

Reinventing 'Normal': Long-Term Rules Settle Into Place for Prolonged Siege Against Virus



Masked U.S. Navy recruits march in formation on June 2 at Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Illinois. U.S. NAVY / Seaman Apprentice Mikal Chapman

The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, victimized this spring by a COVID-19 outbreak, is back home in San Diego and seemingly healthy. U.S. Marines, no longer using their T-shirts as face masks, are rotating back to Australia but with strict disease-prevention measures in place. U.S. Navy ships and crews have resumed annual exercises with allies and partner nations – but at sea only, with no contact on shore. A “new normal” has settled into place. No one knows just how long this will last.

In the seven months since the novel coronavirus surfaced in China and spread to Europe, the U.S. sea services appear to have fought the contagion to a stand-still. Even as case numbers spike throughout the homeland, especially in the Sun Belt, they appear to be static in the military, at least among uniformed personnel.

Check out the digital edition of the July-August *Seapower* magazine and other past issues [here](#).

While the virus has sickened 3 million stateside and killed about 132,000, the Navy has reported more than 4,300 cases – many of those on two ships, the Theodore Roosevelt and the USS Kidd. One Sailor has died. The U.S. Marine Corps reported another 1,600 infections among uniformed personnel, though an outbreak occurred among dozens of Marines at two bases on

Okinawa.

Commanders, meanwhile, are strategizing how to operate in all this and keep the numbers down while demanding focus as always on the mission at hand.

CNO Cautions Against Returning to the 'Old Normal'

In a June 30 message to the fleet, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday stressed "the importance of remaining vigilant" in the Navy's long-term battle against COVID-19.

"Each of us will be faced with temptations to cut corners and return to the 'old normal.' Do not do it. Together, we will rigorously maintain health protection measures to protect our Navy family and assure mission success even when it may appear the [American public] may be relaxing them," he added.

Some measures put in place during the initial response to the pandemic this spring may last longer. Case in point: any event that requires a large gathering.



Machinist Mate (Auxiliary) 1st Class Sean Riebel, assigned to Trident Refit Facility, Bangor, Washington, is tested for COVID-19 on July 6 at Naval Hospital Bremerton. U.S. NAVY / Douglas H. Stutz

The sea services came up with virtual alternatives to graduation ceremonies of new Marines, Sailors and Coast Guard grads. The U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, was the latest institution to join the trend on June 24. Instead of parading in dress uniforms on historic Dewey Field, the 427 students who earned diplomas gathered virtually to hear recorded speakers.

Interviews with prospective recruits and Fleet Week events around the country are being conducted online. Mandated measures governing training and operations include expanded testing of personnel, isolating crews before and after they go

to sea, stringent and frequent cleaning of work and living space, social distancing of at least 6 feet – when possible –and wearing face coverings when it is not. Masks will be a regular part of Navy, Marine and Coast Guard attire for the foreseeable future.

Returning to Normal Operations, but Still Vigilant

A sign that the sea services are emerging from a 24/7 emergency mindset came from Navy Reserve Force, which issued new guidance in June for Reservists to resume regular weekend onsite drills beginning in mid-July, pending evaluation of local conditions and guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Navy also began resuming exercises around the world, including BALTOPS 20, a multinational, maritime exercise in the Baltic Sea with 19 NATO and partner nations; U.S. Navy and Georgian Forces conducting maneuvering exercises in the Black Sea; and the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group and the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit conducting a maritime training exercise with Italian and French ships and aircraft in the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, aircraft carrier strike groups have continued to deploy in the Pacific and Atlantic as well as the Mediterranean and the Arctic.

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CNO Adm. Mike Gilday, in a June 30 message to the fleet

Despite the constraints imposed by the global health crisis, the Navy and U.S. Coast Guard did not stop patrolling the eastern Pacific and Caribbean during U.S. Southern Command’s fight against transnational narcotics trafficking. As one example, the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Preble, with a Coast Guard law enforcement detachment on board, recovered 100 bales of suspected cocaine with an

estimated street value of \$40 million, according to Coast Guard sources. Many more drug and migrant interdictions – both as part of the Navy-USCG partnership and by the Coast Guard alone – still are taking place routinely.

