The commanding officer of the U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) and the executive director of the U.S. Military Sealift Command (MSC), respectively, recently offered strong words of support for civilian mariners and also provided timely updates about their agencies.

Gen. Paul Selva of USTRANSCOM and John Thackrah of MSC addressed the executive board of the Maritime Trades Department (MTD) Feb. 19 in Atlanta. The MTD, a constitutionally mandated department of the AFL-CIO, is composed of 21 international unions (including the SIU) and 21 port maritime councils in the United States and Canada representing nearly 5 million working men and women. SIU President Michael Sacco also serves as president of the MTD.

Selva described Sacco as “a counselor, a teacher and a friend – a person who isn’t bashful about making your case to our nation’s leaders. He has served you well.”

The general said he appreciated the chance to discuss the JHSV Awards Program to those CIVMARS who have been working to make the JHSV initiative a successful, safe and productive effort.

Currently, four JHSV vessels operate in MSC’s fleet: the USNS Spearhead, Choctaw County, Millinocket and Fall River. Twenty-two unlicensed and licensed crew members are slated to sail aboard each vessel. It is anticipated that there will be a total of 11 ships in this class -- all to be crewed by MSC CIVMARS.

For more information about the award and incentive program, contact your union representative, or send an e-mail to siufedmariner@seafarers.org.
Inquiring Mariner

This quarter’s question was answered by SIU Government Services Division members at the CSU in Norfolk, Virginia, in mid-January.

Question: What is the favorite port you have visited?

Candace Poole
I loved Panama! The climate, the scenery. Just a great place to visit.

Curt Hallam
Sasebo, Japan. I love the culture of the Japanese people.

Robert Weaver
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Beautiful place and great food.

Corey Merchant
Bahrain is the nicest place I’ve visited. Just enjoyed being there.

Olgivio Johnston
I loved Bahrain. The people are really friendly and the atmosphere is very nice.

Christopher Owens
Tehuantepec was my favorite. It’s a little different, but I always have a great time there.

Reuben Lewis
Sheik Zayed in Abu Dhabi.

Cassius Jenkins
I loved Tanzania. It’s such a beautiful, I love visiting there.

SIU Asst. VP Chet Wheeler (left) is pictured with MSC Executive Director John Thackrah.

However, his presentation also pointed out the decline in the privately owned U.S.-flag fleet since the end of World War II. Along with lamenting that development, he expressed a desire for additional U.S. shipyards. “I’m glad to have the ones that we have; there’s just not enough,” Thackrah stated. Specifically, he said there aren’t enough yards for repairs of military ships, especially in times of crisis. Thackrah concluded his remarks by applauding the U.S. Merchant Marine. “Mariners are precious to us,” he said. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s a contract-operated ship or a CIV-MAR-operated ship. I need to keep those people safe.”

He described mariners as the “backbone of our sealift enterprise. In times of crisis, our nation calls upon maritime labor unions to crew our surge sealift and MARAD Ready Reserve Forces…We are incredibly proud to serve side-by-side with the men and women that you represent that work for us at Military Sealift Command that go to sea every day.”
Understanding Your Benefits And How to Secure Them

You’re Thinking of Retiring – Things to Consider

Retiring Abroad

Many Federal Mariners spend a good part of their lives travelling across the world. Exposure to different ways of life, making enduring connections with friends abroad, maintaining a second home in another country and understanding the expenses of growing older in the U.S. have prompted many mariners to consider retiring abroad.

In 2013 approximately 373,000 retired Americans lived outside the U.S. Most Americans who retire outside the U.S. retire to Canada. Other large groups of retirees find themselves in Japan, Mexico, Germany, Greece, Poland, Italy, Israel and the Philippines.

But if you are not a citizen of the country you may choose to live in, what should you consider before making the move? For starters, it’s important to be aware of taxes. Even if you live abroad you will probably pay taxes as a result of the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act. The Act allows the IRS to monitor taxpayers via their tax payments and finances. The U.S. has many different tax treaties which spell out how government will be collecting more taxes and every government has different rules to avoid double taxation.

To avoid problems or snafus which may lead to an audit, finding a tax professional with international experience is important. Generally mariners working abroad do not automatically mean an expatriate experience and consulting tax preparers in the U.S. can be helpful. AARP and the group American Citizens Abroad offer helpful information.

