

Esper: 'The Safest Place Is on a Deployed Navy Ship'



Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Shane Miller (left) and Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Austin Kelly draw blood from a Sailor assigned to the guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd after its arrival in San Diego as part of the Navy's response to the COVID-19 outbreak on board the ship. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Alex Corona

ARLINGTON, Va. – The secretary of defense noted May 4 that – with a couple of notable exceptions – the U.S. Navy's ships at sea remain unaffected by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The statistics show that the safest place to be is on a deployed Navy ship compared to one that's in port," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said, speaking during a webcast sponsored by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "Of the 90-plus ships at sea, we only have two that have been affected."

[See: Navy Provides Medical Care to Infected Sailors of USS Kidd, Will Disinfect Ship](#)

[See: Navy Opens Deeper Inquiry Into Theodore Roosevelt; Move Delays Decision on Captain's Reinstatement](#)

The Navy has suffered significant outbreaks of the novel coronavirus on the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd. A Sailor off the Roosevelt died from COVID-19 complications in mid-April.

The cause of the transmission of the virus to the crews of both ships is unknown. The Theodore Roosevelt made a port call to Vietnam soon before Sailors began showing signs of illness. Another possibility: the virus was brought aboard by aircrews

and passengers returning to the carrier.

“We’re not sure where [the USS Kidd] picked [the virus] up,” Esper said. “It may have been through a counter-drug operation.”

Esper said that “two ships out of 94 is a pretty good record. The Navy has taken a lot of good practices. They’ve learned from the Teddy Roosevelt. Before a ship is deployed it goes through multiple tests of its Sailors. They are quarantined for a couple of weeks. And, of course, we don’t bring a ship back in if it’s being replaced by one that’s going out. So, we’re being very careful of that.”

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Defense Secretary Mark Esper, during a May 4 webinar

The service is keeping the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman away from port following a major deployment to avoid the pandemic.

“We have had ships that have been portside that have had Sailors infected but that’s not unlike what you might see at an Army base or an Air Force base where you have Sailors out in the community who may get infected by the virus,” Esper said. “Before they go to sea, we bring them in, we test, we quarantine, and we make adjustments to make sure our ships get out on time.”