

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Defence

Topic: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 - 19 June 20 - Q1 - COVID-19 Quarantine management of US Marine Rotation Force - Siewert

Question reference number: 1

Senator/Member: Rachel Siewert

Type of question: Written

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 July 2020

Question:

How many Troops have arrived so far?

- a. When are the remaining Troops due to arrive?
 - b. Where have the Troops come from:
 - i. Main land USA or somewhere else?
 - ii. If not mainland USA, where were they previously stationed?
 - c. How did they arrive - boat or plane?
 - i. If by boat, which US ship did they arrive on and, has that ship had any on-board cases of COVID-19?
 - ii. If yes, how many cases?
 - iii. How long ago?
 - iv. Is that vessel free of cases now?
 - v. If yes, how many cases?
 - vi. How long ago?
 - vii. Is that vessel free of cases now?
 - d. What quarantine measures are in place to ensure that Top End communities are not at risk from the Marine Rotational Force?
 - i. What was the quarantine process the troops had to go through before they got on their transport to Australia?
 - ii. Have they all been required to do 2 weeks isolation?
 - iii. Have they all been tested?
 - iv. If no, why not?
 - v. Have any troops that arrived reported symptoms?
 - vi. If yes, how many and what process is being followed for those individuals?
 - e. Where will the troops be stationed in Australia (which base)?
 - f. Will they be allowed to freely move around Darwin and other communities in the Top End?
 - i. What measures will be in place when troop move to and from base to ensure that they are not bringing the virus into the community?
2. Why was the Marine Rotational Force cancelled on 2nd April 2020?
- a. Why was the Marine Rotational Force subsequently reinstated on the 5th May 2020? Who made these decisions and on what advice?

- b. What changed in this time period?
3. Did the Minister seek the advice of the CMO and the NT counterpart before making this decision?
 - a. What was that advice?
4. What pathway did you use to engage with both First Nations communities and First Nations health experts to consider the potential impacts of the arrival of the Marine Rotational Force?

Answer:

1. At 16 July 2020, approximately 844 US Marines had arrived for the 2020 Marine Rotational Force – Darwin (MRF-D). 518 of these US Marines have already completed the 14-day mandatory quarantine. The fourth and final tranche is still scheduled to arrive, as planned. The US Marines taking part in the MRF-D have arrived in Darwin from three locations (Okinawa, Japan; Hawaii; and California) via aircraft chartered by the US Government.

All US Marines taking part in the MRF-D are required to complete the mandatory 14-day quarantine on arrival in Australia. Additionally, all US Marines are required to be tested by NT Health for COVID-19 on arrival, and tested a second time prior to their release from quarantine. Prior to departing for Australia, all US Marines underwent medical screening in line with US policy. To date, all US Marines, who have preceded to MRF-D activities, have tested negative for COVID-19 and successfully completed the mandatory 14-day quarantine. At 2 July 2020, four US Marines had reported upper respiratory irritation post-quarantine. In line with Defence planning, the affected Marines were isolated and tested again for COVID-19. These US Marines tested negative for COVID-19 and are continuing with their training. The cause of the irritation was identified by medical advice as acclimatisation to the dry-season weather conditions in Darwin and the back-burning currently under way.

The majority of the MRF-D, after completing quarantine, will be located at Robertson Barracks, with some elements hosted at other Defence facilities in the Darwin area. This year's MRF-D will have reduced interactions with NT communities compared to previous years. When on leave, US Marines will be subject to the same conditions as other residents in the Northern Territory, including all social distancing requirements. The health and safety of the Australian people, including our Indigenous communities, is a core consideration for MRF-D planning.

2. On 30 March 2020, the Minister for Defence announced the 2020 MRF-D would be paused, given ongoing restrictions associated with COVID-19. On 6 May 2020, the Minister for Defence announced that a modified 2020 MRF-D would proceed. The decision was based on Australia's record in managing the impacts of COVID-19, as well as strict adherence by the deploying US Marines to the mandatory 14-day quarantine and other requirements.
3. Both the then-Chief Medical Officer and his Northern Territory counterpart were consulted on the proposed measures for mitigating the risk of COVID-19. The measures were supported.

4. The Minister for Defence was in contact with Chief Minister Gunner to ensure he was consulted on, and supported, planning for the MRF-D. Additionally, Defence officials worked closely with their Northern Territory counterparts in the planning and conduct of the MRF-D.
5. On Friday 10 July, one US Marine from the third tranche tested positive for COVID-19 whilst in quarantine. This US Marine is being cared for in line with Federal and Northern Territory procedures. To date, no other US personnel in Australia has been diagnosed with COVID-19. The remainder of the third tranche is currently completing the mandatory 14-day quarantine, and will be tested for COVID-19 prior to exiting quarantine.