

Navy Won't Restore Relieved Captain to Command of COVID-19-Stricken Carrier



Capt. Brett Crozier, commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71), addresses the crew during an all-hands call on the ship's flight deck. Theodore Roosevelt is conducting routine operations in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Nicholas Huynh

ARLINGTON, Va. – Capt. Brett Crozier, the embattled former skipper of the first U.S. Navy warship to suffer a novel coronavirus outbreak at sea, will not be restored to command of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, top Navy leaders announced June 19.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday and Navy Secretary Kenneth J. Braithwaite announced the decision at a Pentagon press briefing on the results of the USS Theodore Roosevelt

Command Investigation, begun April 2, the day Crozier was fired. The investigation was conducted by Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Robert Burke.

Gilday said he would not reassign Crozier as the commanding officer of the ship known as the TR, "nor will he be eligible for future command. Capt. Crozier will be reassigned." Gilday also said the promotion of Crozier's immediate superior, Rear Adm. Stuart Baker, the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group commander, to a second star was being put on hold "pending further review."

Braithwaite, who was sworn into office just three weeks ago, said he fully supported the report's findings and recommendations and "I am satisfied that it was conducted in an extremely thorough and fair."

Gilday conceded that he previously believed that Crozier should be reinstated after conducting an initial investigation following Crozier's removal, but a wider investigation had a much deeper scope.

"It is my belief that both Admiral Baker and Capt. Crozier fell well short of what we expect of those in command," he said. "Had I known then what I know today, I would not have made that recommendation to reinstate Capt. Crozier. Moreover, if Capt. Crozier were still in command today, I would be relieving him," Gilday added.

Crozier was relieved of command April 2 by then acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly after a March 30 letter that Crozier wrote to top Navy officers and fellow naval aviators, pleading for faster intervention from his superiors to assist his crew, was leaked to a San Francisco newspaper.

In the letter, which was sent, unencrypted, via email, Crozier expressed alarm over the slow pace of disembarking his crew at Naval Base Guam while the coronavirus spread rapidly on the ship, also known as the TR. Publication of the letter in the

San Francisco Chronicle sparked an outcry and worldwide media attention over Crozier's actions and the fate of the carrier's crew.

Eventually, 1,100 of the TR's nearly 5,000 crewmembers, including Crozier himself, tested positive for COVID-19. Only a fraction required hospitalization, but one Sailor, Aviation Ordnanceman CPO Charles Thacker Jr., succumbed to the virus.

Crozier was hailed as a hero by his crew – who were seen on video cheering for him as he departed the ship in Guam – while others criticized him for circumventing the Navy's chain of command. Modly said Crozier was not fired in retaliation for his letter but because the secretary had lost confidence in the captain's leadership. Crozier, he said, had allowed the complexity of the COVID-19 challenge "to overwhelm his ability to act professionally, when acting professionally was what was needed."

However, Modly complicated matters by flying to Guam, to defend his actions in an April 6 profanity laced address to the TR's crew. Modly called Crozier "too naive or too stupid to be the commanding officer of a ship like this," according to transcripts of recordings of Modly's remarks made by several of the carrier's crew.

Less than 24 hours after the speech, Modly issued an apology to Crozier, the Roosevelt's crew and the Navy, and offered his resignation to Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who accepted it.

Gilday directed Burke, the vice CNO, to investigate the circumstances and climate of the entire Pacific Fleet affecting the chain of command. Previously, Gilday spoke of "a potential comms breakdown, wherever it occurred," adding "we're not looking to shoot the messenger here, we want to get this right."

The completed report was delivered April 24 to Modly's replacement, acting Navy Secretary James McPherson, who

directed Gilday to conduct a second investigation, saying he had “unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review.”

COVID-19 was detected on board the aircraft carrier in late March, 15 days after the TR made a port call to Da Nang, Vietnam, the Navy announced March 24. Stopping at Guam for a scheduled visit on March 27, Crozier began disembarking crewmembers as the number of Sailors testing positive continued to rise. Finding suitable accommodations for thousands of personnel on the island was a slow process.

In his letter, Crozier said the carrier had inadequate space to isolate or quarantine Sailors. “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die,” Crozier wrote. “If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset – our Sailors.”

Testing the entire crew for COVID-19 was completed in mid-May and they began returning to the carrier in waves after 14-days’ isolation and twice testing negative for the virus. Despite those efforts, at least 14 returning Sailors tested positive again for COVID-19. Following a bow-to-stern deep-cleaning process by about 700 crew members, and recertifying aviation activities for its Carrier Air Wing 11, the TR left Guam and resumed its mission on June 4.