

# BRAC PROPOSAL

## - - DEEP SIX FOR THE SUBBASE

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On 13 May, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure ("BRAC") recommendations, which propose that 33 major bases be closed and 29 more "realigned." One of the bases that is slated to be closed is the submarine base at New London, Connecticut ("SUBBASE"). "Our current arrangements, designed for the Cold War, must give way to the new demands of the war against extremism and other evolving 21st Century challenges," Rumsfeld explained. In addition, the recommendations hope to achieve approximately \$50 billion in savings over the next 20 years.

The SUBBASE can trace its origins back to 1868 when the State of Connecticut gave the Navy 112 acres along the Thames River. Due to a lack of federal funding no facilities were built on the land until 1872 when a Navy yard was constructed. In 1915, a submarine tender and four submarines were stationed there. Although physically located in Groton, the base had its main offices and housing in the larger city of New London, and hence was christened as Naval Submarine Base New London.

Today, the SUBBASE is homeport to eighteen submarines including 14 LOS ANGELES-class attack submarines, two SEAWOLF-class attack submarines, one VIRGINIA-class attack submarine, and the Navy's nuclear research deep submersible NR-1. (USS JIMMY CARTER (SSN 23) is also temporarily at the SUBBASE). The main base occupies more than 687 acres plus over 530 acres of family housing. It supports more than 70 tenant commands including: Commander Navy Region Northeast, Commander Submarine Group Two, Naval Submarine School, Naval Submarine Support Facility, and three Submarine Squadron staffs.



*Two Los Angeles-class subs at the Subbase. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).*

Nearby is the General Dynamics Electric Boat plant where most of the Navy's submarines were built. The proximity of the base and this plant facilitates submarine refits and repairs. Illustrating the synergy that this proximity can create is the fact that during the period since her launch, JIMMY CARTER - - a boat not

scheduled to be permanently homeported at the SUBASE - - has used the SUBASE for fitting out and as a base for conducting sea trials.

Perhaps the most unique facility located at the SUBASE is the Naval Submarine School. It is the oldest fleet functional school in the Navy and the only Submarine training school in the Navy. The Submarine School instructs over forty thousand Sailors annually in courses ranging from one day to over six months in length. Course offerings extend from introductory skills training to advanced mid-career professional growth courses for both officers and enlisted sailors. It also conducts refresher training of all Atlantic Fleet submarines completing construction or overhaul, pre-deployment and training ashore for all submarines of the Atlantic Fleet. Finally, the School maintains and operates some 95 unique state-of-the-art trainers which cost millions to design and develop. These include trainers that give the students hands-on experience with equipment and which cannot be replaced by computer simulations.

Clearly, the SUBASE is not a relic of the Cold War. Submarines homeported at the SUBASE such as USS DALLAS (SSN 700) have been fitted with facilities for the transportation and deployment of SEALs. Cruise missiles were fired from attack submarines in Kosovo and in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Attack submarines also now operate with carrier battle groups providing both defense and attack capabilities. As then-National President of the Navy League Sheila M. McNeil observed (SEAPOW February 2005): "Renowned for their prowess at strategic warfare, intelligence

operations, and antisubmarine tactics, our sub fleets are expanding their missions and delivering vastly improved capabilities to the fleet. . . . Submarines provide our nation with advantages that potential adversaries cannot match."

Indeed, the VIRGINIA-class submarines were designed after the end of the Cold War for the new challenges facing the nation. As Rear Admiral Malcolm I. Fages, (USN), then-Director, Submarine Warfare Division, Office of the Chief Of Naval Operations testified before Congress in 2000: "The VIRGINIA class is the first submarine designed from the keel up for near land operations while remaining second to none in 'blue water' operations. It will be capable of covertly penetrating future areas of denied operations to other US forces to gather intelligence or conduct land attack operations from within the defensive umbrella of adversaries." This latest class of attack boats is capable of intercepting cell phone messages between terrorists, detecting and avoiding the latest mines, deploying SEALs, and can counter the advanced extremely quiet diesel submarines that are being built in Germany and elsewhere and which are being sold around the world. Accordingly, Admiral Fages said: "I would like to close my testimony by reiterating the critical need for submarine delivered capabilities. The systems we are building into our ships today and planned for tomorrow will enable us to meet the impending future threats. Our submarines are stealthier and more capable than any ship in the world. Our relevance in regional peace or conflict comes from our undeniable access through stealth, long dwell time, and precision combat power, operating

from within an enemy's defenses or ability to react."

