



TRANSCRIPT

Inside USEUCOM, Episode 3: Surgeon General Team

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MASTER SERGEANT JEFF CURTIN: Welcome to "Inside USEUCOM." My name is Master Sergeant Jeff Curtin and I am with the ECPA Public Affairs Office. Today with me, I've got USEUCOM Deputy Surgeon General Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Octavia Jones. Hello ma'am. How are you today?

LIEUTENANT COLONEL OCTAVIA JONES: I'm outstanding. How are you?

MSGT. CURTIN: I'm great. And I have the Chief of USEUCOM Force Health Protection Air Force Major Megan Martin. How are you, ma'am?

MAJOR MEGAN MARTIN: I'm good thanks for having us today.

MSGT. CURTIN: Absolutely. It's great to have you here. Today we're going to be talking about COVID-19 updates and all the things COVID-19 that we possibly can within the time period that we've got. So what is the purpose of the surgeon team? Why is it important to USEUCOM?

COL. JONES: So, I'll say that the surgeon's team, we're medical advisors to the combatant commander. So our job is to ensure that General Wolters has the most pertinent medical information available so that he can make decisions in -- in the operational space. So we advise him on, you know, Force Health Protection things, COVID and others as well as medical plans and operations and global health engagement. That's our relationships with our partner nations and their capabilities and how they can help support us in a contingency operations.

MSGT. CURTIN: Wow. Interesting. So would you say that you are ma'am, are the, kind of, the leader of the team over there, the -- the surgeon team?

COL. JONES: So I -- I assist with leading the team. Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Erickson, she is the surgeon right now. Unfortunately she couldn't be with us today but she -- she's one of those smart people that's got all the knowledge inside her brain and she leads our team expertly.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. I know that's one of the things that we've got actually in all the sections. Right? There's a lot of smart people doing a lot of smart things. It's hard to, kind of, pick out who's in charge because everyone really knows what they're doing. So and Major, you are in the -- the Force -- Force Health Protection position there within that team. What is -- what is your section doing? How does it -- how does it participate with the -- the surgeon team?

MAJ. MARTIN: So right now about 90 percent of our work is -- is COVID focused. Just because of the pandemic, it's been like that for about a year now but we do -- we do a lot of other missions. Tick-borne -- tick-borne encephalitis is another important disease within our area of responsibility. So there's other -- other diseases of concern out there that have operational impact to our forces but COVID is our -- is our main focus right now.

MSGT. CURTIN: Right now.

MAJ. MARTIN: Right now.

MSGT. CURTIN: Right now. Yes, right now it's your main focus.

MAJ. MARTIN: Right.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes, and so, I mean, do you see -- have you seen a drawing down of that at all? Obviously over the past year plus, we've been focusing on COVID-19. It's a -- rightfully so. Have you seen a little -- any drawing down of that or anything -- any parts of your team that are starting to focus on other things or side projects?

MAJ. MARTIN: So I would say, we never really actually stopped focusing on the other projects. You know, we -- we try to do is make sure that COVID minimally impacted the operational mission here. So we did a lot to make sure we could continue to perform our required things. So, you know, I'll say for instance, the DEFENDER exercise that USAREUR puts on, the Army puts on that went ahead while it was scoped down a little bit. It -- it still went ahead and we still had all of those other protection measures that we had to put in place. So, we have current emergencies. We have current situations but yes, we -- we -- we focused a lot on COVID but there was still always the other impacts that had to be focused on.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. DEFENDER '21's going on right now. Right?

MAJ. MARTIN: Yes.

MSGT. CURTIN: And it's -- it actually is a huge exercise and so from a Force Health Protection position, how does -- how do you help the team prepare? How do you help all these -- all these units get prepared for that kind of a exercise both physically and mentally?

MAJ. MARTIN: So that's -- that's a really important question. So overall we -- we try to articulate the scientific guidance. The public health policy out and then -- and help to implement that for these particular exercises or how we do our daily operations within the headquarters. So we advise on the appropriate measures such as wearing masks, physical distancing, also just, you know, you mentioned about mental health, right? So, that's -- that's another concern is that this --

this can be a very stressful time for our family members, for our forces right now. So ensuring that we have those capabilities and that support for those members is -- is definitely important right now.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. Absolutely.

