

Highlights of GAO-21-168, a report to congressional committees

June 2021

NAVY READINESS

Actions Needed to Evaluate and Improve Surface Warfare Officer Career Path

Why GAO Did This Study

SWOs are U.S. Navy officers whose primary duties focus on the safe operation of surface ships at sea. In 2017, the Navy had two collisions at sea that resulted in the death of 17 sailors and hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to Navy ships. Following the collisions, the Navy identified deficiencies in the SWO career path and staffing policies, and took action to improve these areas.

The John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 contained a provision that GAO assess issues related to the U.S. Navy SWO career path. Among other things, this report (1) assesses trends in separation rates of SWOs with those of similar U.S. Navy officer communities, and trends in SWO separation rates by gender; (2) describes how the career path of U.S. Navy SWOs compares to those of selected foreign navies and other U.S. Navy and U.S. maritime communities; and (3) assesses the extent to which the U.S. Navy has used or evaluated alternative career paths. GAO analyzed U.S. Navy officer personnel data; selected foreign navies and U.S. maritime officer communities for comparison; and surveyed a generalizable sample of Navy SWOs.

What GAO Recommends

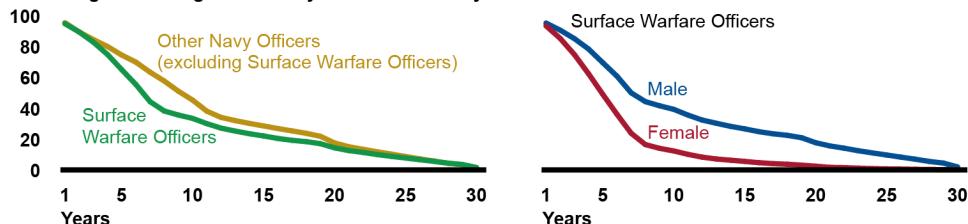
GAO is making 7 recommendations to the Navy, including developing a plan to improve SWO retention; regularly evaluating its current approaches, including alternative career paths; and using these to improve SWO career options and proficiency. The Navy concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-168](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officers (SWOs) separate from the SWO community earlier and at higher rates compared with officers in similar U.S. Navy communities, and female SWOs separate at higher rates than male SWOs.

Retention Rates for U.S. Navy Officers and Surface Warfare Officers by Gender
Percentage remaining in U.S. Navy officer community



Source: GAO analysis of Navy data. | GAO-21-168

Note: GAO compared the U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officer community separation rates with those of the other unrestricted line officer communities in the U.S. Navy: Naval Aviation, Submarine, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Special Warfare.

GAO found that after 10 years of service, around the first major career milestone:

- 33 percent of SWOs remain in their community, compared with 45 percent of officers from similar U.S. Navy officer communities, and
- 12 percent of female SWOs remain in their community, compared with 39 percent of male SWOs.

By using existing information to develop a plan to improve SWO retention, the Navy will be better positioned to retain a diverse and combat-ready community.

The career path for U.S. Navy SWOs differs from those in similar positions in selected foreign navies and other U.S. Navy and U.S. maritime communities.

Career Path for U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officers Compared with Others

Generalist	Specialized by Department	Specialized by Ship Type
Surface Warfare Officers serve on all ship departments, on all ship types 	Surface Warfare Officers serve in one ship department for their career or a part of their career Operations Engineering Weapons	Surface Warfare Officers serve on one type of ship for their career or part of their career Surface Combat Amphibious Operations Mine Warfare
U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officers	France, Italy, Japan, and UK Navies; U.S. Navy Submarine Officers, U.S. Coast Guard	Republic of Korea Navy, U.S. Naval Aviation Officers

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Navy, selected foreign navies, and Coast Guard communities (text); NWM/stock.adobe.com (ship icons). | GAO-21-168

The U.S. Navy made incremental career path changes for SWOs following the 2017 collisions, but has not regularly evaluated or fundamentally changed its SWO career path for over a century. GAO found that by a factor of four to one, SWOs believe specialized career paths would better prepare them for their duties than the current generalist career path. Without periodic evaluations of current approaches, including alternative career paths, and the use of those evaluations, the U.S. Navy may miss an opportunity to develop and retain proficient SWOs.