Demonstrating that it is an adaptable facility capable of serving a wide variety of demands, the SUBASE has been providing support to America's submarine force for nearly a century. The early submarines that ventured forth to fight World War I were much different than the fleet submarines used in World War II which in turn were much different from the nuclear submarines that evolved throughout the Cold War and which are continuing to evolve during the war on terror. Yet, the SUBASE has provided training and support for all of these boats. Moreover, the fact that the base is the homeport for some of the new SEAWOLF-class and VIRGINIA-class boats demonstrates that it can support the latest technologies.

It is also difficult to square closing the SUBASE with the Department of Defense's stated objectives in developing its BRAC recommendations. The first of these objectives is to "[e]nhance the military's ability to meet contingency surge or mobilization requirements." In 2004, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark praised the performance of the New London submarines that participated in a test of the surge concept, noting "[USS]ALBUQUERQUE, along with the USS HARRY S. TRUMAN (CVN 75) strike group was fresh out of the maintenance cycle, so they were what we would call emergency deployers. We were testing this concept, and they performed brilliantly."

If the SUBASE is closed, the submarines based there would be shifted to the bases at Norfolk, Virginia and

Kings Bay, Georgia. With regard to Norfolk, it is difficult to see how moving the attack submarines to a sprawling multi-purpose base from a facility that is dedicated to their needs and that is close to a key manufacturer's facilities would increase the ability to have more submarines at sea. Indeed, the fact that New London is exclusively a submarine base has helped to foster esprit de corps in the submarine service and has created a strong community where there is support and understanding for families while the boats are at sea. These intangibles would be sacrificed if the New London submarines were mixed with other forces at the vast Norfolk base. There is also the question of whether it is advisable to put so many of the Navy's eggs in one basket at a time when rogue nations are acquiring nuclear weapons.

It is true that the nation's other submarine yard, the Northrop Grumman Newport News yard, is located near Norfolk. However, that yard is not exclusively dedicated to submarines. Moreover, how could Electric Boat several hundred miles away from the nearest submarine base long compete when its rival was located close to the submarines? As a result, closing the Subase might well mean that in the long run the nation would have only one yard capable of building, repairing, and maintaining submarines.

Kings Bay has traditionally been a ballistic-missile submarine base and would have to be adapted to meet the special needs of attack submarines. Also, submarines based in Georgia would have an extra day's sailing in any deployments to the North Atlantic or Europe.

Furthermore, King's Bay is located in the hurricane-prone southeast.

Second, the Department's recommendations supposedly seek to "retain those installations that have unique capabilities that would be difficult to reconstitute at other locations." As discussed earlier, the SUBASE has unique training facilities used by the entire submarine fleet that would cost millions to duplicate elsewhere. Along the same lines, located at the SUBASE is the Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory, the Navy's only submarine platform designated medical research and development laboratory dedicated to the unique problems engendered by the operational submarine fleet. This Laboratory maintains a library which constitutes one of the most complete libraries of submarine and diving information in the world. Also, the synergies that come from the base's close proximity to the Electric Boat facilities cannot be achieved from other more distant locations.

Third, the Department hopes to "consolidate similar or duplicative training and support functions to improve joint war fighting." As noted earlier, the SUBASE's training and medical research facilities are unique. If the SUBASE is closed, they will have to be recreated elsewhere or the Navy will have to do without.

