

ON A MISSION OF SUPPORT

THE MINNESOTA NAVY LEAGUE COUNCIL EDUCATES THE PUBLIC ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SEA SERVICES TO OUR NATION'S DEFENSE AND SUPPORTS SEA SERVICES PERSONNEL AND FAMILIES

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

On May 21, the cool, overcast weather couldn't dampen the excitement of dignitaries and spectators who gathered for the commissioning of the U.S. Navy's combat ship, the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul, along Duluth's waterfront. It was a historic day marking the first time that a U.S. Navy warship was commissioned in the state of Minnesota.

This celebratory event was proposed, coordinated and hosted by the Minnesota Navy League Council

(MNLC), which is a Council of the Navy League of the United States – and it was no small feat. More about the commissioning appears later in this article. But first, MNLC officials explain what MNLC does and why they're so proud of it. Given all that it does, this nonprofit organization has much to be proud of.

A RICH HISTORY

The Navy League of the United States was founded in 1902, with the backing of President Theodore Roosevelt,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VICE PRESIDENT-COMMUNICATIONS PNT DOLAN, MINNESOTA NAVY LEAGUE COUNCIL.



Leading the delegation from Washington, D.C. for the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul commissioning was Under Secretary of the Navy Eric Raven. Rear Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic, and other members of the Naval Surface Force based at Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville, Florida, were in attendance as well as Vice Adm. Scott Conn, deputy chief of naval operations for warfighting requirements and capabilities, and Jon Rambeau, vice president and general manager of Lockheed Martin Integrated Warfare Systems and Sensors. State and local officials also attended.



as an educational and advocacy organization supporting America's sea services – Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and U.S.-flag Merchant Marine. As a nonprofit, the Navy League of the United States, as its website explains, "provides a powerful voice to educate the public and Congress on the importance of our sea services to our nation's defense, well-being and economic prosperity. The Navy League provides support to our sea services personnel and their families and youth programs such as the Naval Sea Cadet Corps., Junior ROTC and Young Marines, that expose young people to the values of our sea services."



"We think of it as developing a pipeline of talent. You've got to build talent, and it takes time to do that."

– PRESIDENT BILL JAMES

There are Navy League councils in nearly every state. Minnesota became only the third state to have active branches of the Navy League when 10 cities (Albert Lea, Austin, Duluth, Faribault, Mankato, Rochester, St. Cloud, St. Paul and Winona) were granted branch status in February 1945. As the initial interest waned, participation declined, so that by the mid-1950s, the Navy League was principally represented in Minnesota by the Twin Cities Council.

In recent years, that name was changed to the Minnesota Navy League Council to be more inclusive of the



From left: Duluth Mayor Emily Larson, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, Rear Adm. Casey J. Moton, Program Executive Officer Unmanned and Surface Combatants.

she retired in May 2021 after serving 31 years in the Department of Defense under six defense secretaries. Greene was a strong advocate of having the commissioning held in Duluth and also attended the event.

A vessel commissioning is often mistaken for the christening, but they serve entirely different purposes. A vessel is christened by a ship's sponsor at a vessel launching ceremony. This occasion marks the water birth of the vessel, but occurs months before the fit-out of the vessel is complete and all the sea trials and equipment checks have been completed. When the vessel is manned with a crew and assigned to a port for active duty, that is when the vessel is commissioned.

Leading the delegation from Washington, D.C. for the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul commissioning was Under Secretary of the Navy Eric Raven. Rear Adm. Brendan McLane, who is the commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic, and other members of the Naval Surface Force based at Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville, Florida,

were in attendance. Vice Adm. Scott Conn, deputy chief of naval operations for warfighting requirements and capabilities, also attended. And so did Jon Rambeau, vice president and general manager of Lockheed Martin Integrated Warfare Systems and Sensors.

Leading the delegation from Washington, D.C. for the USS Minneapolis-St. Paul commissioning was Under Secretary of the Navy Eric Raven.

In addition to representatives of the Navy's senior leadership, state and regional officials attending included U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, U.S. Rep. Pete Stauber, Gov. Tim Walz, Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Duluth Mayor Emily Larson and Superior Mayor Jim Paine.



From left: Senior Chief Edward Pare, Gov. Tim Walz, retired Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy Jodi Greene, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum. McCollum was the principal speaker at the commissioning.



Cmdr. Alfonza White of the USS Minneapolis Saint-Paul with Gov. Tim Walz.

entire state. The MNLC has about 185 members, a primarily volunteer cadre. Unlike many military services organizations, one does not have to be a present or past member of any branch of the military to become a member. But naturally, many members do have a military background.

"You'd be surprised at the number of Navy people who actually retired here in the state of Minnesota," said MNLC Vice-President Membership Bob Dolan, who retired after a proud, three-decade naval career. "There are a lot of people who have been part of the Navy in one way, shape or form who have migrated to Minnesota, even though we don't have [direct] access to one of the major oceans."



