

U.S. Army Halts Training Over Coronavirus but Then Changes Its Mind

The infection rate within the American military has shot up to a degree some officials find alarming.



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WASHINGTON — The Army earlier this week ordered a halt to most training, exercises and nonessential activities that require troops to be in close contact, military officials said, but abruptly reversed itself days later even as the infection rate within the American military shot up.

The move, by the largest branch in the U.S. military, would have been the most sweeping effort by any of the armed services to stave off the spread of coronavirus as the Defense Department comes to grips with an illness that has paralyzed plans and missions as the world faces a health crisis not seen in a century.

Rescinding the order sparked confusion among the ranks and with commanders. A Defense Department tally on Thursday reported that cases of coronavirus recorded by the Pentagon had hit 600, more than doubling in three days.

Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper has insisted that the armed forces find a way to both protect troops from the rampaging virus while still performing the military's essential operations.

"I'm fully confident that we will remain prepared to conduct all of our missions," Mr. Esper said during a town hall-style meeting on Tuesday at the Pentagon.

Around the world, military planners are wrestling with a litany of issues. One problem is that far-flung bases in hot spots lack resources to care for potential coronavirus patients and to carry out quarantine procedures.

At Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, the largest U.S. base on the African continent, with 3,000 troops, an older Defense Department contractor was thought to have the virus, according to one military official. But Camp Lemonnier has a limited supply of ventilators configured to help coronavirus patients.

These concerns have forced Pentagon officials to examine how to transport coronavirus patients without exposing the aircrew, since only a handful of aircraft are equipped to move such patients around. The contractor was evacuated to Germany and has subsequently tested positive for the virus.

On Wednesday, Mr. Esper issued an order stopping all U.S. military travel worldwide for 60 days, with some exceptions, such as the ongoing troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Reuters first reported the development.

But the order, which essentially freezes troops in place for the next two months, will undoubtedly have consequences, as troops' missions are extended well past their return date, and the military-wide deployment calendar, set months in advances, is thrown off kilter as training atrophies and certifications for military qualifications expire.

Although the halt in training directive was rescinded, some restrictions put in place by the Army remain. The day after the Army cut off access to outsiders at its installations around the world, the Defense Department issued its own guidance to the rest of the American military to follow suit.

"The Department will take every step to ensure the wellness of our service members, civilians, contractors and families, while also safeguarding our national mission capabilities," the Pentagon said in a statement on Wednesday afternoon.



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But while the Marine Corps has canceled some larger exercises on the West Coast, training at its recruit depots in South Carolina and California continue along with smaller exercises throughout the Corps.

The Navy has put 14-day restricted periods in place for new recruits arriving to training, and the Army and Marine Corps are medically screening new members as they arrive. Marine Corps officials have stopped public attendance at boot camp graduations and believe that altering training schedules much more could have long lasting impacts because the service rotates out thousands of troops a year and is the smallest of the military branches.

Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, the top medical adviser for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the brisk pace of increase in coronavirus cases in the military was higher than the rate in the country at large. “Our curve is not flattening,” General Friedrichs said. “That’s why we went to HPCON Charlie,” a more stringent health protection condition.

On Wednesday, Gen. Robert B. Abrams, commander of U.S. troops in South Korea, declared a public health emergency on his bases, which gives him wide-ranging authority to help combat the spread of the coronavirus among his forces.

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General Abrams is one of the first U.S. commanders to issue such an order. In North Carolina, Maj. Gen. Julian D. Alford, the Marine officer in charge of Camp Lejeune, circulated a draft order that would also declare a public health emergency if authorized.

“Any person who refuses to obey or otherwise violates an order during this declared public health emergency may be detained,” says one section of the draft, which was obtained by The New York Times.

For the military, the challenge now is striking a balance between readiness and health, but “preserving the force” is quickly taking priority.

The mantra of today’s American military, but particularly of Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, is readiness. The phrase “preserving the force” is military parlance for keeping a military that is fit, well-rehearsed and ready to deploy. But that means training and rehearsals, such as fighter pilots practicing how to refuel at 25,000 feet and Marines dragging each other through the dirt.

Those run counter to the social distancing that medical professionals say is required to beat the novel coronavirus.

As part of the new restrictions, the Army chief of staff, Gen. James C. McConville, said that he was putting a select group of service members, the Army’s contingency response forces, into the highest state of isolation — HPCON Delta. These troops are on call to rapidly deploy in emergencies. Under HPCON Delta, they now are expected to remain at home for extended periods of time, the

Army said, and may even be quarantined.

“We are committed to maintaining the Army’s fighting strength by reducing the spread of the virus while simultaneously maintaining dynamic force employment capabilities,” General McConville said in the statement.

In the Navy, with roughly a third of its ships at sea, sailors deployed are dealing with another problem: the tight confines of warships packed with their colleagues. The Navy has more coronavirus cases than the other branches, making up roughly a third of the total.

On Tuesday, the acting secretary of the Navy, Thomas B. Modly announced that three people aboard the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt had tested positive for coronavirus. Those three were flown off the ship but, according to military officials, five more cases aboard have appeared. Mr. Modly said Thursday that 100 percent of the crew would be tested for the virus.

Military personnel deployed overseas are not the only service members being affected by the coronavirus.

A staff aide to Lt. Gen. Thomas W. Bergeson, the deputy head of the military’s Central Command, which oversees operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, including Iraq and Afghanistan, tested positive for the virus this week.

That required General Bergeson and about a dozen other staff members to quarantine themselves at their homes in the Tampa, Fla., area, where the headquarters is. General Bergeson joined colleagues on a secure video-teleconference on Wednesday, and has access to the classified communications systems he needs to perform his duties, said Capt. Bill Urban, a command spokesman.

About 50 percent of the Central Command’s 4,000 headquarters staff now works remotely, a figure that could grow to about 75 percent in coming days if local authorities impose shelter-in-place requirements, Captain Urban said.

The military’s Special Operations Command, which also has its headquarters in Tampa, announced its first employee, a civilian, who had tested positive for coronavirus. Co-workers who were in proximity with the employee, who was not in close contact with the command’s senior military leadership, are now quarantined in their homes, the command said in a statement.

Military commands worldwide are scaling back training and canceling exercises to help limit the potential spread of the virus.

The United States and the United Arab Emirates did go ahead with one major, long-planned exercise on Monday that involved about 4,000 U.S. troops from the Army, Marines and Navy in the desert about 125 miles southwest of Abu Dhabi.

Commanders weighed the pros and cons of canceling the drill, which was conducted amid heightened tensions with Iran and its proxies in Iraq. They decided to proceed given the importance of exercise, called Native Fury, and that risks of exposure to the virus were offset by the exercise’s remote location and strict orders to the troops to practice social-distancing, Captain Urban said.

Last week, the Army announced it was closing all 1,400 of its recruiting stations protect recruiters and would-be recruits.

The Army’s decision to shift recruiting to text messages, phone calls, direct messages or video chat rather than face-to-face interviews comes as the military, like the rest of the country, is rapidly adjusting to the coronavirus’s dramatic upheaval of daily routines.

The military’s other services are also making changes to their recruiting operations. Some Navy recruiting stations are shutting under local directives. Brig. Gen. Edward W. Thomas, Jr., the Air Force’s top spokesman, said, “We are pretty much operating on an ‘appointment only’ basis at most locations.”