



THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON DC 20350-1000

APR 09 2019

From: Secretary of the Navy
To: Lieutenant Natalie Combs, USN

Subj: SECRETARIAL LETTER OF CENSURE

Ref: (a) U.S. Navy Regulations, 1990
(b) Standard Organization and Regulations of the U.S. Navy
(c) Manual of the Judge Advocate General (JAGMAN) 0114a

1. While serving as Tactical Action Officer, USS FITZGERALD (DDG 62), you demonstrated incompetent and ineffective leadership while supervising the Combat Information Center (CIC). Your willful failure to perform assigned duties combined with your ineffective communication and failure to make recommendations to the bridge watch team were significant contributing factors in the June 17, 2017 collision at sea between FITZGERALD and ACX CRYSTAL, resulting in the death of seven United States Navy Sailors.
2. As the Tactical Action Officer and most experienced leader of the FITZGERALD watch team at the time of the collision, you had an affirmative duty per references (a) and (b) to diligently observe the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea along with other governing rules and regulations, including the Commanding Officer's Standing Orders. At a minimum, you and your watch team were at all times required to operate the ship with due regard for the safety of your shipmates and other vessels at sea.
3. Entrusted to be the Commanding Officer's representative concerning the tactical employment and defense of the ship, you were obligated to actively monitor maritime traffic using all available means to continuously assess operationally significant data and offer timely recommendations to the Officer of the Deck regarding ship maneuvers such as course and speed. Your assignment was to execute and supervise the fundamental tenets of bridge resource management – communication, teamwork, decision-making, situational awareness, and forceful backup. Vested with this critical authority, you failed to maintain, understand, and communicate a complete tactical picture. In the hour prior to the collision, you made no contact reports or maneuvering recommendations to the bridge watch team and made no requests or recommendations to the Officer of the Deck regarding tactical intentions. Further, despite the increasingly complex operating environment, in the hours leading up to the collision your watch team did not actively plot the course and speed of a single ship in the area for contact avoidance. You failed to use all available resources to assist with contact management and avoidance and failed to use all available sensors to monitor, clarify, and report the surface contact picture. Simply stated, you and your team failed to maintain a complete and accurate tactical picture, failed to identify and track several ships with increasingly close range and proximity, and failed to communicate in any effective manner with the bridge watch team.

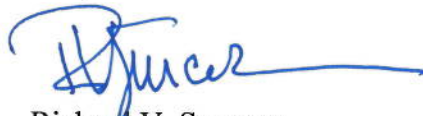
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4. Your failure is not limited to the time immediately preceding the collision. As an experienced watch stander, you were responsible for ensuring basic watch standing principles, and it was your lack of adherence to those principles and your contribution to a culture of complacency, lack of procedural compliance, lack of system knowledge and a dangerous level of informality. This lax culture that you helped propagate contributed to the collision and the deaths of our Sailors.

5. As a naval officer, you were entrusted with the safety of your ship and shipmates. You abrogated your responsibilities to uphold that trust, by both your actions and inactions. You unequivocally share responsibility for this avoidable tragedy.

6. Accordingly, you are administratively censured. A copy of this letter will be placed in your official service record in accordance with reference (c).

7. Within 15 days of the receipt of this letter, you may forward a rebuttal, consistent with reference (c), for inclusion in your official record, if you so desire.



Richard V. Spencer