

TAKING THE BIG SKY UNDER THE SEA

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The USS John Warner, a Virginia class sub, is pictured in action. (Courtesy of Bill Whitsitt)

The commissioning committee for the nuclear attack submarine, the USS Montana is looking for ways to bring a Big Sky feel to the underwater vessel. Once complete, the USS Montana will be the first submarine to bear the state's name and will join more than 10 other vessels in the Navy's Virginia class.

Virginia class subs are among the most advanced in the Navy, with Tomahawk missile systems and increased capabilities for stealth and shallow-water navigation. Construction on the USS Montana began in May of 2015 and is scheduled to finish in 2020.

The USS Montana Committee's role is to educate Montanans about their namesake vessel, support the sub's crew, and raise funds for the commissioning ceremony, which celebrates the sub's formal introduction to the rest of the fleet.

Committee members and interested parties convened July 13 at Glacier Bank in Kalispell to learn more about the submarine and others in its class from naval captain Gene Doyle, Chief of Staff of the U. S. Pacific Fleet.

Doyle, a graduate of Flathead High School, told the 20-some attendees that the Navy was in the process of increasing the size of its submarine force. Currently, they're able to construct Virginia class subs at a rate of two per year.

"President Trump, regardless of what you think of him, has called for a larger Navy and I think we need it," Doyle said." He called for about a 350-ship Navy."

Doyle said other countries such as China and Russia were stepping up their maritime capabilities.

“Up until about 2016, if you saw a land attack cruise missile being launched from a submarine, it would have been automatically designated as the United States because we were the only ones that could do it. In 2016, the Russians launched several,” Doyle said. “It’s always a race between us and our adversaries out there — who can be more quiet? That’s one of the things that Virginia class is focused on.”

The USS Montana will carry a crew of approximately 140 and will spend 85 to 90 percent of each deployment submerged beneath the water.

“The Montana will go 30-plus years without ever being refueled, which is amazing,” Doyle said. “The only thing that limits me in the number of days I can go underwater is the amount of food I can carry.”

Doyle, whose served aboard four different vessels during his career, stressed the importance of a maintaining a mainland connection with the sailors on board and advised committee members to take every opportunity they could to connect with the crew, once they’re selected.

“I remember getting a box of huckleberry jam on deployment and the crew thought that was the greatest thing since sliced bread,” he said. “It’s good to know that people back there understand that sacrifice and appreciate it.”

USS Montana Committee Chairman Bill Whitsitt told the committee he wants to bring a piece of Montana life to the submarine.

“Some states have done some pretty creative things with the interior of the sub,” Whitsitt said. “New Mexico actually has funded the decoration of the crew mess, or the crew dining area, as a Mexican cantina.”

Submarines don’t come with a lot of creature comforts — they have white floors and fluorescent lights, Whitsitt explained. Sailors can be deployed for six months at a time, so even the smallest reminders of home can go a long way in the depths of the ocean.

In the recently commissioned USS John Warner, Whitsitt said, the sponsoring committee installed incandescent lights in the crew dining area and purchased a large TV so the sailors could watch movies.

“Lots of things that are pretty simple, but we’re told mean a lot to the crew,” he added.

Each state can add its own unique flair to the stark interior. The USS Indiana, for example, had pro sports team logos embedded in their dining tables.

Whitsitt said he’s currently in talks with the Montana State Historical Society about developing a Montana history and culture display on board so foreign officers and dignitaries can learn about the vessels namesake state. The display might take the form of a giclée of a famous Charles Russell painting or a replica of an object aboard the first USS Montana — an armored cruiser that served from 1908 to 1930.

The early 1900s wasn’t the only time the name Montana was thrown around.

The government planned to build two different Montana battleships, but both were cancelled before they could be completed — the first in 1922 and the second in 1943.

“The first time, because the first world war ended and there was an agreement to limit the number of war ships. The second time, Montana was going to be the lead in a whole new class of battleships,” Whitsitt said. “That was in World War II, and we realized we were actually winning the war with aircraft carriers, so they cancelled the whole class of battleships. Twice Montana had false starts.”

It appears that the third time’s the charm for the Big Sky state.

Whitsitt estimated that USS Montana is currently between 15 and 20 percent complete.

To keep the Montanan spirit alive during the construction phase, the committee sent a Montanan flag to the ship builder, Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia, to be flown over the construction site and a second banner to be displayed on the sub — both of which were previously flown over the state capitol.

“Montana has a special set of values — courage, freedom,” Whitsitt said. “What better way to demonstrate to our country our commitment to these things that make America and Montana great than by helping those that are going to defend (them)? ... I’m getting misty just talking about it.”

To learn more about the sub or to get involved visit www.ussmontanacommittee.us.