USS Blue Ridge begins NMCRS donations

EN3 Ivy Ancheta fills out a Navy and Marine Corp Relief Society (NMCRS) donation form aboard U.S. 7th Fleet flagship *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) March 1.

Story and photo by MC3 Cale Hatch, *USS Blue Ridge* Public Affairs

U.S. 7th Fleet flagship *USS Blue Ridge* (LCC 19) kicked off the annual drive to raise money for Navy and Marine Corp Relief Society (NMCRS) March 1.

Logistics Specialist Petty Officer First Class Nathan Grant, Blue Ridge's NMCRS unit coordinator, said the committee has decided to set the command goal this year to see the crew's donations exceed the $47,677 donated in 2011.

"We've had about a 55 percent participation rate on *Blue Ridge*, with some of the largest individual donations," said Grant. "Overall, *Blue Ridge* does great with support on fundraising and I think we are fully capable of reaching that goal."

NMCRS is a private, non-profit, volunteer and charitable organization whose mission is to provide financial, educational and other assistance to all active duty and retired Sailors and Marines, their eligible family members.

NMCRS offers budgeting services, financial planning for expecting parents, a visiting-nurse program and quick assist loans for emergencies .

Donations received from Sailors go directly back into the hands of fellow service members who need assistance.

Grant said, "As a donor, don't donate because you're being told to. Do it because later down the road you might need it."

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In addition to ensuring the readiness of our Sailors and Marines, the initiative will aim to make the Navy and Marine Corps the safest and most secure force in the department's history. All personnel in the fleet should expect to work in a safe environment, free from harassment or hazards, and when confronted with these, have the resources available to immediately correct the problem.

The Department of the Navy (DoN) continues to work aggressively to prevent sexual assaults, to support sexual assault victims, and to hold offenders accountable. Part of this effort is implementing new training at multiple levels in both the Navy and Marine Corps.

A recent program, the Bystander Intervention (BI) course, which is part of the Navy's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) program, began in January for all A-school students. BI is intended to educate Sailors that, as bystanders, they have the power - and responsibility - to intervene in a potentially harmful situation, regardless of rank. BI training is part of a larger strategy addressing changes in attitudes and behaviors in the Department of the Navy. SAPR training for Navy leadership and the fleet is in development.

Every day Sailors and Marines do a great job of managing risks on-duty, proven by FY 2011 being recorded as the safest in terms of operational fatalities. Under the 21st century Sailor and Marine area of safety, DoN will continue stressing to Sailors and Marines that they should apply the same operational risk management (ORM) skills to their off-duty activities.

"All leaders must guard against reckless behavior - it jeopardizes the health, safety, and combat readiness of our entire force" said Gen. James F. Amos, commandant of the Marine Corps. "Risk mitigation is one of the best means available as we fight to eliminate senseless and needless loss of life and injury, both on duty and on liberty."

Statistically, the most dangerous thing Sailors and Marines do every day is also one of the most common, driving a personal motor vehicle. While there are a number of factors that make this even more dangerous: driving while fatigued, distracted, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs; the good news is that alcohol-related motor vehicle fatalities are down across the fleet. The Naval Safety Center has tools and resources available to help train Sailors and Marines - particularly those under the age of 25 who are statistically much more likely to be killed or injured behind the wheel. One of the tools is the travel risk planning system (TRiPS), an on-line, automated risk-assessment tool that Sailors and Marines use before they go on liberty or leave, driving outside command travel limits. The system helps them recognize - and avoid - the hazards they may face on the highway.

While each of the five areas provide important support for department personnel, physical fitness can be viewed having some of the farthest reaching beneficial effects. Sailors and Marines must be ready to meet the demands of performing in a tactical environment, and physical readiness is a crucial link to ensuring Sailors and Marines are ready to take on the challenges the Navy and Marine Corps faces today, and will face in the future. As part of the 21st century initiative, Sailors and Marines must maintain the highest level of sustained fitness with the ultimate goal of having the fittest, most deployment-ready force in the history of the Navy and Marine Corps.