Virus Prevention Procedures Begin at Boot Camp

Strict adherence to those COVID-19 preventive guidelines is responsible for the continued flow of Navy and Marine Corps recruits into boot camp, according to the commanders of the services' basic training commands.

Both the Navy and Marines have implemented 14-day restrictions of movement, where incoming recruits are quarantined off-site when they arrive at the Marine Corps Recruit Depots at San Diego and Parris Island, South Carolina, and at Navy Recruit Training Command at Great Lakes, Illinois. After 14 days the recruits are tested for COVID-19. If they test negative, they can start basic training. If they pop positive results, they isolate in a single room for monitoring and more testing.

Quarantining recruits in off-base facilities – like The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, for the Marines or hotels outside Chicago for the Navy – is costly, and both services are looking for long-term alternatives.

More than 8,100 new Sailors have been sent to the fleet during the pandemic, and 6,700 recruits are currently going through Great Lakes, Rear Adm. Milton J. Sands, commander of Naval Service Training Command, told media during a July 7 teleconference. He added that the Navy was on track to meet its goal of 40,800 new Sailors in the current fiscal year.

Speaking at the same briefing, Maj. Gen. William F. Mullen, commander of Marine Training and Education Command, said the number of recruits per company have been reduced at San Diego and Parris Island because of special distancing requirements.



A masked drill instructor with Oscar Company, 4th Recruit

Training Battalion, adjusts her Marine's cover as the platoon conducts their final uniform inspection on Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina, on May 1. U.S. MARINE CORPS / Sgt. Dana Beesley

That and some weeks left open without scheduled shipments of new recruits in case unforeseen COVID-19 problems back up the pipeline are expected to cut into the Corps' goal of 38,000 new Marines this fiscal year. The traditional 10-day leave new Marines used to get after boot camp graduation has been canceled to keep them in the protective bubble before starting their follow-on training, Mullen said.

Concern for the Sub Fleet Leads to Innovative Measures

Norfolk, Virginia-based Submarine Squadron 6 (SUBRON 6) developed a COVID-19 plan that set the standard for Atlantic attack sub deployment with total assurance that crew are free of infection.

SUBRON 6 Commodore Capt. Jeffrey Juergens called the effort to man, train and equip his fleet of 15 attack subs homeported or undergoing maintenance at Norfolk in a COVID-free bubble "wholly unprecedented" in his Navy career. "Our medical and operations departments put together a testing regime, made sure they had the most up-to-date guidance, and knew what to do in case we had someone test positive," Juergens said.

He credited Senior Chief Electronics Technician (Submarine) Joshua Sisk with much of the plan's heavy lifting, like managing repairs and parts delivery on the pier without crew interaction.

"We're now getting lots of phone calls from our counterparts to share lessons learned. Until further notice, this will be the new norm," Sisk said.

Guam, Other Bases Become Safe Havens

Naval Base Guam is among the facilities designated safe-haven

ports for Navy ships and subs. The base is equipped to resupply vessels pierside while protecting ships and service members. In this bubble, Sailors can enjoy mental and physical relaxation while their vessel is serviced. Also, on Guam, visiting crew members have access to a secured beach. Other safe-haven ports include Okinawa, Japan, and Naval Station Rota, Spain.

The safe-haven port concept grew out of the lessons learned from the ordeal of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, the first naval warship hit with an outbreak at sea. More than 1,100 crew members tested positive while the aircraft carrier was sidelined on Guam for more than two months as it was clean and sanitized from bow to stern and sick crew treated.

Thanks to procedures put in place on Guam, the carrier put to sea in June to resume its deployment to the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations and returned safely to homeport in San Diego on July 9.