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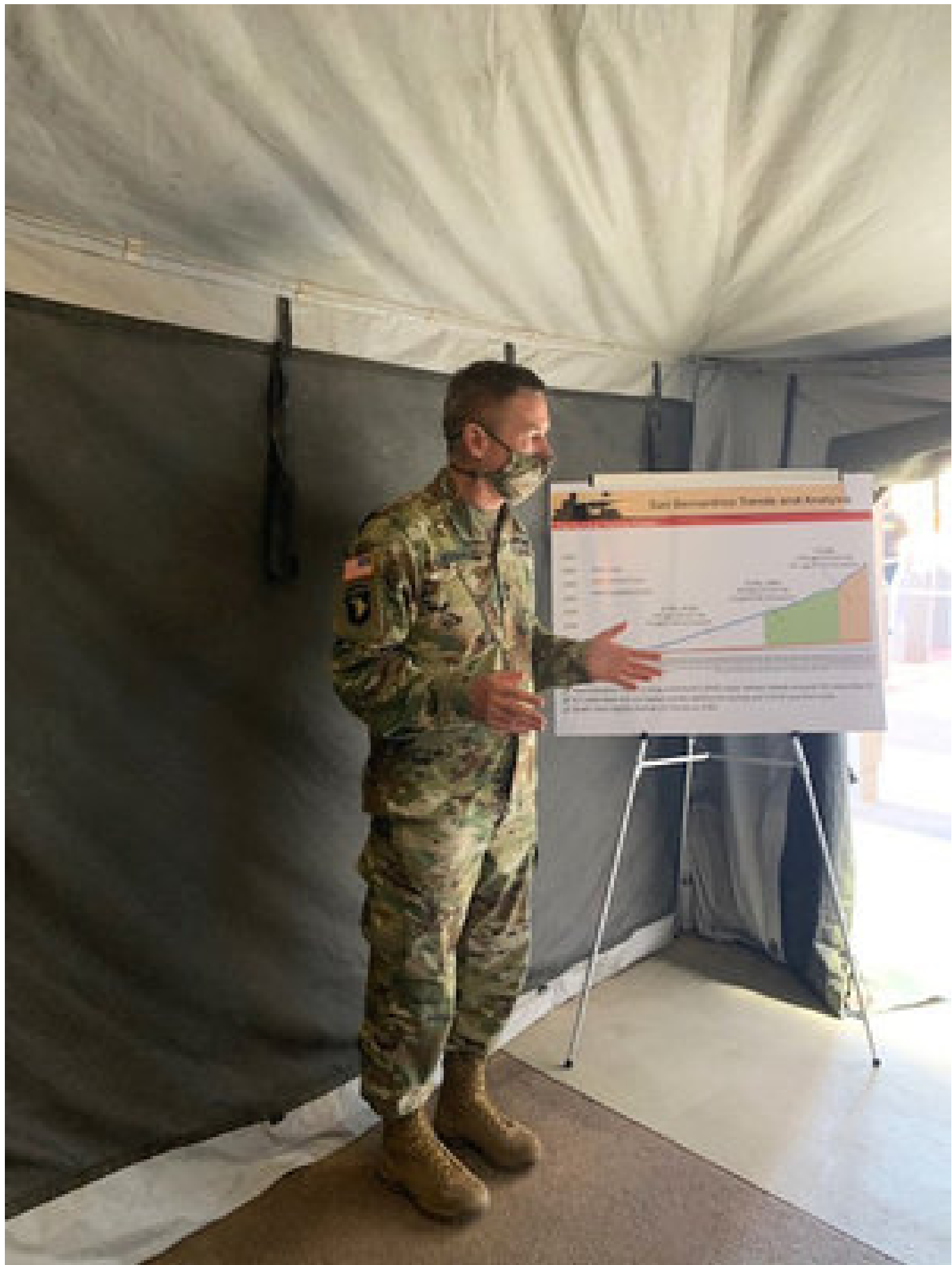
As America Socially Distances, The Army 'Tactically Disperses'

May 29, 2020 · 5:00 AM ET



TOM BOWMAN

At the end of June, several thousand National Guardsmen from 15 states will descend on Fort Irwin in California's Mojave Desert for two months. The Army is already gaming out how to keep them healthy and able to train during the coronavirus pandemic.