The ongoing mission of the MNLC is to support personnel. For example, post-commissioning, the MNLC has adopted the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul as one of the ships it actively supports. And the Council provides a wealth of other support, too.

"We support the three Sea Cadet units in the state. We support three Junior ROTC units and the University of Minnesota ROTC program – and then the active duty units in the state, the Naval Talent Acquisition Group, and the Naval Operational Support Center as well as supporting the ships USS Minnesota – and now USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul – and the Coast Guard cutter in Duluth, the Spar," Vice President of Communications Pat Dolan explained.



"There are a lot of people who have been part of the Navy in one way, shape or form who have migrated to Minnesota."

– VICE-PRESIDENT MEMBERSHIP BOB DOLAN

Bob Dolan and Pat Dolan, a married couple, both worked at the Naval Air Systems Command and later, the Naval Sea Systems Command in Washington, D.C. for many years. That experience serves Pat Dolan well, because as MNLC's vice president-communications, she's got her hands full. She's in charge of the website, a quarterly newsletter and any communications with the media, including issuing media advisories regarding events hosted by MNLC and writing articles afterwards to push out to publications and news outlets. In her brief time with MNLC, Dolan has tied together all of the groups affiliated with the Minnesota Navy League Council.

"Through the newsletter, I feel like I have facilitated that communication, because in a lot of instances, these



organizations didn't know the others existed," she explained. Through the newsletter, for example, one of our Sea Cadet units has talked about training that they've been doing. The University of Minnesota ROTC became interested in that, and they've been partnering more with the Sea Cadets to maximize their own training opportunities and to help those cadets."

KNOCKING IT OUT OF THE PARK IN 2022

When it comes to promoting the sea services through special events, the MNLC has really knocked the ball out of the park in 2022.

In March, it hosted the African American Submarine Experience, bringing five top Black submariners to this event in Minneapolis to talk about and share their histories, and how those experiences paved the way toward a more inclusive Navy and submarine force. These distinguished leaders included men and women whose service comprises more than 70 years – and represents multiple generations – in conflicts in the Middle East, Korea, Vietnam and during the Cold War.

"We are the youth organization of the Navy."

– RETIRED LT. COL. BARNEY UHLIG,
SEA CADETS AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

Two months later, on the release date of the "Top Gun: Behind the Curtain" movie, MNLC Director at Large Tom Wiesen partnered with the University of Minnesota Naval ROTC to host an event providing an opportunity to see some special aircraft at the Minneapolis-St. Paul Air Reserve Station. Two of them – an F/A-18F Super Hornet, as seen in the movie, and an EA-18G Growler – arrived from the Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX-9) Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, located about 150 miles north of Los Angeles.

And these marquee events were held in addition to the May commissioning event for the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul in Duluth. The MNLC is clearly very good at coordinating logistics and myriad details.

SEA CADETS AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

"We are the youth organization of the Navy," said retired Lt. Col. Barney Uhlig, the affable director at large of MNLC's Sea Cadets and Youth Programs. Sponsored by the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps is supported by the U.S. Coast Guard and has 400 units across the country as well as in Puerto Rico and Guam. Commanding Officer Dirk Holman of the U.S. Sea Cadets Twin Cities Squadron was honored to have his Squadron participate in the presentation of the colors at the the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul commissioning in Duluth.

The United States Naval Sea Cadet Corps program was chartered in 1962 under Title 36 of the United States Code as a nonprofit youth organization with an emphasis



towards the sea-going services of the United States. It was modeled after the British Sea Cadets program developed for orphans of the Crimean War, and in 1970, the charter was amended to include female cadets.

In Minnesota, Uhlig explained, the Sea Cadet program is for youth ages 13 to 18 (or the end of high school), and there is a League Cadet program for youth ages 10 to 12. As part of their enrollment, cadets attend an abbreviated Navy "boot camp" for 10 days and are required to maintain a B or above grade point average in school.

SUPPORTING YOUTH THROUGH EDUCATION

The MNLC understands the value of an education as well as the expense it takes to obtain a degree. For that reason, and in honor of the 2013 commissioning of the USS Minnesota, it established a scholarship with the University of Minnesota Foundation on behalf of the USS Minnesota.

MNLC Vice Chair-Events Brian Skon proudly signed the contract. "We have developed criteria, so that if a crew member – or a family member of a crew member – comes to the University of Minnesota for whatever reason as a student, they can apply and receive a grant from that scholarship," he said. Skon also noted they are looking to amend the grant to include students in the Naval ROTC program to assist with room and board.

Another of the MNLC's anchoring tenets is to support sea services personnel and their families with a variety of youth programs – and MNLC President



Bill James is a particularly strong advocate of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education in relation to the U.S. Navy.