Steps to Take on the Road to Retirement – Preparation is Essential

Mariners receive many questions about retirement requirements and processes. Over the next year the SIU anticipates the development of comprehensive retirement information for members of the SIU Government Services Unit. The SIU believes that this will be a helpful service as federal agency human resources and benefits offices are scaled back because of budgetary issues.

Federal employees have many benefit options. Retirement is a big step for those in federal service. It needs to be a complicated process and requires lots of lead time to fully prepare. Understanding how to make the most of your benefits by carefully reviewing your work history, filing the correct forms and ensuring you know your TSP withdrawal options can mean the difference between a comfortable or difficult retirement. Here are some things to consider:

- **TSP Options**: Federal mariners should review withdrawal options at least six months to a year before you retire. One option is to leave your money in the TSP and re-allocate then to other TSP funds. However, employees may also have the option to receive annuities, transfer your money out of the TSP into a rollover retirement account, receive a lump sum payment or take several types of partial withdrawals. These choices require careful review for financial planning and tax purposes.

- **Life and Health Insurance Options**: You are probably eligible to take your life and health insurance with you when you retire from federal service. It’s important to understand how these benefits will fit into your family’s coverage and whether it is worth carrying these benefits after you leave work. Also important to know are the correct forms that will ensure continuation of coverage should you determine to carry these benefits into retirement.

Determining Whether You Need Civilian Dependants

As a retired federal employee or if you were a temporary employee for a period where nor retirement deductions were withheld, the Federal Mariner included a column about this important issue in the January-March 2014 issue, available in the CIVMAR News section of the SIU website. You can help yourself determine whether a deposit/ re-deposit format makes sense by calculating how much the deposit would be versus how much more monetary benefit you would otherwise get during your retiree years. Analysis can be done quickly, especially if you need to contact Office of Personnel Management (OPM) at OPM.gov to look up your deposit.

These are just a few of the issues federal mariners will need to consider. Research your options, and consider speaking with a professional who you trust will give you unbiased and fully informed advice on an issue which will have an important impact on your life after work.

SIU CIVMARS in Action

This photo from Electrician Paul Barbadiello shows crew members aboard the USNS Wally Schirra, a Military Sealift Command vessel which is part of the agency’s fleet of 14 dry cargo/ammunitions ships (abbreviated as T-AKE). Through underway replenishments, the Schirra and its sister ships deliver various cargoes to other vessels at sea.

SIU Government Services Mariners Honored at Annual AOTOS Dinner

Members serving aboard the USNS Richard B. Ebyrd during a daring rescue at sea were honored at the United Seamen’s Service 2014 Admiral of the Ocean Sea (AOTOS) dinner, held in New York City on Nov. 7, 2014. For their heroism and devotion to duty, the mariners of the Byrd were presented with the AOTOS Mariners’ Plaque.

On July 28 last year, the crew of the Byrd rescued nine mariners whose Yemeni-flagged cargo ship (the Al Saad-1) had lost power and was adrift in the Gulf of Oman. With the Al Saad-1 taking on water, the foreign mariners abandoned ship and tried to reach the Ebyrd but not before sending a call for help.

The Byrd was the first ship to respond to the distress signal and rescued the Yemeni sailors around 9 a.m. local time. They were subsequently evaluated by the Byrd’s medical staff, and no injuries were reported. One of the Byrd’s sister ships, the Seafarers-crewed USNS Amelia Earhart, then picked up the Al Saad-1 crew and transported them back to Yemen.

Afterwards, the Commander of the Navy’s 5th fleet communicated to the USNS Richard B. Ebyrd his admiration for expertly rendered assistance to MV Al Saad-1. “Your efforts exemplify the U.S. Navy’s commitment to the safety of all mariners,” he wrote. “You can be justifiably proud of your efforts andtrajectory.

The AOTOS gathering is considered one of the U.S. maritime industry’s premier events. Typically, no more than a few vessels and crews are honored each year.

SIU Government Services Division Representative Spotlight: Sam Spain

Sam Spain is the SIU Government Services Division representative in Norfolk, Virginia. It may be an understatement to say he comes from a seafaring family – Sam has an uncle, brother and two nephews who sail as U.S. Merchant Mariners, and he had a grandfather who retired from the industry.

In 2002 Sam joined the SIU in Norfolk and sailed for a dozen years as a member of the steward department. He began as a steward assistant aboard the Cape Islands and finished as the chief steward on the Steven L. Bennett. Sam was a frequent upgrader at the SIU-affiliated Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education, located in Pinex Point, Maryland.

