Navy Surgeon General: Outbreak on Aircraft Carrier Paved Way for Devising Effective COVID-19 Response



U.S. Navy Sailors assigned to aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) are screened for symptoms of COVID-19 in this 2020 photo. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Staff Sgt. Jordan E. Gilbert*

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — The outbreak of COVID-19 on a forward-deployed U.S. aircraft carrier helped Navy medical personnel learn how to fight the virus at sea and prevent its spread ashore, the Navy Surgeon General says.

“Our wakeup call was the Theodore Roosevelt,” Rear Adm. Bruce Gillingham told a panel discussion on the coronavirus pandemic at the Navy League’s Sea-Air-Space Expo in National Harbor Aug. 4.

After COVID-19 was detected among the crew following a port call at Da Nang, Vietnam, in March 2020, the USS Roosevelt was sidelined at Guam for months.

The data gathered by a deployed medical unit aboard the stricken carrier, where more than one thousand crew members tested positive for COVID-19 in early 2020, and one died, “helped us understand the behavior of the virus,” Gillingham said. “It was from that investigation that we really learned the role of pre- and asymptomatic transmission of COVID and how critically important it was to understand and prevent that.”

More than 76% of the crew who tested positive for COVID were not showing symptoms of the virus when tested, and only 55%

later developed any symptoms.

With the experience gleaned from the Roosevelt and a smaller outbreak on the destroyer USS Kidd, “we were able to learn how to diagnose, quarantine and isolate in a shipboard environment, the surgeon general said. That led to a search for ways to create bubbles to manage the risk of COVID for forward deployed personnel, including restriction of movement for 14 days before deployment and testing personnel coming out of quarantine.

Another study by Navy scientists looked at Marine Corps recruits at Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot to assess the response to the virus of healthy young adults in a tightly controlled, congregate setting. “Even in that environment, about one-sixth of recruits still became infected,” Gillingham said.

Both the Parris Island and Roosevelt/Kidd research findings were published in the New England Journal of Medicine. “I’m proud our folks were able to contribute to the national discussion on how to defeat COVID,” he said.

Another panelist, Rear Adm. Dana Thomas, director of Health, Safety & Work-Life at the Coast Guard, said it is also crucial to monitor the mental and emotional health of personnel working under the trying conditions imposed by the pandemic.

In field communications, “I established, early on, Wellness Wednesdays,” hour-long panel sessions with chaplains, doctors and others to talk about stress and anxiety,“bringing that conversation into the ward room or the workplace,” she said.

“That was one thing we will continue as a best practice,” said Thomas, who is also an admiral in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.