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Letter: Honor the Greatest Generation by properly funding current military needs

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This week we honor the Greatest Generation's Greatest Day. Seventy years ago, on Aug. 14, 1945, World War II came to an end. The Greatest Generation is called that thanks to all they did to ensure we have a safe future. Their sacrifices, commitment to service, and devotion to the service men and women that served continue to inspire us all.

World War II brought our nation together in shared sacrifice. In addition to the young men and women who gave their blood and their lives to defend the United States, we also had the support of our national leadership and our citizens. We worked together to ensure those on the front lines had everything they needed. The American people supported rations, volunteered, and gave their all to support their families, friends, and neighbors fighting abroad.

The Spirit of '45 Day seeks to "preserve the legacy of the men and women of the Greatest Generation so that their example of personal courage, shared sacrifice, 'can-do' attitude and service to community can inspire Americans to come together to meet historic challenges our era." Today, that call to emulate the Greatest Generation is here.

Our country faces the most unpredictable set of threats in recent memory. There is an increasingly aggressive Russia acting out a Cold War-era playbook, a rising China expanding its sphere of influence over the South China Sea, a new terrorist organization more unpredictable than Al Qaeda, not to mention unpredictable humanitarian crises brought on by disease and other natural causes.

The unpredictable nature of the threats we face means our military, and particularly our away team of the Navy-Marine Corps, must be flexible and ready to deter and defeat any threat our nation must face. When a crisis arises, the first thing the Combatant Commander looks for is the carriers and the Marines: it was aircraft from a U.S. Navy carrier that responded to ISIS terrorists in Iraq. For the first 54 days — the time it took other services to secure land-basing rights — U.S. aircraft carriers were the only service striking ISIS. The Navy-Marine Corps must be forward deployed, and ready to surge. However, the Navy-Marine Corps is overextended and underfunded. They consistently go on deployments that can last weeks and months longer than expected, due to changing conditions on the ground.

The demand on the Navy-Marine Corps team is high and continues to grow. Yet the supply of ships and crews is constrained by the size of the force, the condition of its ships and aircraft, and the proficiency of its Sailors and Marines. Today's demand exceeds supply: the U.S. Navy simply does not have enough Sailors, Marines, aircraft, ships, and weapons for the missions necessary to protect and sustain our national defense, our leadership in the world, the strength of our economy and the health of the global economy.

In this era of sequestration, budget cuts, and austerity, the Navy-Marine Corps team is significantly underfunded. Shipbuilding is underfunded by an average of \$5 billion, according to the Congressional Budget Office. The Navy is relying on \$4 billion in temporary war funding to maintain the fleet and keep it at sea. More than 4,000 weapons were cut from the Navy-Marine Corps inventory due to sequestration and budget caps over the last three years. Carriers deploy "heel to toe," or one after another leaving no flexibility in the scheduling of training and maintenance. Any delay throws off the schedule and results in gaps; gaps which present opportunities to those who would do us and our allies harm.

The Chief of Naval Operations recently testified the Navy needs 36 more fighters than it can afford. Nineteen percent of Marine Corps aircraft are down for repairs. Backlogged maintenance on F-18s leave the fleet short 104 aircraft, the same as an entire Carrier Air Wing. The 2011 shutdown, hiring freeze, and sequestration have had a devastating impact: it will take the Marine Corps until 2018 to recover its aviation readiness.

Lack of funding has resulted in hiring and overtime freezes for government shipyard and aviation depot maintenance workers, and has created a shortage of ships and aircraft. The U.S. Navy usually has three aircraft carriers and strike groups ready to deploy in a crisis; today, it has only one due to backlogs at aircraft and ship maintenance depots.

Our leadership does a disservice to the Spirit of '45. Given this time of global unrest, we must pull together like the Greatest Generation did and demand better resources for our Navy-Marine Corps team.

They deserve it.

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Gulf Breeze

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