Sam came ashore as a patroline in Norfolk in 2002. His experience living and working in Norfolk gives him firsthand knowledge and an excellent understanding of the pressures and burdens of Federal Mariners working on vessels serving the Navy fleets. The Seafarers hiring hall location, three blocks from NOAA, allows Sam to be available to that Norfolk NOAA unit at a moment’s notice. Sam began working in the Government Services Division in 2014. Since starting his work with the Government Services unit, Sam has represented CIVMARS in disciplinary actions. He has negotiated MOUs and various policies and procedures impacting MSC and NOAA Federal Mariners. Sam has also attended Labor-Management and Quality Assurance meetings, covering a wide range of issues for the ACOE mariners. Sam is enjoying meeting the SIU Government Services Federal Mariners and looks forward to continuing to work with this unit.

Submissions Wanted

Attention all ACOE, NOAA, SBIBF-MARAD and MSC federal mariners: Your work on behalf of our government is vital. Your union appreciates all you do in your workplace and on behalf of our nation. We want your voices to be heard! We want to make sure we are writing about issues and topics that are of importance to all our Government Services units. Please send your comments, pictures and requests for coverage to siufedmariner@seafarers.org.

We will do our best to print your photos and publish articles based on your requests. Be active. Stay involved. Support the Federal Mariner and your union!
The following summaries touch on a few important subjects the SIU is monitoring and addressing on behalf of the membership:

**Phased Retirement:** An initiative of the Obama Administration, phased retirement is intended to allow employees to transition into retirement by continuing to work on a part-time basis. Federal employees will be eligible for a portion of their retirement annuity for the time they are not working. The goal is to enhance mentoring and training for younger employees who will be following those experienced workers as they begin to finish their federal government careers. There has always been informal mentoring between more experienced unlicensed crew and newer CIVMARS coming up the ranks.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has reviewed the possibility of different groups of workers participating in the phased retirement program. The SIU has communicated to the Military Sealift Command (MSC) that the union sees several benefits in allowing CIVMARS to participate in a phased retirement program. The union will continue advocating for participation.

In fact, at the most recent Labor-Management Forum, SIU representatives asked MSC leaders to determine whether OPM and the Department of Defense will commit to applying the phased retirement program to unlicensed CIVMARS. The union believes this will help improve manning issues, overdue relief concerns and improvement of CIVMARS to participate in a phased retirement program, send them to siufedmariner@seafarers.org

**Workplace Flexibilities:**

In fact, at the most recent Labor-Management Forum, MSC leaders to determine whether OPM and the Department of Defense will commit to applying the phased retirement program to unlicensed CIVMARS. The union believes this will help improve manning issues, overdue relief concerns and help train and support the next generation of CIVMARS.

As a Veteran, you’ve served our country, now we want to serve you by offering a $1,000 grant when you purchase a home through the Union Plus Mortgage program.

**Make your dream of home ownership a reality!** The $1,000 Union Plus Mortgage Veterans Grant makes home ownership more affordable for veterans by helping with expenses for your newly purchased home.

**New Leave Policies for Childbirth, Adoption and Foster Care:**

President Obama, in an effort to support, recruit and retain federal workers, issued a memorandum authorizing agencies to take up to six weeks of paid leave to care for a newborn child, to handle adoption proceedings, for the placement of a foster child and other sick-leave eligible uses. In accordance with the January 15, 2015 memorandum, OPM and federal agencies must now review existing policies to determine how the new policy will be incorporated.

Additionally, in a separate memo titled Enhancing Workplace Flexibilities and dated June 23, 2014, President Obama called for the update and review of existing agency leave policies to ensure that employees were educated about those guidelines and, where possible, to expand availability of workplace flexibilities.

The SIU has notified MSC of the agency’s obligation to review new types of advanced leave and we have received a commitment from MSC that it will do so. The SIU will be working with MSC, NOAA, ACOE and MARAD - SRBF representatives this quarter, to ensure that federal mariners receive all the benefits to which they are entitled. Each year SIU representatives help many federal mariners who have given birth, who are sick, or who care for a sick family member navigate their way through the complex puzzle of federal leave policies. We will continue to follow this issue closely to ensure that MSC, NOAA, ACOE and MARAD - SRBF make this benefit available to all eligible employees.

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