

Spaces That Serve

Supporting ship-based USO centers — helping service members connect, build community and recharge

Even in the world's most remote corners, the human spirit seeks connection. Community is what grounds us, uplifts us and reminds us we're never truly alone. That idea lies at the heart of a powerful collaboration between the United Service Organizations (USO), the United States Navy, Steelcase and its dealer partners, Creative and Hyphn – a shared mission to bring comfort and dignity to those who serve.

Aboard U.S. aircraft carriers, more than 5,000 people live and work together in tight quarters for months on end. Privacy is scarce and stress is constant. In such an intense environment, the need for mental relief isn't just important — it's essential for wellbeing.

In response to a recent, troubling rise in mental health incidents across the fleet, the USO, a private, non-profit group that supports military service members, launched ship-based USO centers. This initiative creates dedicated spaces aboard ships designed to be human-centric and serve as places where service members can unwind, recharge and find community. It allows them to connect with each other in a relaxed environment or reconnect with their faraway families and friends privately.

The USO reached out to Steelcase through Steelcase Salutes, an employee-led Business Inclusion Group dedicated to honoring and supporting military service members. Open to all employees, Steelcase Salutes engages the organization in meaningful, mission-driven projects. Steelcase employees responded with urgency, purpose and pride when the call came. They coordinated the donation of privacy pods and critical assembly and logistics support to outfit the first ship. Over the past two years, Steelcase has equipped USO centers aboard six aircraft carriers with On the QT by Orangebox pods – acoustically private, self-contained seating areas that offer a rare moment of tranquility and privacy amid the constant motion of shipboard life.

"In this arduous, demanding, dynamic life of a heavy industrial ship environment, it's absolutely critical to recharge our sailors," said Captain David Pollard, Commanding Officer of USS George H.W. Bush, during a ribbon-cutting ceremony on his own ship.

"This pit stop, this safe haven, this relaxing space is exactly what our young warriors need to recharge on a daily basis."

CAPT. DAVID POLLARD | Commanding Officer, USS George H.W. Bush

These pods now serve as quiet sanctuaries aboard:

- USS Carl Vinson – San Diego, CA
- USS Abraham Lincoln – San Diego, CA
- USS Harry S. Truman – Norfolk, VA
- USS Gerald R. Ford – Norfolk, VA
- USS Theodore Roosevelt – San Diego, CA
- USS George Washington – Norfolk, VA

The impact has been immediate and profound. On USS George Washington, the ship's captain was among the first to use the new USO center, stepping into a pod to call his wife — a simple, yet symbolic, act demonstrating the emotional power of these spaces. Since opening, the pods have been in near-constant use, often booked days in advance.

Tim Merkle, a Marine veteran who is the senior global director of digital experiences + innovation at Steelcase and a co-founder of Steelcase Salutes, believes these spaces are real lifelines. “It may sound like a small thing — to make a private call to family — but it can be life-changing for these men and women.”

The USO centers are more than just places to make a call, though. They are hubs of community — spaces where sailors can play games, watch movies or simply take a break from the intensity of deployment. This allows them to bond and form deeper relationships.

“This new support concept for deployed sailors includes many of the same amenities as a land-based USO center, such as comfortable seating, TVs, gaming equipment, and snacks,” said Christopher Plamp, USO Chief Operating Officer. “We’re grateful to Steelcase for donating and installing the privacy pods, which are especially helpful aboard a ship with limited personal space.”

The sense of community surrounding this effort also extends far beyond the ships. The project galvanized employees across the company at Steelcase, many with personal ties to the military. Among them was Brent Williams, a senior model maker at Steelcase and Navy veteran, who proposed creating a custom plaque for each ship. These handcrafted tributes became deeply meaningful expressions of pride and craftsmanship — especially the plaque for USS Gerald R. Ford, which featured a piece of White House stone, maize and blue accents, and a fleur-de-lis honoring Ford's Boy Scout roots. President Ford is a native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Steelcase was founded. For Williams, the opportunity to contribute was a powerful, full-circle moment.

“As both a Navy veteran and a longtime Steelcase employee, being part of this project was incredibly meaningful. It allowed me to bring together my professional skills and personal history in a way that doesn't happen often,” says Williams. “Contributing to something that honors President Ford and the Navy felt like a true privilege — and a moment of pride I won't forget. It was very cool.”

The USO now has ship-based centers on 10 aircraft carriers in the U.S. fleet, with additional centers on Navy ships coming soon.

“At its core, this effort is bigger than our business. It’s about creating community aboard ships, across the company, and within the hearts of those who serve,” says Merkle. “It’s a reminder that even in the most unconventional environments, thoughtful design can foster connection, community and hope.”