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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

HOW U.S. MILITARY SERVICES ARE RESPONDING TO THE
CORONAVIRUS AND THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON MILITARY READINESS

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On this special edition of the podcast, four U.S. military officers, who are participating in the 2019-2020 class of Federal Executive Fellows at Brookings, share their expert insights about the effects the Coronavirus pandemic is having on the readiness of their respective services.

The discussion was hosted by Brookings' President John R. Allen, himself a retired United States Marine Corps Four-Star General, and moderated by Senior Fellow Michael O'Hanlon, Director of Research in Foreign Policy at Brookings, where he specializes in U.S. defense strategy, the use of military force, and American national security policy.

In this episode of the podcast a portion of their conversation is presented, with each of the four officers addressing the readiness and capabilities questions for their services. In order, you will hear from O'Hanlon, followed by Colonel Thomas Burke, a U.S. Army aviator, Lieutenant Colonel Chesley Dycus, a mobility pilot with the U.S. Air Force, Colonel Eric Reid, a career infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps, and Commander Jessica Worst, a U.S. Coast Guard Officer. You can find out more about these officers on our website, Brookings.edu. Follow the Brookings podcast network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all of our shows, including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings trade podcast, the Current, and our events podcast.

And, now, here is Michael O'Hanlon.

O'HANLON: The two questions I'd like to pose to each analyst: first, what is the military doing so far to help in the COVID-19 response that you would want to highlight? Perhaps in regard to your own military service or perhaps something you think is just not getting enough

attention that's important.

And then, second, how about traditional U.S. national security concerns around the globe? To what extent is the readiness of the American armed forces being adversely affected in the way that obviously the Teddy Roosevelt aircraft carrier was, by COVID-19 among the men and women of the military, to what extent do we have to worry that our military forces could have their capabilities suffer, and therefore have deterrence or responsiveness suffer in a crisis? And even if the military doesn't get sick, will the measures taken to prevent that, the kind of social distancing we all do here, for example, at what point will those adversely affect military readiness because people can't train, can't keep to normal rotational schedules, can't change their military assignments?

So, again, question one, what's the military doing so far in response to COVID-19? Question two, at what point do you worry about military readiness being severely affected in a way that really could hurt the national security of the United States or put overseas interest a risk?

And with that, Tom, I'll start with you please.

COLONEL BURKE: First off, thank you, General Allen, thank you Michael, and thank you all.

To hit your first question, I think the Army, and really indeed all the services, responded pretty quickly to help augment state, local, and federal agencies with primarily, as you hinted at, Michael, the medical support. And, of course, we in the Army are able to reach across both the active component, the Guard, and the Reserve, for resources.

I think right now all 54 governors of states and territories I have activated — I think it's on the order of around 30,000 Guardsmen to assist, again, those same authorities. And right now

what the Guardsmen are doing is everything from helping with drive-thru medical testing, transportation of medical supplies, and handing out food in some of the more harder hit, distressed areas.

Also, I think as you've heard, we're sending medical teams to some of the harder hit communities, doctors, nurses, et cetera, to set up unit hospitals as well as augmenting inside actual hospital centers. And we've done this right now in New York, Seattle, Dallas, Chicago, other big city areas.

So our role really is one of a supporting agency on the medical front.

Michael, to your second question regarding readiness, and when we worry. I think it's useful to maybe provide a little bit of a background in terms of what the Services have done, what the Army as done, to help maintain what I think is an important balancing act between both protecting the Force and maintaining readiness.

So what the Army did, and frankly what all the Services did pretty early, I think beginning as early as January, is begin issuing guidance to the field. Okay, this is something that we're concerned about. Commanders start thinking smartly about how you might implement protocols and procedures at the unit level based on each of your unique missions to help maintain that balance that I just described.

One of the more visible things that the DoD did more broadly is implement the stop movement order, which is designed to help contribute to the overall flattening of the curve, of the pandemic spread, as well as protecting the Force.

