

Hospital Ship Mercy Deploying to Los Angeles



Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southwest forklift driver Steve King moves pallets of supplies to be craned aboard Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) at Naval Base San Diego, March 21, 2020. Mercy is preparing to deploy in support of the nation's COVID-19 response efforts. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jessica Paulauskas

ARLINGTON, Virginia – The secretary of defense said the Military Sealift Command's hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) is deploying to Los Angeles to relieve the city's hospitals of some of their non-COVID-19 patient burden as they deal with the virus pandemic.

During a March 23 news conference at the Pentagon, Secretary Mark Esper said the Mercy was departing its layberth in San Diego the same day for Los Angeles. The sister ship USNS Comfort would deploy at a later date for New York City for the same mission. The two ships will not be caring for COVID-19 patients but will treat acute care and surgery patients with other needs to relieve local hospitals that are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Esper said that some field hospitals are being readied for similar missions and that some hotels and college dormitories may be put in service as well for patient care.

He said that to date 137 Defense Department personnel had been diagnosed with COVID-19 and that one department civilian had died.

During a separate Pentagon news conference on the same date, Rear Adm. Timothy H. Weber, commander, Navy Medical Forces Pacific, said that 800 medical personnel were being embarked

on the Mercy and were being drawn from eight military treatment facilities, primarily from naval hospitals and clinics in San Diego, Camp Pendleton, California, Twentynine Palms, California, Bremerton, Washington, and Oak Harbor, Washington. A total of 58 Navy Reserve medical personnel – all volunteers – also are being embarked. Weber said that none had been involved in treatment of COVID-19 patients.



Master-at-Arms 3rd Class Ashlee McCasland, Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Jonathan Shaw and Senior Chief Master-at-Arms Lou Canton prepare pallets of supplies to be loaded aboard Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) at Naval Base San Diego, March 21. U.S. NAVY / Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Mike Jones

Also at the news conference, Capt. John R. Rotruck, commanding officer of the Mercy's Medical Treatment Facility, said the ship would dock at Los Angeles "within the week" and will start care of the local population the following day. He said the ship will operate under the control commander, Destroyer Squadron 21, and operate for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Rotruck said the Mercy will embark a total of 1,128 personnel, including the ship's civilian crew, the military medical treatment team and a few civilian contractors. The Mercy has 1,000 hospital beds and will be operating nine of the 12 operating rooms on the ship. He said the embarked crew will be screened for COVID-19 but not tested unless needed.

Rotruck said the Mercy will offer a broad range of medical services but will not be staffed to handle obstetric or pediatric cases. The ship has a fully capable blood bank on board.

"The Mercy is ready to go," said the Mercy's master, Capt. Jonathan Olmsted, also in the conference. He said the Mercy will be underway for about two days to runs some tests of its systems before docking pierside in the Port of Los Angeles.

Rotruck said the time underway at sea will be used to train the medical team.

“Our Mercy team is ready to deploy and support FEMA and local relief agencies against the COVID-19 pandemic,” he said. “I have an amazing team, and we are truly honored to answer the nations’ call to protect the health of the American people.”