

General Darren W. McDew: Losing our sea legs

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TWENTY-FIVE years ago today the United States completed the largest deployment of combat power since World War II. That effort represented the ultimate show of national resolve in the face of aggression by projecting a decisive combat force, around the globe, to crush the world's fourth largest army in just 100 hours.

The sheer size and complexity of that deployment was staggering. The material moved was four times more than the D-Day invasion and six and a half times more than the peak of Vietnam. It was also the farthest the United States had ever deployed forces.

We all remember the news clips showing helicopters rolling off massive airplanes, but as a career Air Force officer, I must tell you the reality is almost 95 percent of all cargo went by ship. The mere 5 percent moved by air required near full mobilization of commercial industry and maxed out our military airlift fleets. Indeed, sealift transported more than 2.1 million tons of cargo, which included everything from 2,000 main battle tanks to millions of Meals Ready to Eat.

We often credit the decisive victory of the "100-hour ground war" to the professionalism, strategy and technological edge of our combat forces.

I submit to you, however, our overwhelming success was due in large part to the 10,000 U.S. mariners who sped 220 shiploads of decisive U.S. combat power throughout the buildup known as Operation Desert Shield. Without those mariners and vessels, our ability to project decisive force and demonstrate our national resolve would have been a mere fraction of what was required to ensure the swift victory the world witnessed. Simply put, moving an army of decisive size and power can only be accomplished by sea.

Unfortunately, our ability to project a force the way we did 25 years ago is no longer guaranteed. This should shock you. It shocks me.

As a country, we have collectively worked to maintain a strong maritime industry that supports our needs. From enacting the Cargo Preference Acts of 1904 and 1954 to the Jones Act of 1920, and from a 1989 National Security Directive to the Maritime Security Act of 1996, we have sought to delay the day when U.S. national security interests could no longer be supported by a U.S. mariner base springing from our commercial sealift industry.

In the 1950s, there were more than 1,000 U.S. ships engaged in international trade. Each of these vessels employed and trained a pool of U.S. mariners we could rely on in a time of war to sail our forces to the fight. Today, there are only 78.

Just as the number of U.S. ships have declined, so too has the amount of American mariners who, unfortunately, must follow the available jobs. While the decline in American mariners gets some attention, often lost in the discussion is the reality that the mariners who move international trade and those who transport wartime cargo come from the same dwindling pool of U.S. mariners. If that U.S. mariner base gets too small, we will have to rely on other countries to deploy our combat power.

As we look back over the last 25 years, sealift has deployed a decisive force across the globe twice. Looking at the possibilities the next 25 years may present, many would agree the global security environment is only getting more contested.

The current environment in the Middle East and Korea are certainly enough to justify those concerns. When you add the complexities of further Russian aggression and China's ambitions in the South China Sea, it is clear the United States must maintain the flexibility to deploy a decisive force at the time and place of our choosing.

As a military professional and senior leader, I think about and plan for what the future may hold, and I would tell you we must prepare for the real possibility we will not enjoy the uncontested seas and broad international support experienced in 1991. If either of those possibilities becomes reality, and if we remain committed to responding to security incidents around the globe, the only way of guaranteeing we decisively meet our national objectives is with U.S. ships operated by U.S. mariners.

That leaves us with a critical question. As a nation, are we resolved to retain the ability to deploy overwhelming U.S. power, a decisive combat power, at the time and place of our choosing?

It is time now for that national discussion.