Gen. Jim McConville, the Army chief of staff, visiting Fort Irwin in California's Mojave Desert. The Army is working to get back to large-scale training after a three-month hiatus due to concerns about the coronavirus.

Tom Bowman/NPR

A sergeant barks out a command: "Soldiers completing the medical screening process come this way!"

The soldiers line up on a large concrete slab sheltered by a metal awning. All wear masks and stand 6 feet apart. A stiff desert wind picks up as a soldier gets ready for a quick health check.

One of the soldiers walks up to an Army medical technician.

"Are you experiencing any symptoms today, cough, shortness of breath or fever?" the technician asks.



THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Coronavirus Testing Machines Are Latest Bottleneck In Troubled Supply Chain

"Negative," says the soldier, as the technician holds a hand held thermometer, close to his forehead.

The thermometer beeps, and she tells him he can go. No elevated temperature.

"OK you can face this line over here," she says.

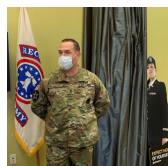
If he'd popped hot, he'd be isolated from the other soldiers, taken for a virus test and maybe quarantined for two weeks. No training for him.

This is all a simulation. But the Army's top officer, Gen. Jim McConville, watches it all closely. And turns to an officer.

"You know we have to keep this as safe as we can when we bring the soldiers in," the general says.

McConville came up in the Army as a helicopter pilot and served a number of tours in Afghanistan, but in the last few months he's become well-versed on the virus, as well as such things as swabs and reagents and testing machines.

"We going to have to make sure we can test," he says to a staff officer. "They're coming from all over the place. We have to make sure we can do that."



THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Army Scales Back In-Person Recruiting, Deploys Virus Testing Before Basic Training

These Guard soldiers will be the first to train here since March, when the coronavirus canceled and postponed field exercises for two other units.

The Army had to quickly adjust. Now all soldiers will be tested before they arrive. Buses bringing soldiers here will be half-full to allow for distancing. Tents will have fewer cots.

The officers walk into a massive tent the size of a high school gym. A sergeant major's voice echos as he points to the sea of green cots, all with the proper distancing.

"If you notice all the cots that are across here, there's 6-foot spacing now," he says to the visitors from the Pentagon. And soldiers will alternate how they sleep. No longer head-to-head.

"Head-to-foot to minimize impact," he says.

Army leaders like McConville are eager to start large-scale combat training again of brigades, a unit with some 4,000 soldiers. Another training base in Louisiana next month also will welcome back hundreds of soldiers to prepare for its mission to Afghanistan later this year.

McConville gives some advice to Brigadier Gen. Dave Lesperance, who commands Fort Irwin.



Soldiers at Fort Irwin in California wear masks to protect themselves from the coronavirus. The Army wants to get back to training thousands of troops at a time. Such training has been sidelined by the virus.

Tom Bowman/NPR

"And what I'm looking for is you have to minimize exposure, you really have to have social distancing," McConville says. "You really have to keep people apart, they have to wear their masks."

The National Guard soldiers will arrive here with their armor and artillery and head into a training area called "The Box." It's a sprawling desert expanse of mountains and

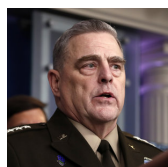
hills the size of Rhode Island.

"The safest place for people to be will be in the desert," McConville says. "We call it social distancing in the civilian sector. You call it tactically dispersed out here. And they'll be tactically dispersed and they'll work through that."

There are some 4,000 soldiers permanently based at Fort Irwin, part of an opposition force, or Op For, that battles the visiting units. Their role is to play the enemy, and battle visiting units during simulations.

Back at a conference room, Gen. Lesperance said he's had just a handful of positive virus cases here. The military hospital on post is equipped with three machines that can quickly turnaround a virus test.

"Right now we can do a 144," he says. "We want to get to 1,000."