So, as I mentioned, you know, the key now that each of the Service, what the Army is trying to figure out and is indeed doing, is maintaining that balance between readinesses, as well as protecting the Forces. We call it in the civilian world social distancing, the military refers to it

as tactical dispersion. And so it's, what you may have heard or seen in the news, what General Abrams has done, for example, in Korea, establishing these safety bubbles that include, you know, screening procedures and basically the social distancing that still allows us — through smart implementation of safety protocols, still allows us at the lower level to conduct training.

So that is something that the units are doing. We can't neglect training those mission essential tasks. What you have seen, of course, in the news — and getting to your question about the readiness — are some of the efforts that the military has taken to start scaling back or modifying some of the larger collective training events that we do. And so I think what the Services will do, what the Army will do, is really start looking, hey, at what point will readiness be impacted, and then when can we begin resuming some of those larger scale collective training events that are key to maintaining readiness.

Defender 20 was modified, of course, Pacific Pathways mission into Thailand was cut back a little bit. So those are some of the things that we have done to maintain that balance, get after the mission central tasks while also protecting our Force.

Thank you.

O'HANLON: That's a great start. Just one quick follow up since you're going first. I want to get a little bit of a tactical feel here for what's going on. And you alluded to it, but just to be even more specific, so typically at the small squad, at the platoon level, individual soldiers, or small groups of soldiers, up to dozens of soldiers, would still be doing a lot of the same training they normally would do, but at higher echelons, let's say when you get into the hundreds and thousands, companies, battalions, brigades, or large exercises, those are the ones that are being curtailed or suspended or postponed?

COLONEL BURKE: That's correct. So you're seeing — again, we're really talking

about the training exercises, some of the largest scale training exercises. For example, today it was reported that Pacific Pathways, which is a key mission that we do in the Pacific with our allies and partners in that region, we just concluded a few weeks early the Pacific Pathways mission, but not until we had first gotten after those essential tasks that we needed to do.

So that important partnership that we do with other nations, to really help them as well build readiness, we pulled that back. Once we met those collective training events, we pulled it back to that we could again achieve that appropriate level of balance.

To your point about the smaller unit, and this is a point that General McConville has made, that's really the core of all units, that squad team level training. And because they already, as a function of how we train, because they already tactically disperse, we're still able to get after that. But the bigger point that you raised is the importance of those major collective training events. And those are the ones that our leaders right now are looking at very closely. Hey, in the next 30, 60, 90 days, when can we begin to resume those larger scale collective training events so that we don't have any degradation in our overall readiness.

O'HANLON: That's fantastic. Thank you.

Chesley, over to you, my friend.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DYCUS: Good afternoon. John Allen, Mike, thank you for the opportunity for this.

I am going to echo some of Tom's primary points. Hands down I think the Air Force's biggest contribution to this is the addition of medical personnel from the Guard and Reserve. I have a friend who's in the Reserves who just found out yesterday that she is heading to New York. As you can imagine, some people may or may not be prepared for this, but it's on a significant scale—not having exact numbers in front of me.

As far as things the Air Force is doing unique, I'll point to two things, which just so happen to be in my area of expertise. And I'm not talking about the mobility world of the Air Force selfishly, but the Air Force has done two things just this month that are also what I would consider to be significant inputs. In early April a C-17 flew about 950,000 COVID-19 swab tests from Italy to Memphis, Tennessee so that those could then be distributed via FedEx to various parts of the country. That is one thing.

The second item is that three—I don't know if they were active duty or they were contractors, but three individuals in Afghanistan tested positive for COVID-19. And the C-17 also has a system that allows to put these individuals in basically a bubble to help prevent transmission, but that aircraft flew three people home from Afghanistan—not home, from Afghanistan to Germany, just three to four days ago.

So those three things collectively are what I would say are the Air Force's biggest contributions.

As far as readiness, I'm not overly concerned for readiness for the Air Force. And I don't think it really needs to be reassessed until probably sometime this summer. Air Force leadership has gone on record saying what our priorities are. That includes current operations in both the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula, cyber operations, standing up the Space Force, as well as homeland defense operations. Things are happening across the Air Force, as Tom alluded to, they're just not happening as fast as we're accustomed to.

