub's control room. The crew lives and works on a submarine for six months while it is at the shipyard being completed—a procedure that the BRAC shutdown plan will jeopardize.

alongside the Signal Corps School, and together the two institutions developed and were integrated into the Army communications technologies. Fort Monmouth expanded rapidly in the 1940s and 1950s, becoming the Signal Corps Center in 1949, and exploring the then-new technologies of radar and electronic warfare.

In 1962, the Army Electronics Command was established at Fort Monmouth, with the mission of cradle-to-grave management of all the Army's programs in the areas of communications, electronic warfare, combat surveillance, automatic data processing, radar, and meteorology. ECOM was responsible for a number of firsts throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including, among others:

- Reception of the first satellite weather pictures from the Tiros-1 satellite in 1960.
- Construction of the first experimental communications satellite that proved that high-volume communications could be relayed through space, also in 1960.
- Development and deployment of the first night-vision equipment in 1968.
- Development of the defibrillator-pacemaker, in cooperation with doctors at Patterson Army hospital. This device could regulate heartbeat, detect fibrillation (wild tremors of the heart), and briefly stop the heart so that normal beat could return.

Today, Fort Monmouth continues that legacy with one of the largest concentrations of engineers and Ph.D.'s in the country, developing technologies across the entire sphere of what is known as C4ISR, command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. That support includes day-to-day involvement in ongoing combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a team of 125 engineers trying to find a solution to combat the threat of improvised explosive devices. Yet, the Pentagon BRAC recommendations call for closing Fort Monmouth, and redistributing most of its functions to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., and Fort Belvoir, Va.

Witnesses testifying to the BRAC Commission hearing in Baltimore on July 8 graphically demonstrated the impact of closing Fort Monmouth. Retired Vice Admiral Paul Gaffney, whose 35-year Navy career included four years as head of research and development for the Navy, warned the Commission that the Pentagon recommendation would result in substantial disruption of the base's missions. "There was no discussion, no consideration, no calculation of the disruption to the current force, to the current mission, support to the war that goes on today," he said. This support includes "the hundreds of Fort Monmouth engineers that have been in Iraq and in Afghanistan updating equipment that they've built, the software that is sent daily, maybe minute by minute, into the war zone to update software in the field, or the amount of money that's been added to Fort Monmouth to deal with the evolving threat in that war fight."

Robert Giordano, who spent his entire career working in research and development at Fort Monmouth, warned the Commission that the loss of the highly trained and educated workforce would be catastrophic for the Defense Department. According to surveys, few, perhaps less than 20%, of the 5,000 technical workers would move to Aberdeen and Fort Belvoir, primarily because they are in two-income families with children in local schools, resulting in a huge loss of skills and institutional knowledge that would not be passed on to the new workers hired at other locations.

Gaffney also stressed that Fort Monmouth is in the middle of the "highest concentration of scientists and engineers between Philadelphia and New York City." He reported that in the Monmouth and the surrounding Ocean County area, there are more than 800 firms working in the same technology fields as Fort Monmouth. "There are terrific partnerships between Fort Monmouth and both academia and industry in the area," Gaffney said.

What makes the Pentagon plan to dismantle Fort Monmouth even more ironic is that the Director of Defense Research and Engineering, Dr. Ron Sega, has gone around the country making speeches about the dangers of the shrinking pool of engineers in the United States, and the Defense Department is facing large retirements in the near term in its own engineering workforce. "This is not the time to be trying to reconstitute the workforce no matter where one is moving," Gaffney said.