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At this point if he wants to do a lot more tests, he has to turn to a private lab in Phoenix. But the turnaround time is two to seven days. Gen. McConville says that's too much time for an Army unit to stand idle.

The general shook his head. It wasn't long ago when the only talk at Fort Irwin was about weapons systems, how many rounds can it fire, and its range.

"Now we're talking about how many people can you test with this machine?" says McConville. "How many of these do you have? How many of those do you have?"

Gen. McConville says that's the message he'll carry back to Washington. Defensive measures are all very well, but the army needs more testing machines if it hopes to better hold off the coronavirus. And he realizes that he's not alone. Everyone — governor or mayor or even a general — wants more supplies.

Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said as training ramps up they will identify more machines.

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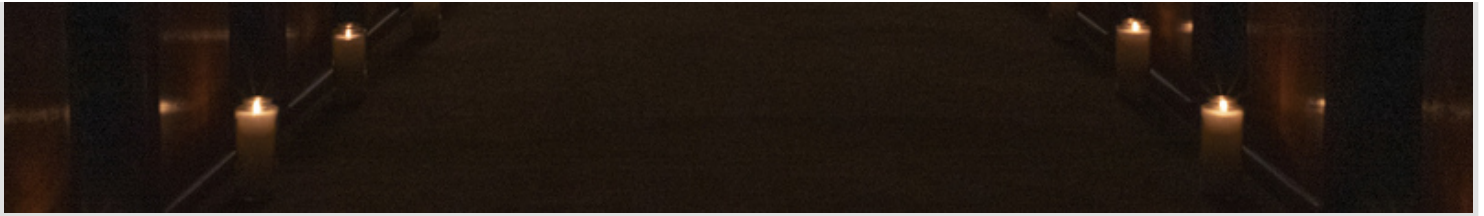




