

As first sailor from COVID-19-stricken carrier dies, Pentagon stresses readiness for war

By Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon reported Monday the first COVID-19 death of a US Navy sailor from the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, whose captain was fired for demanding that the bulk of his crew be evacuated and quarantined to prevent the spread of the virus from taking their lives.

The Navy said it was withholding the name of the sailor pending notification of next of kin. He was the second member of the US military to die from the disease.

When the nuclear-powered ship's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, called, in a letter directed to at least 20 senior naval officers, for his crew to be evacuated, there were 90 confirmed cases of the coronavirus aboard the Theodore Roosevelt. Today, the number of confirmed cases is at least 585, with the dismissed captain himself fighting an infection. Another 400 sailors remain to be tested.

The Navy has carried out precisely what Crozier had demanded, evacuating all but a skeleton crew from the warship and placing the vast majority of its crew under quarantine on the US Pacific island territory of Guam, with those who tested positive isolated from their shipmates. According to a report published Monday by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, while most of the sailors were placed for 14 days in Guam hotels, those who tested positive were sent to the Guam Navy base gym, where hundreds of cots were crammed into a crowded space.

"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," the captain wrote in his March 30 letter, which was obtained and published by the *Chronicle* on March 31. "If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset—our Sailors."

The Captain's demand, issued in the face of stalling and opposition from his superior officers, provoked a political firestorm. It cut across President Donald

Trump's attempt to minimize the impact of the pandemic and pretend that his administration had it under control, as well as the Pentagon's determination not to allow the outbreak to interfere with US imperialism's worldwide aggression.

The likely cause of the infection on the USS Theodore Roosevelt was the decision by the US Indo-Pacific Command to go ahead with a March 5 port call by the nuclear-powered carrier at the Vietnamese port of Da Nang, despite reports of coronavirus cases in the country. The port call, timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the "normalization" of US-Vietnamese relations, marked only the second time that a US aircraft carrier had visited the Southeast Asian country. It was seen as an important projection of US military force in the region, as part of Washington's confrontation with China.

Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly relieved Crozier of his command on April 2, apparently acting on explicit orders from Trump. At the time, he made clear that Washington was determined not to allow the pandemic to blunt the edge of US overseas military operations. "The nation needs to know," he said, "that the big stick [the nickname for the Theodore Roosevelt] 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 diminish that respect and fear."

The "big stick" that Modly feared was the one wielded by Trump. His predecessor, Richard Spencer, had been sacked for falling afoul of the US president when Trump intervened repeatedly on behalf of Special Operations Chief Edward Gallagher, who had been charged by his fellow Navy SEALs with multiple war crimes, including murder.

Modly—and presumably Trump—was outraged after videos circulated on social media showing the Theodore

Roosevelt's commander leaving the vessel as hundreds of crew members clapped and cheered, repeatedly chanting his name. An online petition demanding his reinstatement had garnered over 365,000 signatures as of Monday.

Modly flew from Washington to Guam—a 35-hour round trip—to deliver an angry rant to the ship's crew, denouncing them for supporting the captain and describing Crozier himself as “naïve” and “stupid” and accusing him of betrayal. The tirade was broadcast over the ship's loudspeakers, without Modly facing or speaking directly with any of the aircraft carrier's sailors.

Like the videos of Crozier's disembarking from the Theodore Roosevelt, a recording of Modly's speech was also soon placed on social media, provoking a storm of criticism from retired and active-duty military officers, as well as Democratic politicians. After first proclaiming that he stood by “every word” of his tirade, Modly was soon forced to issue an apology and then resign. The cost of his trip to Guam aboard a Gulfstream business jet was revealed to be close to a quarter of a million dollars, while the ousted acting secretary was compelled to spend two weeks in quarantine as a result of his being aboard the ship.

Since the incident, the Pentagon has severely censored information on the spread of the virus within the ranks of the military, with individual units and bases halting all reports on new cases, leaving it to the Defense Department in Washington to announce daily global totals. The fate of Captain Crozier has ensured observance of this information clampdown by commanding officers, leaving US military personnel and their families along with civilian employees and local communities in the dark as to the extent of the threat they face.

Based on classified Pentagon data, however, *Newsweek* magazine posted a map last week showing the distribution of coronavirus cases at more than 150 US military bases spread across 41 states. Coronavirus cases have also been reported on at least three other aircraft carriers, while the Federation of American Scientists reports that all but one US nuclear installation is affected by the virus.

In an online press conference Thursday, top US commanders delivered the message that, no matter what the toll of the pandemic on the military's ranks, US imperialism's aggressive operations would continue.

“We're still capable and we're still ready no matter what the threat,” said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley. “I wouldn't want any mixed messages going out there to any adversaries that they can

take advantage of an opportunity, if you will, at a time of crisis. That would be a terrible and tragic mistake if they thought that.”

As General Milley spoke, China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, along with five other warships, was sailing through the Miyako Strait between Japan's Ryukyu Islands and the Bashi Channel east of Taiwan toward the South China Sea, in what constituted Beijing's own version of the provocative “freedom of navigation” operations frequently staged by Washington's Pacific fleet.

Beijing's state-run English language newspaper *Global Times* posted an online piece Monday stating: “As the most powerful military force in the world, with the highest level of combat readiness, the US military's failure to contain the virus has been disappointing. There are [a] number of reasons for this, such as the large number of personnel deployed overseas, poor military-political relations, and the absence of preparedness.”

With its deployment of US warships off the coast of Venezuela and the dispatch of Patriot missile batteries to Iraq, Washington has made it clear that the coronavirus, while spreading rapidly among rank-and-file soldiers, sailors and Marines, will not induce it to rein in military aggression abroad. There will be growing pressure for the Navy to send the Theodore Roosevelt and other carrier strike groups back into the South China Sea in preparation for world war, even as humanity is ravaged by the global pandemic.

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