So we're not exactly where we would like to be in this fiscal year, but at the same time, the hole is very easy to dig out of at the moment. Obviously the big question is how long this goes on and where is that deficit at in the summer, in the fall, or into next year.

And with that, Mike, I'll hand it back to you for questions.

O'HANLON: Great, Chesley. Before I go to Eric, just one quick follow up for you as well. Do we have a sense about roughly what percent of the Air Force we think has COVID-19 right now compared to the population writ large? Obviously, in the Teddy Roosevelt case we were concerned this could be the equivalent of a cruise ship. And Eric will speak to that kind of situation in just a moment, but across the Air Force, have you seen any statistics on expected or suspected incidence rate?

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DYCUS: I have not seen statistics. It is theß—so crew aircraft are a big concern. It's similar—it's not a perfect analogy compared to an aircraft carrier, but obviously there are people in close spaces and they have set up protocol so that crew members of crew type airplanes can adhere—as best they can—to CDC protocol. It's not perfect, but in a show of ingenuity it's what they can do to adhere to those guidelines as best as possible while keeping certain missions moving.

O'HANLON: Thank you.

And, Eric, over to you, my friend.

COLONEL REID: Thank you, Michael. Good afternoon, Eric Reid. I'm the Naval Services Rep this year.

So what are the Naval Services doing? I think our primary role is to continue to preserve U.S. interests globally with forward deployed forces and standing ready to deter and prevail in conflict. And so we're still doing that.

Domestically, as everyone knows, the Navy was tasked with high profile support with the deployments of the Mercy and the Comfort hospital ships. I think that demonstrated a unique capability and was intended to send a strong political message that federal help is on the way. Efficacy I think remains to be seen.

As an aside, I think we need to remain mindful that this is a public health viral pandemic emergency with no proven treatment and we're still building up a testing capability. And other than our medical personnel and some selected civil affairs assets, the Naval Services don't have a whole lot of special competency for pandemic response, other than the fact that we have a tremendous logistical augmentation capability standing at the ready to support domestically or internationally.

Military members are just as vulnerable as any citizen to COVID. Indeed, due to communal living conditions on ships and in barracks and in the field, military life is pretty fertile for community spread of the virus. So we're adapting. Until we have relief from the outbreak and we have adequate volumes testing fielded and a vaccine potentially, the Navy and Marine Corps are mitigating through—distancing has already been alluded to by Tom and Chesley, following CDC guidelines, and canceling nonessential group activities while still conducting training as best able. That is a commander level medically informed decision and in practice. And we're learning valuable lessons at all levels of command about what's truly important, about what we can curtail. And we're rediscovering how to prioritize a little bit.

One of our greatest immediate friction points has been navigating our throughput of incoming and outgoing sailors and marines into our manpower system amid the outbreak.

Four quick points on Naval readiness I would raise in answer to the second question. We remain the most capable and ready Naval military force in human history and nothing about COVID jeopardizes that in the long run. Readiness impacts to our ground units in the Marine Corps, they're not consequential. And any degradations we've had, as alluded to a little bit by Tom, to collective unit skills, they're easily recoverable once we start collective training again and once we start collective group activities again. So minimal or negligible diminishment in

that. Point three, the readiness impacts to the currency of our flight crews, collective ships crews, actions and maintenance, and flights deck crews, they're more tangible, but they're mitigated through the use of simulators in the case of crews and flight crews and for the flight decks through prioritized scheduling when we have availability to train. And flights are still happening, we're just mitigating via CDC guidelines. Point four, and the last one on Naval readiness, is outbreaks aboard Navy ships and submarines are obviously very serious and consequential and the fleet is learning and adapting as we speak.