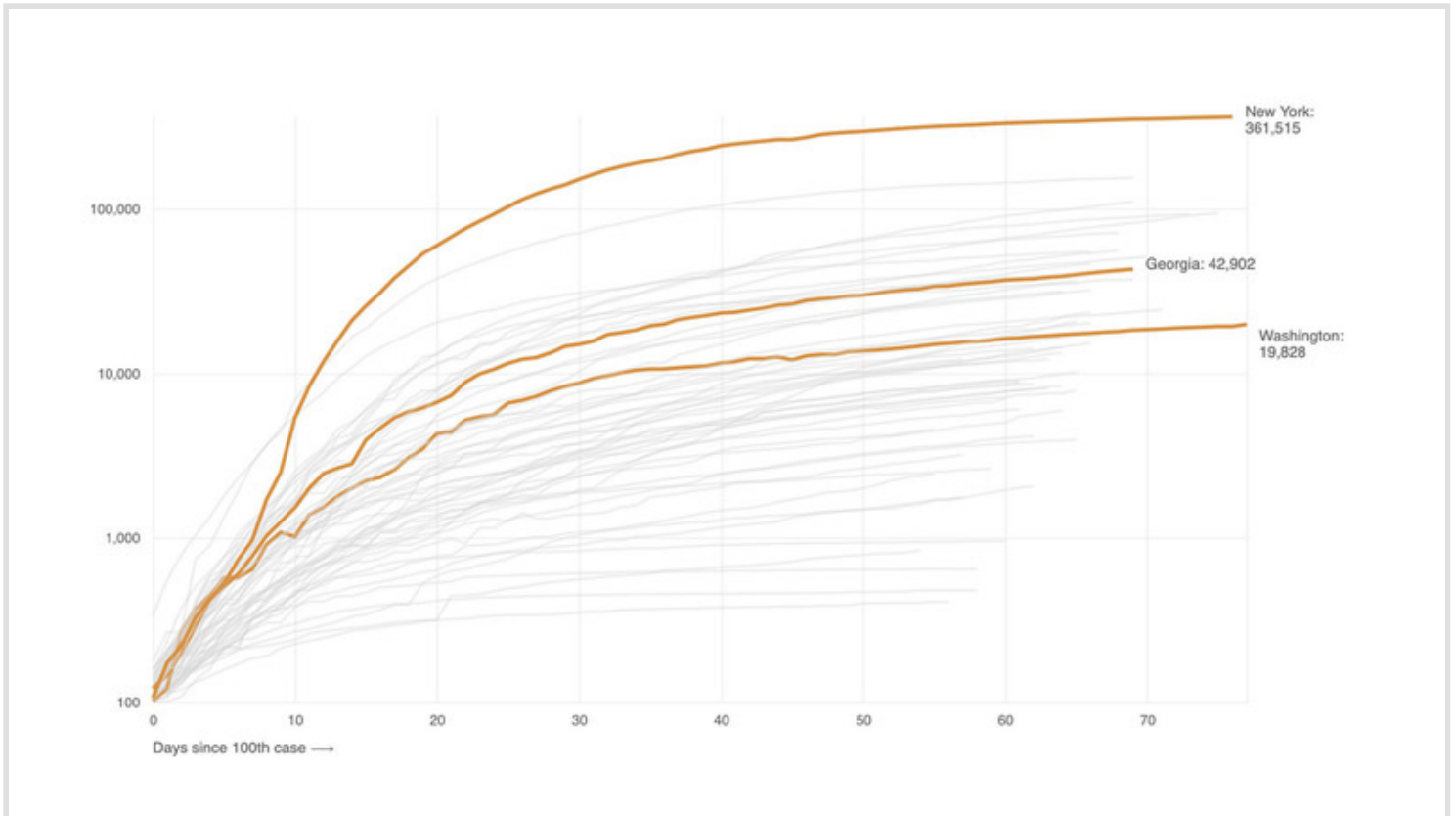
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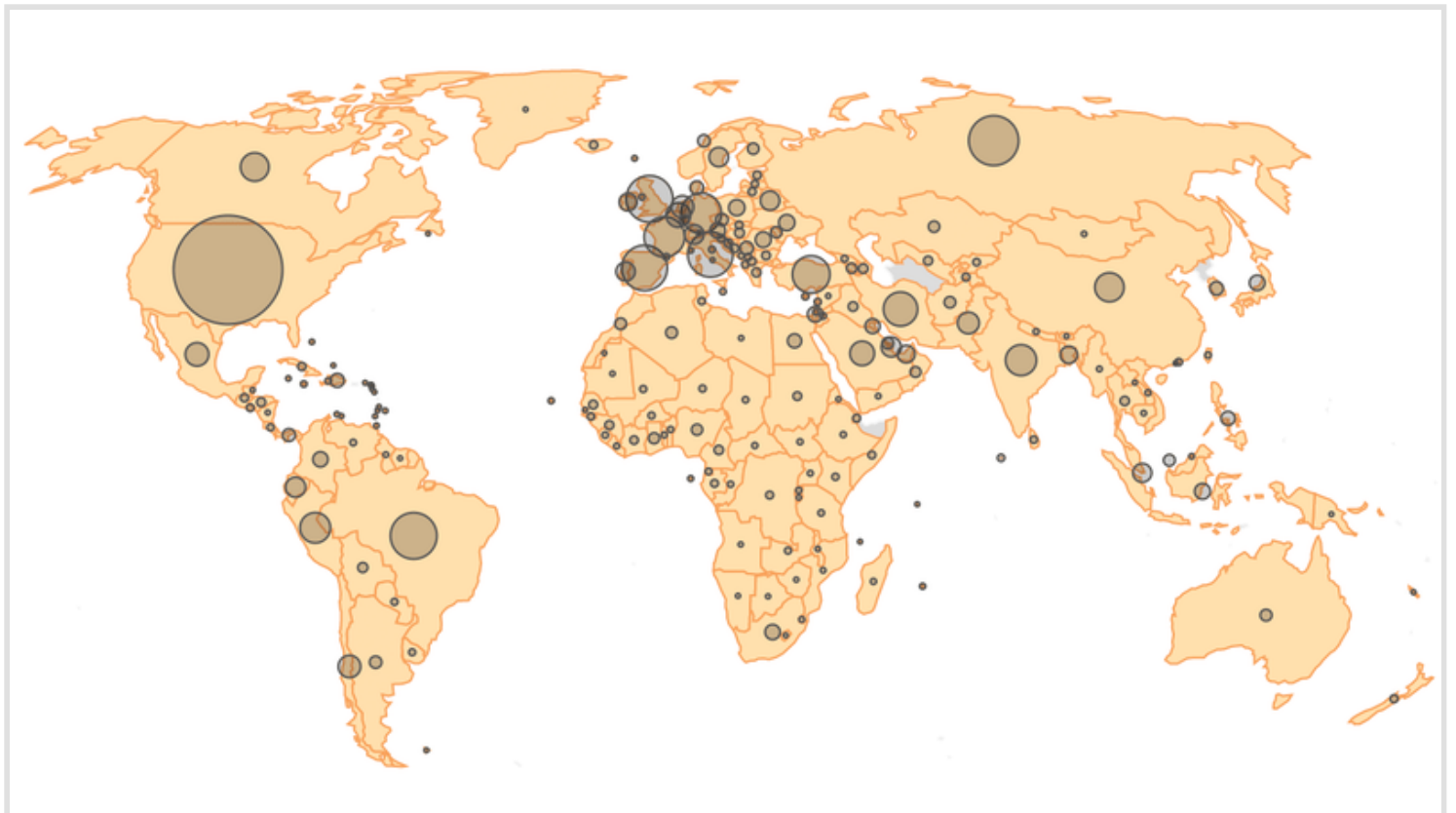


