

Many Questions Remain Over USS Fitzgerald Collision

USS Fitzgerald (DDG-62), a critical piece of the U.S. missile defense effort in the Asia-Pacific region, was severely damaged and lost seven crew members after it collided Saturday with a Philippine cargo container ship less than 65 miles from its home base at Yokosuka, Japan.

The seven lost crewmen were:

- Gunner's Mate Seaman Dakota Kyle Rigsby, 19, from Palmyra, Virginia
- Yeoman 3rd Class Shingo Alexander Douglass, 25, from San Diego, California
- Sonar Technician 3rd Class Ngoc T. Truong Huynh, 25, from Oakville, Connecticut
- Gunner's Mate 2nd Class Noe Hernandez, 26, from Weslaco, Texas
- Fire Controlman 2nd Class Carlos Victor Ganzon Sibayan, 23, from Chula Vista, California
- Personnel Specialist 1st Class Xavier Alec Martin, 24, from Halethorpe, Maryland
- Fire Controlman 1st Class Gary Leo Rehm Jr., 37, from Elyria, Ohio

As of this writing, the White House has not yet issued a statement. However, President Donald Trump tweeted the following message shortly after the damaged destroyer returned to port:

"Thoughts and prayers with the sailors of USS Fitzgerald and their families. Thank you to our Japanese allies for their assistance."

Fitzgerald's collision with the ACX Crystal occurred at approximately 2:30 a.m. local time at a position roughly 56

nautical miles (64.4 miles) southwest of its home port. The Navy is currently investigating what led to the incident, as there are conflicting reports regarding navigational actions taken by Crystal in the moments prior to the crash.

Fitzgerald suffered damage on her starboard side above and below the waterline, damaging two berthing areas and a machinery shop and causing significant flooding. Cmdr. Bryce Benson, Fitzgerald's commanding officer, was among the injured and was medical evacuated to Naval Hospital Yokuska. His cabin was directly impacted by the collision.

Vice Adm. Joseph Aucoin, Commander of the 7th Fleet, issued the following statement after Fitzgerald had returned to port and its missing crewmen were accounted for:

USS Fitzgerald experienced extensive damage and flooding after a collision with the Filipino container ship at 0220 local time, 17 June, approx. 56 [nautical miles] off the coast of Honshu, Japan.

The damage included a significant impact under the ship's pilothouse on the starboard side and a large puncture below the ship's waterline, opening the hull to the sea.

The ship suffered severe damage, rapidly flooding three large compartments that included one machinery room and two berthing areas for 116 crew. The commanding officer's cabin was also directly hit, trapping the CO inside.

The crew's response was swift and effective, and I want to point out—as we stand by the ship—how proud I am of them.

Heroic efforts prevented the flooding from catastrophically spreading which could have caused the ship to founder or sink. It could have been much worse.

The crew navigated the ship into one of the busiest ports in the world with a magnetic compass and backup navigation

equipment. One of two shafts were locked.

Because of the tireless damage control efforts of a resolute and courageous team, the ship was able to make its way back to port safely on its own power last evening.

The *Fitzgerald* crew responded professionally as all sailors are expected to fight the damage sustained to their ship. They are known as the "Fighting Fitz" and the crew lived up to that name.

We owe it to our families and the Navy to understand what happened. Under my authority, I am initiating a JAGMAN investigation into this collision, and I will appoint a flag officer to lead that investigation. There will also be a safety investigation.

The U.S. Coast Guard is to take the lead on the marine casualty investigation.

We recognize that there are other organizations who have equities in this incident, and we expect they will conduct their own separate investigations. More information on any further investigations will be forthcoming.

I will not speculate on how long these investigations will last.

As you are aware, we have found the remains of a number of our missing shipmates. Our deepest sympathies are with the families of these sailors.

Out of concern for the families and the notification process, I will decline to state how many we have found at this time. We owe that to the families and friends of these shipmates and hope you can respect this process.

We will update you after all notifications have been made.

We have transferred remains to Naval Hospital Yokosuka. The

families are being notified and will be provided the support they need at this difficult time. Please keep them in your thoughts and prayers.

Their loved ones are what makes this Navy great, so this loss is something we all do feel. The names of the deceased will be released soon.

Unfortunately, we don't have the details regarding the conditions during their final moments, but hope that the investigation may shed some light on that matter.

At the same time, I want to express my most heartfelt appreciation to our Japanese allies for their swift support and assistance.

Japanese Coast Guard ships and helicopters were the first on scene and our first medevac, the ship's commanding officer, Cmdr. Bryce Benson, was accomplished thanks to a [Japanese Navy] helicopter.

A second medevac was performed for two sailors with minor injuries. All three patients are alert and under observation at Naval Hospital Yokosuka.

We set up a *USS Fitzgerald* Emergency Family Assistance Center within hours, and disseminated the phone numbers to their hotlines through social media and Navy websites.

This support center remains open for chaplain and counselor care indefinitely, 24/7, on the Fleet and Family Support Center's 4th floor.

But to be clear: my sole focus now has shifted to helping the grieving family, crew and friends of the *Fitzgerald*.

The Navy family comes together during a tragedy, and I want to thank the entire Yokosuka community rallying their support in these difficult days. Fellow sailors, family members and civilian members of the Navy team were all out

here last night to welcome Fitzgerald home and provide the crew and grieving families with food, blankets, clothes and emotional support. MWR, Port Operations, NEX, USO, the Chief Petty Officer Mess and many others pulled together to help out.

I ask all of you to keep the affected families in your thoughts and prayers and respect their privacy as we work to get them the answers they deserve regarding their loved ones.”

A few hours after Aucoin’s speech, the Navy released the names of all seven sailors, whose remains were found in the flooded berthing compartments.

The Navy’s investigation will attempt to determine how the collision occurred. Although the “T-bone” nature of the crash would suggest Fitzgerald was to port of Crystal, the military vessel also appears to have been traveling faster—or, “overtaking,” in nautical terms—and would have been required to navigate around the cargo ship at a safe distance.

Several reports indicate Crystal may have made course corrections in the final moments before the crash that put both ships in jeopardy. Further complicating matters is the fact that since the terrorist attack on the USS Cole in 2000, American naval vessels do not have their Automatic Identification Systems engaged, making it more difficult for other vessels to “see” them on navigational radar. {eo}