From where I sit, Naval-wise, three points from my bottom line. Number one, there's absolutely no cause for hyperventilating over readiness impacts at this point. COVID is a new fact of life and we're adjusting to it. Number two, it's relative. So I'm reminded of the old joke about the hikers and the bear. We don't have to outrun the bear, just the other hikers. Our adversaries have to deal with and operate in a COVID world just as we do, and it's competitive. We have a lot of capacity and capability that other competitors don't have, which brings me to my final observation, which is number three, this is all about balancing risks, balancing competing risks, right. So in the absence of a military threat, the correct thing to do is to protect the Force and preserve our strength as best we can by mitigating COVID while we're increasing testing capability and awaiting a vaccine.

If a legitimate threat emerges, the relative risks and consequences of COVID will descend in importance and, in that case, we'll respond accordingly and we'll do what we need to do to prevail in conflict, while simultaneously mitigating the COVID as best we can.

Over to you, Mike.

O'HANLON: That's fantastic. Thank you, Eric.

And now, Jessica, over to you to explain what the Coast Guard has already been doing

and how you see the situation.

Thanks.

COMMANDER WORST: Great. Good afternoon. Thanks General Allen and Mike for this opportunity.

I'm Jess Worst; I'm the Coast Guard FEF this year. And, as Mike said, although the Coast Guard is one of the six military services, we certainly are quite unique in our mission set. And I think that played out here. The Coast Guard has been supporting the COVID-19 response really from the beginning, but often I think the public is not aware of our vast mission set, which does include responding to the unexpected, frankly. We regularly conduct search and rescue, response to natural disasters, like hurricanes, we respond to oil spills in the marine environment. So this is just another emergency response for us really, albeit on a much broader geographic scale.

Really, I think one of the more important roles we've filled in this response is management of the marine transportation system. Over 90 percent of U.S. overseas trade really leaves and enters the U.S. by ship. And it's been an incredibly important role to kind of keep those goods moving during this response. So the Coast Guard has captain of the ports across the country who are really responsible for keeping the commerce flowing while at the same time maintaining the safety of the ports, both the infrastructure and the people there.

So in order to ensure that needed cargo is still getting in to the U.S. and we're getting the supplies we need, particularly at this time, we put additional measures in place for screening the vessels that are coming in, certainly including looking at previous ports of call, putting additional restrictions in if vessels have visited certain affected areas prior to coming to the U.S. to really ensure we can keep everyone safe in the process of moving commerce.

We've also been addressing significant cruise ship concerns, as I'm sure everyone has heard of. We've worked under the guidance of the CDC, with a bunch of other federal, state, and local partners, including CBP, TSA, state and local entities, to really coordinate the safe landing, screening, quarantine where necessary, and repatriation of about 250,000 cruise ship passengers from over 120 vessels, all in the span of about a month. We've also conducted an increased number of medivac as necessary as well. So that's probably the most important role that I think a lot of folks haven't seen the Coast Guard doing.

In terms of your question on readiness, you know, the Coast Guard has challenges like all the other military services that were mentioned. For the most part we've been able to adapt and overcome those, whether it be, you know, modifying the way we're doing training, reorganizing the local (inaudible) schedules to kind of maintain social distancing the best we can, or even prioritizing some needed IT infrastructure upgrades, because our system is so antiquated. But because we've been able to address these challenges, really our overall readiness has not been diminished.

I think one of the most important contributing factors to this though is that our senior leaders have really empowered our field commanders to take the necessary actions to both protect their personnel while at the same time maintaining their unit readiness. They recognize it's not a one size fits all situation and we do have Coast Guard units spread geographically across the country in some, you know, smaller locations, larger locations. Every solution is going to be a little bit different in each geographic area.

But really I would say that our Coast Guard system is built on the ability to adapt and surge for disasters or any kind of emergency response, but under the present circumstances I don't see any problems in the Coast Guard's ability to maintain operations or being significantly

degraded in any way. We'll continue to overcome challenges that are presented and we will continue to deliver the services, you know, that are expected of us.

Of course, we'll need to reassess in the future in terms of the longer-term impact that folks have already mentioned, but at this point I don't see any degradation in our Coast Guard readiness.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleague, starting with audio engineer, Gaston Reboredo, and producer, Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalain provide design and web support. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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