

Port Visits Cancelled, Submariners' Health Monitored to Contain Coronavirus Spread at Sea



Retail Services Specialist 3rd Class Thuy Nguyen and Airman Manuel Lozano stand watch in front of the barge quarterdeck of the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard to screen oncoming traffic for COVID-19 symptoms. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Devin Kates

ARLINGTON, Va. – Nonessential port visits by U.S. Navy ships have been cancelled and Sailors' health aboard the nuclear deterrent submarine force is being closely monitored, top officials said in the latest report on combatting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said he believed "every port visit, with the exception of ships that need to pull in for maintenance or resupply," had been cancelled. He was sure with "high certainty" that all ships in the Pacific Ocean were no longer making scheduled port calls and crews of ships that do make stops would be confined to the pier area while in port.

[See: Ship Commissionings on Track, But Ceremonies Delayed](#)

In a March 24 press briefing, Gilday and acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly announced that three Sailors deployed in the Pacific aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt were diagnosed with COVID-19 and were being evacuated from the carrier. It was the first appearance of the novel

coronavirus on a deployed ship at sea, Modly said, adding that all those who encountered the three sick individuals were being quarantined aboard the Roosevelt. There were no plans to recall the carrier or any other deployed ship, Gilday said.

“We have not missed any operational commitment in the Navy at this time,” he said, adding that the impact to force readiness has been low “but that’s not to say that this couldn’t spike at any given time. We continue to watch this very closely in every ship, squadron and submarine.”

Gilday said all crews of the ballistic missile submarine force – which forms the maritime leg of the nuclear triad of submarines, bombers and ground-based missiles – undergo enhanced medical screenings and 14-day isolation before beginning training or deployment aboard a sub. “We have not seen a single case yet” of COVID-19 within the submarine force, Gilday said.

Elsewhere, two Navy hospital ships were being readied to ease the burden on health care workers and institutions in two cities hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, Los Angeles and New York, Modly said.



From left: Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Russell Smith, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday and Rear Adm. Bruce Gillingham, the Navy surgeon general, speak to the media about the ongoing efforts to combat COVID-19 while maintaining operations. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Sarah Villegas

The hospital ship USNS Mercy, which is based in San Diego, was doing some initial training off the coast of California and would reach Los Angeles “within the next few days,” he said, adding that Mercy would need another 24 hours after arriving in L.A. “to prepare for how she’ll receive patients” before the sick are brought aboard. The USNS Comfort, based in Norfolk, Virginia, tasked with aiding New York City’s medical services squeezed by the surge of COVID-19 cases, is still preparing for its mission, Modly said.

Both ships will serve as referral hospitals for patients not infected with the coronavirus to allow local medical services to focus on those who are, Modly stressed. “They’re there to handle the overflow of acute trauma cases and other urgent needs, and they will not be handling pediatric or OB-GYN cases,” the acting Navy secretary said.

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Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly

Because of the pandemic, the Navy has postponed, until 2021, this summer’s Large-Scale Exercise 2020, the first of a planned return to annual large exercises involving several strike groups. Modly said no decision has been made yet on scrubbing Hawaii-based Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), the world’s largest international maritime exercise that runs every two years in June and

July.

Both Modly and Gilday said they expect COVID-19 shutdowns will challenge work tempo at Navy and private shipyards. While the work of the private shipyards is essential in producing and repairing ships “we are also concerned about the health of their people. We don’t want them putting them at risk, either,” Modly said, noting Navy officials were talking with company executives daily.

Meanwhile, large prime contractors were, in effect, creating task forces to monitor the supply chains “to keep all of those production lines running and to see where we might be incurring risk out through, 2021, so that we can then prioritize what type of work we need to do,” Gilday said.



Hospitalman Katelynn Kavanagh sanitizes equipment aboard the USNS Mercy on March 24. The hospital ship is deploying to Los Angeles in support of the nation’s COVID-19 response efforts. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ryan M. Breeden