

USS Ford Update

The officer overseeing the deployment of the carrier Gerald R. Ford was fired 8 July 2020, the latest jolt to the trouble program that has been operating under a microscope as technical problems with nearly two dozen new technologies bundled into the lead ship have piled up. Capt. Ron Rutan was removed by Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition James Geurts last Wednesday in connection with his “performance over time” in the role as program manager for the ship. News of Rutan’s removal was first reported by USNI News.

According to a statement from Naval Sea Systems Command spokesman Rory O’Connor, “Based on the recommendation of PEO Aircraft Carriers [Rear Adm. James Downey] due to performance over time, ASN RDA Geurts reassigned CVN 78 (PMS 378) Program Manager Capt. Ron Rutan to Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) staff, and selected Capt. Brian Metcalf, previously LPD 17 program manager and Executive Assistant to COMNAVSEA, as his relief, effective 1 July,” The Navy said the change was made to get “fresh eyes” on the effort to get the new aircraft carrier through its post-delivery test and trial period, which will go on through the rest of this year before the ship heads into full-ship shock trials, where live explosives are set off next the ship to see how it handles battle damage.

“While there is no perfect time for leadership transitions, it is prudent to bring in renewed energy now to lead the CVN 78 team through the challenges ahead,” the statement reads. “Capt. Metcalf’s proven program management acumen and extensive waterfront experience will be a tremendous asset to the CVN 78 team in the months ahead.” The Ford has had a witches’ brew of technical problems and accompanying delays and setbacks since construction of the ship began in 2005. Much of the trouble is the result of trying to pack too much new stuff in a single new hull, and Rutan’s firing shows the problems are still vexatious, said Jerry Hendrix, a retired Navy captain and analyst with the Telemus Group. “Obviously the problems on the Ford are still beyond the managers’ ability to control them,” Hendrix said. “And while this may be a blow to Capt. Rutan’s career, it sounds like they just needed to move on to someone who will take a different approach and brought a different perspective. It may be more about getting to the next guy as it is removing the current guy.

“Look, I don’t think it’s possible to overstate the complexity of the Ford program.” The ship, conceived in an era when the Defense Department was looking to make giant steps forward in military technology while it had no direct peer competitors, packed at least 23 new technologies into the lead ship. Those included a complete redesign of the systems used to arm, launch and recover the ship’s aircraft. All those systems have, in their turn, caused delays in getting the Navy’s most expensive-ever warship to the fleet, which was originally to have deployed in 2018, but now will likely not deploy until 2023. The Ford cost the Navy roughly \$13.3 billion, according to the latest Congressional Research Service report.

The latest hiccup came in the form of a fault in the power supply system to the electromagnetic aircraft launch system, which is replacing the old steam catapult system on the Nimitz-class carriers. The fault curtailed flight operations on the ship for several days while the crew and contractors tried to identify the issue. Prior to the latest EMALS issue, the Advanced Weapons Elevators – which are designed to reduce the time it takes to get bombs armed and to the flight deck for mounting on aircraft – became the center of a firestorm and contributed to former Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer’s firing last year. In January 2019, Spencer announced he’d told the President that if the weapons elevators aren’t functioning by mid-summer, then he should fire him. But within months Spencer had to admit that the

weapons elevators would not be finished until the end of 2021 or maybe 2022, which he blamed on Huntington Ingalls Industries for not communicating adequately.

Making the Ford deployment ready was a focus of former acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly, who likened the ship to an albatross around the Navy's neck. "The Ford is something the president cares a lot about, it's something he talks a lot about, and I think his concerns are justified," Modly said. "It's very, very expensive, and it needs to work. "And there is a trail of tears that explains why we are where we are, but right now we need to fix that ship and make sure it works. There is nothing worse than having a ship like that, our most expensive asset, being out there as a metaphor for why the Navy can't do anything right."