"Sound minds and sound bodies are the fundamental elements of successful Sailors and combat readiness," said MCPON (SS/SW) Rick D. West. "The transition from a 'culture of testing' to a 'culture of fitness' means that we deliberately incorporate physical proficiency and holistic health into our daily routines rather than simply doing just enough to get by on tests twice a year. The more we do each day to improve our physical conditioning, the better prepared we are to handle stress, deployments, and unexpected situations.

Sometimes it's difficult to find the time or resources to get in a run or hit the gym, but if leadership and Sailors actively make those things part of their commitment to excellence, the pay-off is significant. We are not a sedentary force ... we are forward-deployed, we are expeditionary, we are agile ... and we need to be physically ready as Sailors to answer any call at any time."

The Navy continues to build a culture of fitness as part of the physical fitness area, by urging Sailors to incorporate fitness into their daily lives. Adopting the "Fueled to Fight" program fleetwide will provide a nutrition strategy to increase high quality fuel (food, drink) fleetwide to meet the warfighter's nutrition needs. Additionally, Mabus is moving the DoN to be smoke-free by choice with a continued education campaign on the hazards of smoking, providing easy access to free cessation tools to every Sailor and Marine trying to quit and ending the discounts for cigarettes in Navy Exchanges and Marine Corps Exchanges. Ending the discounts will bring the prices up to 100 percent market pricing.

Ensuring all personnel, regardless of race or gender, are given every opportunity to excel and succeed is the hallmark of the program's forth area, inclusion. In order to operate globally, the Department of the Navy will need diversity of ideas, experiences, areas of expertise, and backgrounds to fulfill a variety of missions, while remaining relevant to the American people. Regardless of mission, in the Navy women are permanently assigned to all types of ships, aviation squadrons, afloat staffs, Naval Construction Force units and certain submarine platforms. The nature of today's ground conflicts is evolving; there are no front lines in Iraq or Afghanistan. Women in the Marine Corps are assigned to units and positions that may necessitate defensive combat actions - situations for which they are fully trained and equipped to respond.

There are many areas where opportunities can be expanded for women to serve and contribute and the Marine Corps is taking a deliberate approach in identifying them.

A new DoN Diversity Office will be established, with the Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Manpower and Reserve Affairs) serving as the DoN's diversity officer. The Diversity Office will leverage, coordinate and formalize ongoing efforts within the Navy and Marine Corps and will include the heads of the Navy Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Marine Corps Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management and the DoN Office of Civilian Diversity as team members.

"Diversity of Thought - Connectedness with America - Diversity is more important than race, ethnicity, or gender," said Sgt. Maj. Micheal P. Barrett, the 17th sergeant major of the Marine Corps. "We are committed to attracting, mentoring and retaining the most talented men and women who bring a diversity of background, culture and skill in service to our nation."

The last area, continuum of service, aims to ensure Sailors and Marines are provided the most robust transition support in department history. Whether retraining wounded warriors, providing voluntary education, or helping achieve civilian credentialing, the department will aim to provide personnel every opportunity for personal and professional growth.

The Navy's Credentialing Opportunities Online (COOL) program offers Sailors the opportunity to earn civilian certifications and licenses corresponding to their Navy ratings, collateral duties, and out-of-rating assignments. COOL is designed to further develop the personal and professional capability of the Navy Total force, enhancing force readiness.

Through each of the areas described in the secretary's address, the 21st Century Sailor and Marine initiative will realign many programs throughout the department and focus their combined efforts to ensure all personnel are not only mentally and physically prepared for the future fight, but that they will also have the knowledge, skills and support needed to succeed for the remainder of their lives.

"The 21st Century Sailor and Marine initiative is focused on the whole life of the individual and their family's lives. When a Sailor's or Marine's time in the military ends whether it is after four years or forty, we want your productive life to continue and for you to leave the service in better health, more trained and better educated than when you came in."

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