COL. JONES: And I will add in that we -- we work very closely with the Army team to make sure that the personnel that were coming in were tested prior to or upon arrival. That they did the appropriate quarantine, the restriction of movement met those things as well as the -- the host nation requirements. Because it's not just about what we, the U.S. want to do, it's about what the host nation will allow us to do. So, a lot of that too and -- and I'll bring up another thing that's quite -- quite a big deal. African swine fever which is cleaning the actual vehicles and -- and personnel and things as they come through the -- the area of responsibility. So all those things kept going the entire time that COVID has -- has been in existence and -- and impacting our lives.

MSGT. CURTIN: So you all have been working real hard for the past year and a half.

(Laughter.)

Not that you weren't working hard before that I'm sure. It's just that every day is a new challenge and this is the one that we happen to be in right now. Right? So your team is responsible with ensuring that the command copes with COVID-19, right, as well. And so -- who, I've got to ask the question, who's -- who's responsible for determining whether or not I wear a mask while I'm at the gym or -- or walking around on base?

COL. JONES: So I will say that we try to follow of the Center for Disease Control guidance as it comes out. So back in the United States in Atlanta, Georgia, they're the lead for the COVID response for all the U.S. government. So we try to fall in line with those requirements as well as what the host nation mandates that we do. So from our perspective and -- and I think if you'll remember the new administration came in and one of the first pieces of policy that the new president put out was mandatory mask wear on all U.S. installations in all government property. So that was one of the more strict policies that got place -- put into place and our leadership decided when and where exceptions to that policy would be granted. So each of the component commanders and the combatant commanders made that decision for their forces that they're responsible for.

MSGT. CURTIN: Anything to add on that ma'am? She did that pretty well.

MAJ. MARTIN: Yes. She did that pretty well on that one. But you know it's -- it's -- it's definitely a balance. Right? So we not only have CDC guidelines but host nation guidelines as well. So, as you know, Germany at least for us here locally and -- and Stuttgart, we're on a lockdown and that got extended through mid-April. So we also have to be cognizant and -- and interpret their public health policy as well and make sure we align with host nation.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. Speaking of host nation, how important is it that we as guests in this nation actually adhere to the guidelines? I mean, if I walk out into the -- the city of Stuttgart

or into any of the surrounding areas. How important is it that I actually know what's going on in those areas and that I'm following the guidelines of those areas?

COL. JONES: So I'll say it's critical. So, most of the people that are in this -- in the European continent for with part of courting the DOD they are here on what they call the SOFA status, Status of Forces Agreement which says you will abide by host nation requirements. And so this is one of those and unfortunately if you choose not to follow or -- or respect host nation requirements, you can have your SOFA status revoked and you can be sent home from this country that they're allowing us to be in. So, I would say it's very vital. We continuously scour the -- the Robert Cook Institute is the Germany's equivalent of the Center for Disease Control. We constantly scour that to make sure that we're providing as much information we can about what the German requirements are. And each of the combatant commands and the components that we have support us do the same for the areas that they're in as well.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. That's -- that's -- that is really important. I mean, I haven't been here that long, you know, in -- in the country but -- but I really, really enjoy it so far and I would not -- I would not like to go back to the states right at this moment. So, all right. Well, so let's move onto the vaccine. Obviously, it's like people are wondering, you know, when is this going to happen? What's -- what's the status? How long until I can get a vaccine and what does that vaccine actually mean at this -- can I go out to restaurants and start moving around the -- the area? Or do I still have certain restrictions? So where are we at with that?

COL. JONES: So, I'll -- I'll preface this question in saying that things are continuously changing but the United States government has purchased vaccine from private industries in the United States. And as the Department of Defense, we get a small portion of that because, of course, the United States is responsible for vaccinated 330 million of which the Department of Defense is less than one percent of that. So we get vaccinations at -- at our appropriate rate. In this theater, we have received about 92,000 doses and we've administered already over 88,000 does of those. So we -- we've worked very hard to make sure that as soon as we get vaccine, we can put it out there and get into the arms of the people that -- that need it.

But beyond that, the president's recently gave some guidance and some thoughts that they've increased vaccine production in the United States and so he gave a goal of -- of May timeframe that he wants to have enough vaccine available for everybody. And so we -- we want to -- or we will get a portion of that allocation and hopefully we'll fall in those same guidelines in that same timeframe.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. Kind of -- I know it sounds kind of like a broken record but obviously patience is critical here. A lot of people have been patient for a long time. Some are getting a little restless but at the same time we have to maintain that -- that aspect because it -- it is really important. Everyone is working really, really hard. I can assure that and I -- and you all are -- you are not exemptions to that at all. So, are they safe? Are they effective? I mean, at this point, you know like, if I take the vaccine, what's to say that it's actually going to do me any good?

