

## NATIONAL

# Shortage of sailors prompts Navy to go easy on miscreants

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The Navy plans to keep more sailors who misbehave, sending them to the brig or demoting them in rank instead of discharging them, according to a memo to Atlantic Fleet commanders.

The message to all commands from fleet headquarters in Norfolk said the Navy missed its retention goal for first-term sailors this year. With the Navy suffering a 12,000-sailor shortfall at sea, one way to close the gap, the memo says, is to rehabilitate offenders.

"It was typical to classify sailors with simple misconduct problems as an administrative burden so that the command could start over," said the message, a copy of which was obtained by The Washington Times. "It is this 'throw away' approach that needs overhaul by

finding ways of motivating and turning around the marginal sailor."

"Interestingly, as [the] attrition rate has risen, the relating number of reductions in rate have declined, indicating that we are electing to separate sailors instead of using the other tools available (i.e. reduction in rate, correctional custody units) to correct a young sailor for simple misconduct," states the message earlier this month from the Atlantic Fleet, headed by Adm. Vernon Clark.

The new policy is the latest in a series of moves by the Navy to turn around disappointing recruiting numbers and low retention rates.

The Navy missed its recruiting goal by 7,000 sailors in 1998 and had to scramble to make the mark this year. At any given time, the Atlantic and Pacific fleets are short 12,000 crew members.

A Navy official in Washington said the message reflects a move by the Navy to abandon the "draw-down" mentality of the earlier 1990s. Then, the armed forces were shrinking under smaller post-Cold War budgets and commanders were almost looking for excuses to get rid of people.

Now, with the drawdown ended and with all services but the Marine Corps struggling to meet recruiting benchmarks, a sailor who is chronically late for work does not look so bad.

More troubling, the Navy predicts that next year it will take nine months to replace each flunked-out sailor.

Lt. Cmdr. Mark McDonald, a fleet spokesman, said one focus of the new program will be to turn around first-year sailors who commit a series of minor infractions, such as being late to work, showing

disrespect to superiors or a first-time conviction for driving under the influence.

Asked if the Navy is taking a drop in quality, Cmdr. McDonald said, "If you focus on these people and make them better sailors, the quality will still be there. You are not allowing a bad-quality sailor. You are taking someone who is starting down the wrong path and bringing them back and making them a good-quality sailor."

The Atlantic Fleet message said the goal was to retain 38 percent of first-term sailors in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30. But the Navy only retained about 28 percent in its surface ship community. The Atlantic Fleet experienced an attrition rate of 29 percent, or 3,936 sailors who failed to complete a first enlistment.

Only one segment of the fleet, the male-only submarine service, met

and exceeded the goal, keeping 41 percent of first termers.

"The significant detrimental impact attrition has on readiness is particularly relevant when compared [to] the current [Atlantic Fleet enlisted] manning shortfall of approximately 4,700 sailors," the message states.

The top reasons for failures: drug abuse, misconduct, criminal offenses, personality disorder, and parenthood or pregnancy.

"The early loss of sailors underscores a problem that requires our best efforts to fix," the message states. "In particular, the high number of personnel who are discharged due to misconduct requires each command's scrutiny to ensure all of the performance and character-building tools available have been employed to their fullest before turning to administrative separation," the fleet directive says.