

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, August 28, 2017.

A US Navy caught napping is no joke, and no reason for China to cheer

Tom Plate says the embarrassing recent blunders by America's prized Seventh Fleet may seem good for a laugh, but they add risks to an already tense region. Besides, it's not a good idea to underestimate the strength of US military pride

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[Tom Plate](#)

It's easy to imagine that in some officers' club, perhaps at Yulin naval headquarters on Hainan Island, where China's brass (vice-admirals and others) gather and, after a few rounds of *baijiu*, recycle submarine stories and second-guess their masters in Beijing – it's easy to imagine them laughing their heads off. Why? The extremely embarrassing recent stumbles by the US Navy's Seventh Fleet just have to be the toast of the PLA Navy.

Fuelling the merriment is that the object of their presumed hoopla – four recent astonishing US Navy mess-ups in the Pacific that left sailors dead and/or missing – is obviously anything but a joking matter to America's military establishment. It is extremely painful.

Earlier this month, off Singapore, the destroyer USS John S. McCain and an oil tanker [slammed into each other](#), injuring sailors and leaving some others missing. In

June, off Japan, seven sailors perished and many others were injured when the destroyer USS Fitzgerald [collided with a container ship](#). There were other blunders at sea. In May, the USS Lake Champlain rammed into a South Korean fishing boat. In January, the USS Antietam guided-missile cruiser ran aground near Yokosuka, home port of the Seventh Fleet.

The Pentagon, getting that sinking feeling, [sacked the vice-admiral](#) in charge of the Pacific armada, which oversees roughly 52 per cent of the Earth's surface, from the waters of the US west coast to the west coast of India. A red-faced navy fleet command officially explained that the three-star admiral had been relieved "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command". Other captains, sailors and technicians face discipline, reassignment and/or more training.

Bad jokes abound, of course. One making the rounds is that double-strength no-doze pills may have to be given to all US watch commanders. A new training video – another jibe has it – should instruct the crew of these US ships that if they absolutely must ram into something, they should avoid hitting friendly ships from South Korea and Japan. Another mandates an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter to be stationed on every ship at sea.

"China and the US circle like sharks around each other constantly, and yet here we have American boats evidently bobbing all over the Pacific like drunken sailors"

All joking aside, Pacific waters are now so very dangerous. China and the US circle like sharks around each other constantly, and yet here we have American boats evidently bobbing all over the Pacific like drunken sailors.

This cannot be right. Nonetheless, these embarrassments about our otherwise revered navy and the evident incompetence of some otherwise admired officers and crew have more or less slipped under the radar of much of our American media. With the media locked and loaded at another target, the sinking sagas in the Pacific seas were viewed as an egregious annoyance and unworthy interruption of the (endless and repetitive) attack on [Donald Trump](#). (Not since the 2001 destruction of the Twin Towers in New York or the "historic" 1995 trial of alleged wife-murderer O. J. Simpson has the US media seemed so glued to one narrative.)

This might well prove a colossal misjudgment (and if it turns out I am overstating the case, I apologise in advance). But, to me, this steady stream of sorry blunders is the most unnerving story of serious US naval napping since Pearl Harbour. Consider that, over the decades, the US Pacific Command has been the premier perch for some of America's most distinguished military leaders, such naval icons as Arthur W. Radford; Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jnr; John S. McCain, Jnr; and William J. Crowe, Jnr, to mention just a few.



In more recent times, I have come to admire admirals Joseph Prueher, who became ambassador to China in the late Clinton administration years; Dennis C. Blair, who became national intelligence adviser in the Obama administration; and Thomas B. Fargo, a droll Clint Eastwood-style submarine commander who became the role model for the character of Commander Bart Mancuso in the hit film *The Hunt for Red October*.

These officers and gentlemen had smarts and charisma – and no enemy would underestimate them. They were also sensible souls: well trained at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland – and, in Blair's case, at Oxford as well – they were exposed to an excellent social-science faculty as well as the standard combat canon, in an effort to turn out professional warriors, not thoughtless warmongers. Admiral Prueher impressed the Chinese as US ambassador while, in 2001, Admiral Blair worked through the EP-3 Hainan Island stand-off that year. So here's a

cautionary thought for the admirals of Yulin: hold off on breaking open the champagne and, for the time being, stay steady-as-you-go in the [South China Sea](#).



You could also joke with them that, given recent evidence, if you get hit by an American warship, don't assume it was purposeful. On the other hand, maybe we're overrating the sense of humour of China's naval command. Surely the PLA Navy has experienced its own share of embarrassing moments it doesn't wish to share with the world. It may even have some sympathy for the US Navy. They swim in the same roiling waters, and have been well briefed on our current US president's adoration of naval power.

Trump is, after all, of the generation that had it all glorified in a memorable documentary series about the US struggle against Japan during the second world war, whose title was *Victory at Sea*. They may be thinking: there's nothing very funny about that.

Columnist and professor Tom Plate's new book is *Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles the Ups and Downs Between China and the US*

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No laughing matter