MAJ. MARTIN: So that's -- that's an excellent question. So even though the -- the vaccines are under emergency authorization still. The vaccines are -- are shown to be very effective and very safe. So the vaccines will protect yourself and they'll also protect people around you. And now that we know that they're very effective and very safe, it's a really important tool that we have in our tool kit now to help us, kind of, stop this pandemic. And CDC guidelines, the Centers for Disease Control Prevention, they still highly recommend to continue wearing your -- your facemask or face covering as well as physical distancing as we continue to learn even more about COVID and the vaccine. But the research is very promising.

MSGT. CURTIN: Okay. Then -- yes, that's really great to hear. I mean, I'm -- I'm sure that I'm going to be on the list here sometime soon and I'm looking forward to being able to just walk around wherever I want, do whatever I want and not wear a mask. Right?

COL. JONES: So that's -- that's not immediately, you know, as soon as you get a vaccine everything stops and then you don't have to work on any of the Force Health Protection measures. Again, as this -- this disease is evolving and we're -- we're still learning more about it especially with the -- or that -- that fact that variants are becoming an issue as well. It is still recommended that people that have been vaccinated still practice social distancing and mask wear. There are certain liftings of restrictions that you could say per the -- the CDC. So personnel or people that have been vaccinated and -- and everyone in that group setting is vaccinated.

They're allowed to gather in small areas without masks, with less social distancing. But it's not a free for all of just I want to go out and never wear a mask again. I don't have to wash my hands anymore and I -- I get to be in somebody's face immediately and all the time. There's still precautions that you put in place but it's allowing a little bit more freedom at a time. And as we continue to find out information about the -- the virus, we -- we will continue -- the CDC will continue to evolve the guidelines for that.

MSGT. CURTIN: Well that's great to hear. You know, there's one thing that I really want to know and I know there's rumors kind of going both directions. Does the vaccine prevent you from getting sick? Or does it just -- or does it prevent you from actually getting the virus?

MAJ. MARTIN: So, it definitely reduces disease severity and death, especially with the mRNA vaccines because we have a lot more research with that. And with the Johnson & Johnson-Janssen vaccine, so preventing death and severe illness, it's very effective at doing that. Some -- there's also a lot of research out there that's saying it does prevent you from getting the illness. Even -- even for more mild illness or asymptomatic, so we're still learning about that aspect but overall it's showing very good indications that it will do that.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. So that's good to hear because, I mean, even if I get the vaccine I should still obviously, like you said, practice all those precautions because I theoretically could be a carrier even though I do not feel sick or have any symptoms or anything like that. And I could spread it to someone else. Right?

MAJ. MARTIN: Yes. We just need to keep learning about the vaccine and it's going to take time much like we're still learning about COVID-19 in general. Right? Just the virus and -- and it goes along with the vaccine as well that we just need to continue learning. So -- so it's just, again, another part of our tool kit but we need to remember to still utilize our other protective measures -- measures like physical distancing, facemasks, testing and even quarantine and isolation.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. I mean, it's a -- I mean, it's a fairly new thing. Right? The COVID-19's a fairly new virus in general let alone the -- the vaccine. So you just have to stay vigilant and pay attention to those kinds of things. So, Pentagon officials recently -- recently stated that all DOD personnel and beneficiaries will be eligible for the vaccine. Do you have any insight on that or any timelines or anything that you -- that you have that you might be able to add to that?

COL. JONES: So they gave the -- the 1 May, kind of, goal that they wanted to -- to hit on and I don't want to stress that it's not, you know, everybody rush to your local medical treatment facility on 1 May and say give me a vaccine right now. What they say, what the actual intent is that they will -- it will be open to all of the rest of the tiers at that point and time. So I will say that we have a large population here in the USEUCOM area of responsibility and most of that population falls into the generally healthy population. And that's not the people that we're targeting right now. Right now we're targeting the people that are sicker, our medical professionals so that we can make sure that if -- or people that have pre -- pre-existing medical conditions so that they don't end up in the hospital overwhelming our medical systems.