Much of the argument for closing the SUBASE is based upon the theory that the need for submarines has declined since the end of the Cold War, the number of submarines in the fleet will accordingly decline in the future, and thus, the country can get by with fewer submarine bases. However, the

consolidation argument rests upon a faulty premise. As discussed earlier, the attack submarines have adapted to fill new post-Cold War roles. Indeed, as Admiral Vern Clark noted last year: "We created new roles for submarines in the creation of the expeditionary strike groups operating with the Marines, and with the amphibious forces to be able to project more offensive punch with the Tomahawk capability, and the surveillance capabilities the submarine forces bring to bear." Accordingly, the demand for submarines is high and most requests by naval commanders today for submarine support have to be turned down. Furthermore, a 1999 study released by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that 76 fast attack submarines would be needed by 2025 - - a 41% increase over today's 54 fast attack submarines. Additionally, the JCS study concluded that any fewer than 55 SSNs in 2015 would leave the country with insufficient capability to respond to time-critical, urgent demands. Also, while some in the Administration now disparage the need for submarines, China has built a 50-boat fleet of nuclear and diesel submarines, financially-strapped Russia continues to send submarines to sea, and the appetite for advanced diesel submarines among smaller nations is seemingly insatiable.

The Department's fourth objective is to "transform important support functions - including logistics, medicine and research and development - by capitalizing on advances in technology and business practice." It is difficult to see how closing a facility with unique attributes and recreating them somewhere else is a good business practice. This is especially so

considering that the Navy invested \$98.5 million in improving the infrastructure of the SUBASE last year and is scheduled to spend another \$50 million this year. Furthermore, closing the SUBASE could mean the loss to the Navy of irreplaceable skilled workers. One former BRAC commissioner has been quoted as saying that only 25 to 45 percent of the affected employees agree to move when a base is closed. Since the workers affected include people with specialties in unique areas of medicine, training, and engineering, and it may be impossible to replace them if they refuse to relocate.

It is worth noting that some of the Department's figures are hard to fathom. One press release quotes Secretary Rumsfeld as saying: "This year's recommendation ... should result in some \$5.5 billion in recurring annual savings, a net savings of \$48.8 billion over 20 years." However, \$48.8 billion over 20 years is only \$2.44 billion annually ( $48.8 / 20 = 2.44$ ). Of course, if one factors in the time value of money, the fact that the savings would be spread over 20 years means that the expected savings are less than \$48.8 billion in 2005 dollars. Along the same lines, a Navy spokeswoman said that the recommendations affecting the Navy should produce \$1.5 billion in annual savings. This means that the recommendations affecting the Navy are expected to produce the majority of DOD's expected savings ( $\$1.5 \text{ billion} \times 20 \text{ years} = \$30 \text{ billion}$  or 61% of \$48 billion).

Leaving aside the Department's stated objectives, closing the SUBASE is a bad idea because it would mean that there would be no major Navy base in

the New York metropolitan area. Indeed, if all of the Department's recommendations are adopted, there would be no major Navy base (i.e., one with major ships permanently assigned to it) in the entire Northeast. A report by The Northeast-Midwest Institute, entitled "Base Closings and Military Presence in the Northeast-Midwest: The Nation's Unguarded Region," contends that the Northeast has been disproportionately hard hit by past base closings. The closure of the SUBASE would clearly have an additional adverse effect on the region's economy. Indeed, according to SUBASE website, the base supports "more than 21,000 civilian workers, active-duty service members and their families." Just as importantly, it would increase the isolation of the Navy from the general public. Before the draft ended, the military touched everyone's life. With the all-volunteer force and the consolidation of bases, the military has become remote to many people. This is unhealthy for the country in the long run because it leads people to believe that the nation's defense is someone else's problem.

The Department's recommendations are now being examined by the BRAC commission, which will make its independent judgment on each and present its list to President Bush on 8 September. The President may approve or disapprove the list in total. If he approves it, it will go to Congress. Congress will then have 45 days to disapprove the list. If it does not, the list becomes law. *Note: The BRAC commission decided not to close the Subase.*