Navy, Marine Corps Dismissals for Declining COVID-19 Vaccination on the Rise



Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro talks with Chief Engineman Stephen Bashore, aboard the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Milwaukee (LCS 5) in Ponce, Puerto Rico, Jan. 25. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class T. Logan Keown*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The number of U.S. Marines and Sailors dismissed from the services for refusing vaccination against COVID-19 has grown to well over 600, officials say.

On Feb. 2, the Navy announced it has dismissed 118 Sailors, 96 active duty and 22 recruits who had served less than 180 days. All have received honorable discharges, according to the Navy. No reservists have been dismissed to date.

The next day, the Marine Corps reported 469 uniformed personnel have been separated from the service for incomplete

vaccination. According to Marine Corps guidance, any active duty Marine who did not receive a final vaccination dose, by Nov. 14, 2021, or reservist by Dec. 14, 2021 “is considered unvaccinated.”

According to Defense Department statistics, 194,689 active duty and reserve Marines were fully vaccinated by Feb. 2 and 384,586 Sailors and reservists met full vaccination requirements. Both the Navy and Marine Corps, as well as the Pentagon, consider COVID-19 a readiness issue requiring full vaccination for all military personnel.

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro became the latest Pentagon official to test positive for COVID-19 on Jan. 31. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Mark Milley, all tested positive in early January.

Del Toro, who was fully vaccinated and had received a booster shot, said he would quarantine for a minimum of five days in accordance with the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. He planned to attend key meetings and discussions virtually and when necessary, be represented by Meredith Berger performing the duties of undersecretary of the Navy.

The Navy has granted 269 Sailors medical exemptions to mandatory vaccination, all but 10 of them temporary. The nine medical exemptions granted reservists were all temporary. By Feb. 2, the Navy also granted 60 administrative exemptions for active duty Sailors and 23 for reservists. However, not a single request for exemption from vaccination on religious grounds, has been granted to any of the 3,288 active duty Sailors and 773 reservists who requested one.

The Marine Corps reported a combined 665 administrative or medical exemptions had been approved by Feb. 2. Of 3,538 requests for religious accommodation to skip the vaccine

mandate, 3,414 have been processed and only three requests were approved. The Marines are the only armed service, so far, to issue a religious exemption for the vaccine mandate. In a letter to Rep. Darrell Issa (R-California), first reported by Military.com, a Marine Corps official explained that even those three Marines granted religious accommodation were, in effect, no longer serving or soon leaving the Marine Corps.

The high rejection numbers for exemption requests, particularly for religious accommodation, have sparked numerous complaints to members of Congress that they are being handled in a pro forma review with nearly identical rejection letters.

That prompted Issa, a highly vocal critic of the Pentagon's vaccination mandate, to write Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger Jan. 17 for an explanation of the exemption process. In a statement released by his office, Issa said the vaccine mandate "is ending careers of distinction, ruining lives of service, and weakening America's force readiness. This isn't how the military wants to treat its own – it's how the president and his team show their unprecedented hostility to our men and women in uniform. I will not stand for this betrayal."

Issa and 14 other House Republicans have written House Appropriations Committee Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-Connecticut) urging funding for the vaccination mandate be prohibited in any pending defense spending bill.

In a Jan. 21 letter to Issa, J.J. Daly, deputy legislative assistant in the Marines' Office of Legislative Affairs, explained that of the three Marines who received a religious exemption, two were "on terminal leave" and the other "has transitioned into the Department of Defense Skill Bridge Program, a 180-day training program in private industry." Marine Corps leadership determined that "the likelihood of their vaccination status impacting military readiness and

health and safety was remote because the requestors are no longer serving with Marine Corps commands.”

He noted chaplains counsel every Marine who submits a religious accommodation request and provide advice to the adjudication authority for each request. However, “the ultimate question is whether or not approving the request will have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, good order and discipline, or health and safety. This is a decision that requires consideration of factors that fall outside the expertise of a trained chaplain,” Daly wrote.