So by the 1, May timeframe, they want to be able to open up the vaccines for all the healthy people that are out there that are eligible for the vaccine through the Department of Defense. So each of the medical treatment facilities are creating processes and having those in place so that they can manage the vaccine roll out as soon as those vaccines start flowing from the sky so they say. When there's a lot more vaccine available and the supply and demand issues are no longer what's the constraining factor.

MSGT. CURTIN: Okay. Well that's good to hear. I mean, it's -- it's great to hear that there's somewhat of a timeline. Obviously there's, as you said, everything's flexible and everything's, kind of, changing slightly from time to time. So, we're going to keep an eye on that and everybody should just basically be paying attention. And how are they -- they going to get notified by somebody? An e-mail or a text or a phone call to say that they're eligible or how does that work?

COL. JONES: So each of the medical treatment facilities are doing their's slightly differently. So some of them are planning to do mass vaccination event, where they'll, you know, like the flu line. You come here on certain day between certain hours and -- and pretty much if you're eligible we'll give you a shot. Some of them are doing it by appointment only so that they can maintain their clinical services. So I'd say it -- it has to be coordinated with your medical treatment facility at the installation that you're at and though, there's different processes and different procedures as each different base has a mission that they have to still accomplish as

well. So it's a balancing act of making sure that we get as many people vaccinated as quickly as possible versus maintaining our -- our regular mission.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. That could be really crucial to someone being able to go on an exercise or TDY or anything like that. Right? So how does -- how does getting the vaccine effect somebody's ability to perform their duties over someone that doesn't have the vaccine yet?

COL. JONES: Well right now, the -- the Force Health Protection or the Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions that we utilize. They're -- they're still being implemented for personnel whether being that they're vaccinated or not. Until we know more about how effective the vaccine is in the long term and -- and how much of the population has either natural immunity to the disease or has that pharmaceutical immunity. You can't really start lifting those restrictions as of yet. And so, right now, a lot of the people that are coming over for exercises, they still have to do, even though if they're vaccinated, they still have to do, you know, the -- the social distancing.

They still have to do the quarantine. They still have to get tested just to be on the safe side. Hopefully in the future, I can't give you a specific timeline, but hopefully in the future that will not become or that will no longer be an issue for -- for our personnel that are just living their everyday lives or deploying. So --

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes.

COL. JONES: -- that's the goal.

MSGT. CURTIN: That's the goal for everyone. Right? That's not just us but that's everyone's goal. So, why does the medical readiness factor come into play? I mean, you know, obviously we have medical readiness that has to happen all the time. I mean, I just got my MMR shot the other day and -- and that was, you know, that's a regular thing that we all have to get. How does -- how does the COVID-19 perspective fall into our medical readiness on -- on a regular basis? And how will it fall into the medical readiness in the future, years and years down the road?

COL. JONES: I would say that right now, it is not a factor because this vaccine is not mandatory for any service member or dependent or beneficiary. There could come a time where this does become a mandatory vaccine that people will have to take. And when that time comes, it will greatly impact your medical readiness or ability to deploy and -- and perform your duties. But as of right now, at this moment, it has not been mandated by the president as a mandatory vaccine. We don't know if and when that will happen. It's -- we're probably more probable than not that it will eventually become a mandatory vaccine but as of right now, it's not effecting your -- your medical readiness. It is a -- a vaccine that is highly recommended that you take because we think eventually it will impact that.

MSGT. CURTIN: Do you have any thoughts -- there are some people that have the -- the thinking that, maybe this is an opportunity for me to be able to control my own -- my own future and me be to be able to take a say in what I do and don't put in my body. Some people that are a

little skeptical as to how the vaccine works or whether or not it's going to be effective or it's going to have some negative effects on them. What would you say to those people?

MAJ. MARTIN: I would just say, follow the science. So the science shows that this vaccine is very effective and it's very safe. So if you look at -- look at the science, maybe kind of avoid Facebook or Twitter or what else, you know, people have their opinions but there's a lot of really intelligent people, very intelligent scientists who are working on this. And this is one of the most studied viruses and -- and vaccines that we've ever -- we've ever seen. So there's a lot of smart people looking into this and the evidence is very clear that it's very effective and very safe and as we mentioned before, this will hopefully, you know, ease the pandemic and give us some relief. So we can have more of those nice freedoms or -- or be -- have an opportunity to travel more safely or visit with grandparents briefly. So I think considering all those factors, it's highly encouraged at this point.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. I mean, you make a great point, I mean social media obviously plays a huge role in all of our lives and like the way that we see the world and we -- we kind of take in information. That being said, do you have any specific outlets or -- or places where people can get information even if it is on social media? Like, what are some -- some locations - - some places I can look up to get updates?

