

A new and very different USS Oregon joins the U.S. Navy

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

A new USS Oregon officially joined the U.S. Navy on Saturday morning during commissioning ceremonies at Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut.

The Navy put the ceremonial commissioning of ships on hold for two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic and only recently resumed the tradition.

The nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine will be the first U.S. Navy ship to carry the state's name since 1893, when the battleship USS Oregon was launched.

The Virginia-class submarine was built at an estimated price tag of just under \$3 billion by Groton-based General Dynamics Electric Boat Co. After its launch and sea trials, the commissioning marks the official beginning of its U.S. Navy service.

Each Virginia-class submarine has had an official sponsor, a woman with a connection to the vessel's namesake state. Their role is to bring good luck to the submarine and crew, with duties including breaking a bottle of champagne over the hull of the submarine and giving the first order after a commissioning.

While still in the White House, first lady Laura Bush sponsored the USS Texas and first lady Michelle Obama carried the role for the USS Illinois.

In April, first lady Jill Biden was the sponsor of the USS Delaware, also a Virginia-class submarine.

During a commissioning commemoration, she called out "Officers and crew of the USS Delaware, man our ship and bring her to life." The crew responded, "Aye aye, ma'am" and swiftly boarded in dress uniform.

The sponsor of the commissioning of the USS Oregon is Dana Richardson of Corvallis, the wife of former



John Narewski/U.S. Navy Provided Photo

The USS Oregon pulls into Submarine Base New London in Groton, Connecticut on March 1, 2022 for the first time. The submarine was delivered to the U.S. Navy on Saturday, Feb. 26.

Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson.

Built to kill nuclear missile subs

The USS Oregon commissioning will be the first traditional ceremony since 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States. Two Virginia-class submarines — the USS Delaware and USS Vermont — were commissioned to join the Navy and public commemorations occurred later.

The USS Oregon will soon take to sea to hunt — and if necessary, kill — Russian and Chinese "boomers," the nickname for all ballistic missile submarines that can launch nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. The Russians' main missile submarine, the Borei-class, carries 16 RSM-56 Bulava nuclear ballistic missiles.

The USS Oregon has four torpedo tubes to fire Mk-48 torpedoes that move at 50 mph. Unlike older torpedoes that exploded when the tip struck a submarine or ship, the Mk-48 has advanced proximity fuses to detonate with maximum

explosive force.

When fired at surface ships, the Mk-48 torpedo dives under the hull and detonates at the keel, the blast breaking the back of the ship.

The USS Oregon has a quiver of variety when it comes to weaponry. It can fire surface-skimming Harpoon anti-ship missiles, a weapon that is now reaching Ukrainian coastal defense troops fighting Russia's attempt to bottle up the port of Odessa.

The submarine also is equipped with BGM-109 Tomahawk cruise missiles that can reach targets on land up to 1,500 miles away. It can carry conventional and nuclear warheads.

The USS Oregon is also designed to house and quietly deploy Navy SEAL commando teams on covert operations.

The submarine will move through the water powered by pump-jet propulsion instead of traditional screws with blades — reducing the amount of bubbles and noise — called cavitation — that can be heard on sonar.

The submarine's S9G nuclear reactor gives the USS Oregon a top speed of 25 knots submerged. Its reactor will run for about 30 years without any additional fuel. The nuclear power gives the submarine virtually unlimited range and the ability to stay submerged for up to three months.

The advanced systems of the submarine also cut the size of crew needed at sea. The submarine has 15 officers and 120 crew. The battleship could operate with 600 officers and crew.

The Navy has commissioned 19 Virginia-class submarines — the USS Oregon is the 20th. Eight more are under construction, including what would become the USS Idaho.

Vice Admiral Michael J. Connor told Congress in 2015 that the USS Oregon and its sister boats were "game-changers" in maintaining a balance of power with Russia and China.

"The undersea arena is the most opaque of all war-fighting domains," Connor said. "It is easier to track a small object in space than it

is to track a large submarine, with tremendous firepower, under the water."

The commissioning of the USS Oregon this weekend ends a long gap in U.S. Navy history without a ship named for the state.

USS Oregon — pride of the fleet, then obsolete

The first USS Oregon was a brigantine purchased in 1842 from a private owner to be used as an exploring ship until 1849.

The Confederacy seized a privately-owned steam-wheeler mail boat during the Civil War and converted it into blockade runner christened CSS Oregon. It was scuttled and burned by its crew as Union forces closed in on New Orleans in April 1862.

By 1889, the Navy had adopted a tradition of naming battleships after states.

In 1893, the USS Oregon was launched at a cost \$4 million — about \$115 million in today's dollars. The

nation's third battleship, it was 351 feet long — 26 feet shorter than the USS Oregon submarine. It was the first American warship named for the 33rd state.

More than 20,000 people came to the Union Iron Works shipyard on Mare Island to watch the ship slide into San Francisco Bay.

"The Oregon In Her Element" said a wire report headline in the New York Times.

The battleship's four coal-fired boilers could push the ship to a top speed of 15 knots with a range of 4,900 nautical miles before requiring refueling. It was nicknamed "Bulldog of the Navy" for the way its bow thrashed through open seas.

In 1898, the USS Oregon made headlines by steaming more than 15,700 miles from San Francisco, around South America's Cape Horn, to Florida — arriving 66 days after it left, just as the Spanish-American War broke out.

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