

Writing Better Award Recommendations – What Sets a Zumwalt Award Winner Apart

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Each January, the Surface Navy Association (SNA) presents the Admiral Zumwalt Award for Visionary Leadership to two Surface Warriors. We, the authors, have the privilege of serving on the selection committee for that award. Over our time on the selection committee, we have seen persuasive inputs and not-so-persuasive inputs. We offer the following techniques for writing effective award nominations and endorsements for your consideration.

Admiral Elmo Zumwalt is among the most charismatic and inspirational leaders the United States Navy has ever seen. He led the Navy as Chief of Naval Operations during tumultuous times. He is known for making bold decisions, often against conventional wisdom. He is also the namesake of a class of modern surface combatants.

The Surface Navy Association honors Admirals Zumwalt's legacy by naming one of its most prestigious leadership awards after him. Reflecting on the accomplishments of its namesake, this award recognizes outstanding and inspirational leaders in the Surface Warfare community. As such, the most outstanding and inspirational surface warriors must be nominated for these awards.

The Admiral Zumwalt Award for Visionary Leadership is not just about leadership; it's about, as its name indicates, *visionary* leadership. It honors the officer and enlisted sailor who most clearly embody the extraordinary qualities, vision, and incisiveness of the 19th Chief of Naval Operations. Presented to active-duty Navy members in pay grades E-3 through O-4, awardees best exemplify the ideals of Admiral Zumwalt and demonstrate dynamic leadership, operational excellence, unselfish dedication to duty, visionary zeal, and exemplary care for Sailors under their purview. In keeping with Admiral Zumwalt's penchant for seeking deck plate input, candidates must be nominated in writing by an active-duty member equal or junior to them in rank. Nominations should highlight professional performance and positive leadership qualities and provide examples of *visionary* actions. In particular, the nomination should include examples of how the individual improved the effectiveness of the organization and the welfare of its people. The nomination should give a clear sense of the nominee's imaginative talent, which has benefited the command through outstanding planning and execution. A commanding officer's endorsement is required to accompany the nomination.

With those technical details out of the way, let's discuss what sets this award apart from your standard end-of-tour award. This award recognizes excellence and standout performance above and beyond that expected of all Sailors. Nominations must reflect the actions and vision exhibited by candidates for the award. Unlike the process used for end-of-tour awards, the Surface Navy Association Awards Committee compares the awardees to one another relative to the award criteria. All the candidates the committee reviews are excellent surface warriors, or they wouldn't be nominated.

So, what do we, the authors, look for as we read and score Zumwalt award inputs? Looking through the award's criteria lens, we note reported examples of dynamic leadership, operational excellence, unselfish dedication to duty, visionary zeal, and exemplary care for



Surface Navy Association's 36th National Symposium - Presentation of the Admiral Zumwalt Award for Visionary Leadership. Pictured left to right: Mouzetta Zumwalt-Weathers, OS1(SW) RICHARD GOOSSEN, USN, Force Master Chief (SW/AW) Larry Lynch, SURFPAC

Sailors. Then, we examine these examples to see if they describe performance beyond the level expected of those in the same billet elsewhere. That is to say, we are looking for leaders who perform above the level of their Standard Organization and Regulations Manual job description.

Let us offer an example of what not to do, taken from recent Admiral Zumwalt Award recommendations, followed by several examples of impactful recommendations.

Here is an example of what not to do. We call it the "job description" recommendation because it describes the billet, not the person. It could be written about anyone of reasonable competence in that billet:

"As [billet], [name] flawlessly executed all mission tasking during an arduous fleet deployment. A flexible leader with an unbreakable positive output, he led a junior division of 20 Sailors through nine man overboard drills, seven underway replenishments, six anchoring evolutions, and two small boat operations, with zero mishaps.... He is a pillar of [ship's] training and mentorship programs."

Nothing in this recommendation indicates visionary or innovative leadership. It describes a competent Sailor who has done their job well. That is to be commended, but it does not set this leader apart from the hundreds of other Surface Warriors doing their jobs well every day.

In contrast, the following example reports in-billet performance demonstrably better than others with the same tasking, measurably better than other ships (above average), and better than under the predecessor (quantifiable improvement).

“As [ship’s] Fleet Gauge Calibration Coordinator, [name’s] leadership resulted in an above-average Fleet Metrology and Calibration program, increasing calibration effectiveness from 85% to 97% in less than three months.”

This next example reports excellent contributions beyond the duties of the billet itself.

“Petty Officer First Class [name] is filling a gapped senior chief billet and a gapped chief petty officer LCPO billet simultaneously. His leadership and technical skill through multiple events led to the early certification of all Combat Systems warfare areas with a score of 97%, above the class average.”

These examples report the fruit of dynamic leadership, operational excellence, and unselfish dedication to duty.

Let’s look at two more examples that show visionary (unique, innovative, groundbreaking) leadership. First, leadership that crosses all intra-ship organizational lines.

“[Name] established and leads a weekly meeting with her fellow second tour division officers where they mentor, teach, and lead the first tour division officers.... She created and has sustained a biweekly newsletter highlighting the incredible work of Sailors around the ship.”

And finally, an example of visionary leadership across the force.

“[Name] gave presentations at both the Junior Officer Training Symposium and the Surface Navy Association Waterfront Symposium.... Her idea, referred to as [initiative name], proposed a means to collect quantifiable data to increase the efficiency of assessment and execution of the Surface Navy’s readiness generation process.”

Every day, Surface Warfare Officers and Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialists across the fleet do great things to help their work centers, divisions, departments, ships, squadrons, and our Surface Navy meet its mission. These officers and sailors are the backbone of our Navy. Some are demonstrably committed to improving the teams around them. These are the leaders that the Admiral Zumwalt Award for Visionary Leadership was designed to recognize. We encourage nominators and Commanding Officer endorsers to take the time to show us, the awards committee, how your nominee stands above the rest.

We look forward to reading your nominations!

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