"Pre-COVID, we partnered with the Minneapolis School District to do STEM outreach," said James. "They had a STEM conference that the Minneapolis School District would host, and we were a participant in that. It was a one-day event at the Minneapolis Convention Center. They would bring in kind of a multitude of eighth-graders to introduce them to lots of different organizations, corporations and non-profits that were involved with directly – or touched on – science, technology, engineering and math initiatives. We were approached by the Minneapolis School District, their STEM education department, to bring the Navy into that."



"We have developed criteria, so that ... they can apply and receive a grant from that scholarship."

– VICE CHAIR-EVENTS BRIAN SKON

He added that the Navy, as well as all of the military branches, are very technically driven organizations. James explained that the STEM conference exposes youth at an early age to opportunities of which they may avail themselves at the trade level, if they're not necessarily going to pursue a college education, or at the college level – meaning Navy ROTC programs across a multitude of accredited colleges like the University of Minnesota, for example, as well as the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

"We think of it as developing a pipeline of talent," said James. "You've got to build talent, and it takes time to do that – talent meaning kids that are moving up through their educational development, going from middle school to high school and ultimately into a trade or a college environment."

"There are a lot of jobs within the federal government that are engineering and science related," said Bob Dolan. "The people who run the weapon system programs at that organization – a lot of them are engineers. And at some of our weapons stations across the country, they need engineers, they need scientists – they need the type of people that these STEM activities attract."

"That's why this is one of the programs that the Navy League likes to focus on," he added, "in order to provide a pipeline into not only the naval service itself, but also the Department of the Navy. They need these types of people to be part of their organizations."



From left: Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, Cmdr. Alfonza White, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, Duluth Mayor Emily Larson.

YEARS IN THE MAKING: THE COMMISSIONING IN DULUTH

"It was years in the making – truthfully, years in the making, because once we knew that the port had been identified, there was a lot of planning that went on behind the scenes for years," said Pat Dolan of the commissioning of the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul in Duluth. "Everything – from what pier the ship was going to be at to what they needed when they got there in terms of services, food, fuel, dry cleaning – all of those things were happening behind the scenes that the general public didn't see."



"We had such tremendous support from the city, from the fire department, the Coast Guard unit up there, the Duluth Seaway Port Authority."

– VICE PRESIDENT COMMUNICATIONS PAT DOLAN

She also said the MNLC was grateful for the support it received from the Duluth community in general and others in particular. "We had such tremendous support from the city, from the fire department, the Coast Guard unit

up there, the Duluth Seaway Port Authority," said Dolan. "I can't tell you how much support we got from them for this event."

The USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul was built at the Finncantieri Marinette Marine Yard in Marinette, Wisconsin. This vessel is part of a new class of small, highly versatile surface warships designed to operate in near-shore environments (called "littoral" environments) by the U.S. Navy. In 2002, the initial contract for two monohull vessels was awarded to Lockheed Martin. The Minneapolis-Saint Paul is the 11th "Freedom" class vessel using the Lockheed Martin design.

The Minneapolis-Saint Paul carries a crew of nine officers and 41 enlisted crew. The steel-hulled vessel is 388 feet long with a maximum width of 58 feet. The upper structure is made of aluminum and is designed to be readily reconfigured to engage in combat scenarios. And it's the second vessel to carry this name. The first Minneapolis-Saint Paul (SSN 708) was a Los Angeles class, nuclear-powered, fast attack submarine in service to our nation from 1984 to 2008.

Prior to its launching in Marinette, it was christened by the ship's sponsor: retired Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy Jodi Greene. A native of Northfield, Minnesota,



The Minnesota Navy League Council commissioned this painting of the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul by renowned Duluth artist John Salminen. The painting was presented to vessel officials on May 20, the day before the commissioning event.

IMAGE USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MINNESOTA NAVY LEAGUE COUNCIL.



Gov. Tim Walz addresses the crowd at the USS Minneapolis Saint-Paul commissioning. In addition to representatives of the Navy's senior leadership, many state and regional officials attended the event.



RESCUING A CIVILIAN ON THE WAY HOME

After leaving Duluth, the USS Minneapolis-Saint Paul was on the way to its home port in Mayport, Florida, through the St. Lawrence River on June 9 when it responded to a distress signal from a civilian vessel. The small craft had lost power near Cat Island Shoal in St. Lawrence County, New York, and was taking on water. The Minneapolis-Saint Paul diverted from course, got into position to launch its rigid-hull inflatable boat and rescued the person in peril.

When news of the story reached the MNLC, Bill James was touched.

"When you save a human life, that's really important," he said. "You've got this [approximately] 400-foot ship just taking care of somebody on a pleasure craft that was having a bad day. But that's just what they do – you know, it's just part of the work. That, for me, was kind of a prideful moment."

To learn more about the Minnesota Navy League Council, visit the website at www.navyleaguemn.org.

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior, Wisconsin.