COVID-19 Breaks Out on Okinawa as About 90 Marines Test Positive



Marines carry a combat rubber raiding craft during a squad competition on Okinawa on July 7. COVID-19 has broken out among about 90 Marines there, Marine commanders confirmed on July 13. U.S. MARINE CORPS / Sgt. Audrey M. C. Rampton

At least two U.S. Marine Corps bases on Okinawa are reporting clusters of COVID-19 infections, leading Marine leaders to reinstitute stringent protective measures on the Japanese island, home to numerous U.S. military installations.

"After months with no confirmed COVID-19 infections on Okinawa, this week the Marine Corps experienced two localized clusters of individuals who tested positive for the virus," Okinawa-based Marine Corps Installations Pacific (MCIPAC) announced.

The installations where personnel tested positive were identified as Camp Hansen and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, both on the southern part of the island. All personnel who tested positive for the novel coronavirus are in isolation, the announcement stated.

In keeping with Defense Department policy, the Marine Corps did not disclose how many Marines and Sailors were infected, but media outlets, quoting local officials, placed the number in the 90s.

On July 10, Marine Forces Japan – also known as III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) – reintroduced Health Protection Condition "Charlie" to limit the spread of the virus by further restricting off-base activities, including prohibiting personnel from using non-military public transportation,

eating in off-base restaurants and going off base for nonessential services.

In response to the increased health protection directive, the next day MCIPAC ordered an enhanced lockdown at all Marine installations across Okinawa. This included closing all nonessential facilities. Dining will be take-out only at mess halls, exchanges, commissaries, base restaurants and food courts. Personnel will have to get permission from a Marine colonel or a Navy commander for off-base activities. The new restrictions apply to all uniformed and civilian III MEF and MCIPAC personnel.

U.S. Air Force Brigadier Gen. Joel Carey, commander of the 18th Air Wing at Kadena Air Base, ordered the base to transition from Health Protection Condition Bravo back to the more rigorous Charlie, effective immediately. The U.S. COVID-19 cases have primarily been Marines assigned to MCAS Futenma and Camp Hansen, Carey said.

“Patients have been a mix of both travel-related and those with origins we’ve yet to be able to identify, indicating the potential of a re-emergence of community spread,” he said. COVID-19 may already be spreading. “We have confirmed the presence of COVID-19 aboard the air station,” Col. Lance Lewis, commander of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, announced July 12 on the facility’s Facebook page. He added there was no risk to the base.

“COVID was brought here from overseas travelers. As we planned, the positive travelers were contained within their quarters, and our social distancing and strict adherence to [restriction on movement] worked.” The air base is still operating under HPCON Bravo and all liberty policies remain the same, Lewis said.