

Navy fires captain who warned of COVID-19 spread on aircraft carrier

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In a clear statement that saving lives in the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be allowed to interfere with the war aims of US imperialism, the U.S. Navy fired the commander of the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt who warned about the spread of the disease.

US Navy Captain Brett Crozier was fired on Thursday just two days after he sent a letter asking his superiors to take emergency action to allow the crew of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, which is suffering a major COVID-19 outbreak, to disembark.

“We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset: our Sailors,” Crozier wrote in the letter.

Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly was clear about the message he was sending. Simultaneously referring to the ship by its nickname, “the big stick” and using the term to euphemistically refer to the power of US imperialism, Modly said “The nation needs to know that the big stick is undaunted and unstoppable... our adversaries need to know this as well. They respect and fear the big stick and they should. We will not allow anything to diminishes that respect and fear.”

He continued, “We are not at war by traditional measures, but neither are we at peace.”

On Wednesday, US president Donald Trump announced a deployment of forces to Latin America, in a nominally counter-narcotics operation targeting Venezuela “We’re deploying additional Navy destroyers, combat ships, aircraft and helicopters, Coast Guard cutters and Air Force surveillance aircraft, doubling our capabilities in the region,” Trump declared.

Earlier in the day, Trump had made another war threat, stating, “Upon information and belief, Iran or its proxies are planning a sneak attack on US troops and/or

assets in Iraq. If this happens, Iran will pay a very heavy price, indeed!”

The USS Theodore Roosevelt pulled into the island of Guam, a US territory in the western Pacific Ocean, last week after several soldiers on board tested positive for COVID-19. Sailors began falling ill about two weeks after it made a port call at Da Nang, Vietnam. About 100 cases of COVID-19 had been reported in Vietnam at that time, with most of them near Hanoi, well north of Da Nang.

The four-page letter, which included an uncharacteristically emotional appeal to top Navy officials, was sent to between 20 and 30 individuals identified as Navy leaders. The letter was leaked by the *San Francisco Chronicle* the following day.

Crozier called for all but ten percent of the over 4,000-person crew to disembark the ship and be quarantined in isolation as soon as possible in Guam, with remaining crew members to remain on as a “necessary risk” to sanitize and secure the ship while docked.

The letter raised concerns about the impossibility of social distancing and isolation of those diagnosed with COVID-19. “Due to the close quarters required on a warship and the current number of positive cases, every single Sailor, regardless of rank, on board the [Theodore Roosevelt] must be considered ‘close contact,’” Crozier wrote.

Naval ships require large amounts of sailors to live and work together in a confined space around the clock, with shared sleeping quarters, restrooms, workspaces and computers, a common mess hall, movement constraints requiring communal contact with ladders and hatches, and complex workflows which require close contact. “The current strategy will only slow the spread,” he wrote. “The current plan in execution on

TR will not achieve virus eradication on any timeline.”

Crozier criticized the promises made by senior military officials for tests for all crew members aboard the carrier last week, as it was not a solution to the tight quarters which exacerbated the spread of the virus.

“Keeping over 4,000 young men and women on board the TR is an unnecessary risk and breaks faith with those Sailors entrusted to our care.”

On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump made his position clear on the situation on the Theodore Roosevelt, offering no sympathy or concern but simply saying that he would “let the military make that decision”.

Modly denounced Crozier’s writing the letter as an “uncharacteristic lapse of judgment” that created a “panic”. Modly continued, “And that’s what’s frustrating about [it], it created the perception that the Navy’s not on the job, and the government’s not doing its job.”

David Lapan, a retired Marine Corps colonel and former top spokesman for the Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Marine Corps, did not believe that Crozier’s letter created any more panic than what already existed. He told *DefenseOne*, “The idea that it got out there and it created panic among families — you don’t think the families didn’t already know what was going on on that ship? You don’t think the sailors weren’t already telling their families what was happening on the ship? That’s ridiculous...It’s more believable that the letter would cause the families to be upset that the Navy wasn’t taking the right steps to protect their loved ones.”

According to *military.com*, which tracks official cases of COVID-19 in the Department of Defense, as of Thursday there have been 1,638 total cases of COVID-19: 893 military, 256 dependents, 306 civilians and 95 contractors. 85 of the total have required hospitalization and five have died.

The US Navy announced Wednesday that it had begun moving 3,000 sailors of the nearly 5,000-large crew into available hotel rooms in Guam. Because there are not enough beds on the island currently, Modly told the press that the Navy would work to “create tent-type facilities” when needed. The Navy has denied that the letter or public reaction spurred these actions, claiming that preparations had been under way.

In a Wednesday morning press conference, Governor

of Guam Lou Leon Guerrero confirmed she would agree to allow sailors off the aircraft carrier and into strictly guarded and monitored hotels off the Navy base under certain restrictions.

“In partnership with the Guam Hotel and Restaurant Association, public health officials and representatives of the Navy, only sailors testing negative for COVID-19 will be housed in vacant Guam hotels ... subject to a 14-day quarantine period enforceable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice,” she said.

Senator Sabina Perez of Guam raised concerns over the ability of the island to handle the influx of patients from the ship and fears among the island’s residents that without protective measures in place that the virus would spread at an accelerated pace on the island, which had 82 cases and three deaths since Thursday. Perez called on President Trump to utilize the Defense Production Act to accelerate the manufacturing of needed medical supplies and for the US military to mobilize available medical resources.

The US Navy stopped giving information to the Guam media on the breakdown of positive cases aboard the ship after a Pentagon memo prohibited its release, citing it as information which could “compromise national security”.



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