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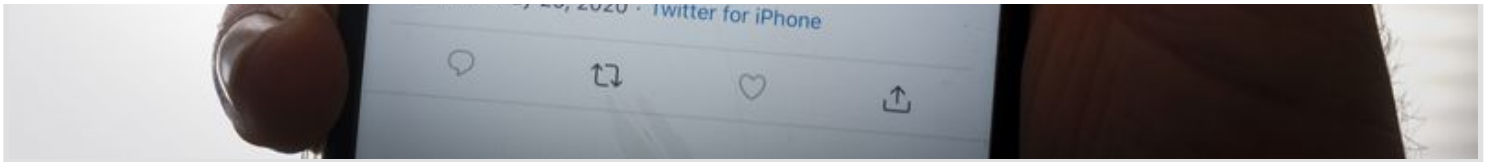
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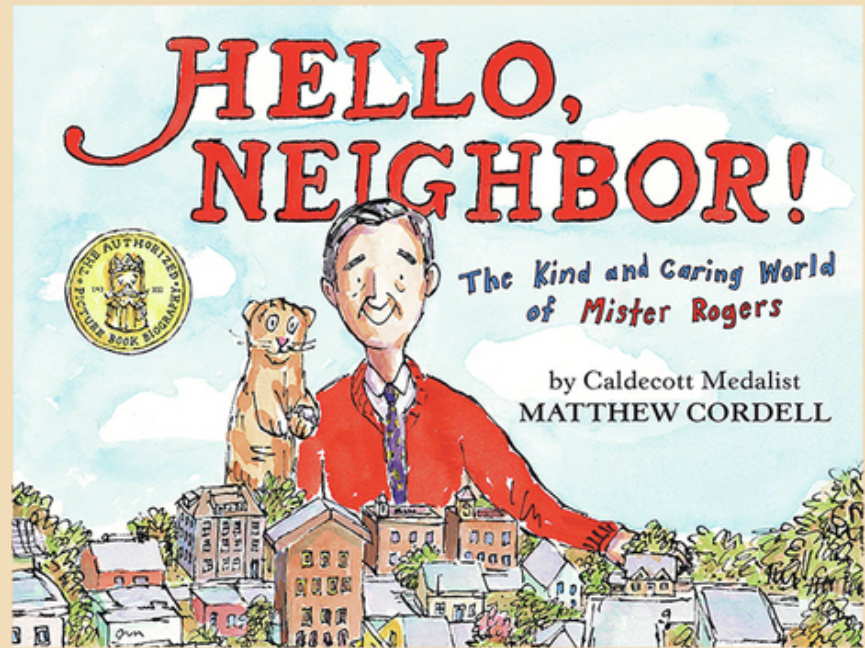
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