MAJ. MARTIN: So the Centers for Disease Control Prevention, they have a Facebook site. They also have a website and so this is where it's very credible source. Right? And that would be a good place, also the ECDC so that's the Europeans equivalent to the Centers for Disease Control Prevention. So that's their equivalent website, they also have a lot of good information that is credible and it's a little bit -- pertains more to the European region.

COL. JONES: And -- and I'll say I love the CDC website, so for everybody out there that's www.cdc.gov. So literally the -- the first page is -- is all the -- all the -- the COVID information you could want. There's a giant block for, you know, vaccine efforts and travel requirements and it's -- it's pretty much dedicated almost exclusively to COVID at this point and time. So if you want a credible source from people who have been studying diseases and -- and contagions their entire adult lives typically that's the people to talk to. Those are the people to read their information. You know, while they're great reports out there on things that tends to be filtered through a -- a -- a media filter or something along those lines. This is the straight information directly from the people who do this for a living and I -- I check that site at least four times a day.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. And those are two really great outlets. Those are great places to go for information. I mean, that being said we are in Europe and a lot of people here are looking forward to getting into traveling again and seeing everything that Europe actually has to offer. Do you have any recommendations for -- for places they can go for country specific or guidelines that will help them be -- be able to be better travelers? Be better partners or allies to the host nations and -- and taking care of not just themselves but everyone they come in contact with?

COL. JONES: So in addition to going through our CDC or the European CDC, we have the Foreign Clearance Guide which is something our -- our, you know, our embassies in each of these countries spend a lot of time going through and making sure that you put up front the -- the requirements to enter their country. Whether it's for leave. Whether it's for an exercise, whether it's for any type of travel to their country. Each one of those Foreign Clearance Guide sites has information about what you have to do to enter that country and follow their requirements safely. I -- I'm trying to think of the other places that I usually go to check this. I try to check the individual ministry of health websites that they have out there. Google Chrome does an amazing job of translating the host from whichever language they're in but -- but that's where I'd start if -- if nothing else.

MAJ. MARTIN: And I think when travel really does start to pick up, hopefully soon here as more people get vaccinated. It's really important to just ensure to do your research. Right? So COVID has really forced us to even, you know, do even more planning when we -- when we travel. So just ensuring that you understand what that particular host nation guidance is. Do they require a COVID test upon arrival? Is that within 48 hours, 72 hours? As well as, do they require facemasks? And I would say, even if they -- even if that country maybe might be a little less conservative about that to still wear that facemask and just be respectful. But knowing really what does the host nation require I think is, will help set you straight during your travels.

MSGT. CURTIN : Great. That's fantastic news. And, you know, I mean, I'm really loving the whole hiking and, you know, some outdoor stuff that the area has to offer throughout the area here. And I'm probably going to keep doing that for a while and when stuff does start to open back up, I'm sure that I'll keep doing it because it's a great form of exercise and that there's a lot to see here.

COL. JONES: Yes there is.

MSGT. CURTIN: So, I'm -- I'm excited as -- as we move forward to -- to get some -- to getting some of those vaccines and see how that's been -- and how that's coming. Do you have anything that you want to add to this -- this concept or to the COVID-19 situation in general?

COL. JONES: I would say, we have to exercise patience at this point and time. You know, I -- I know we all want to get back to normal and not wearing masks. I will say COVID-19 as a virus does not really care that we want to get back to normal and stop wearing a mask and -- and they, kind of, disregard our vote in that. So as the -- the better we comply with the Force Health Protection Requirements, the easier it is to stop the spread. So you see now cases are rising across the globe and it's because they're tracking that down to non-compliance with host nation requirements. You know as your vaccinating, you would think immediately you'd decline in cases.

But people are stopping and -- and -- and stopping doing the things that they're required to do and it's -- and unfortunately going in the opposite direction across the globe that we want it to go. So I know it's hard. I know it's tough. I know it's frustrating and we all just want to go

back but we have to be patient and we have to continue to -- to follow those Force Health Protection measures to help stop the spread of this disease.

MAJ. MARTIN: So Colonel Jones you have a lot of great points but, you know, I really just encourage when it's everyone's time to -- to really consider the science and the research that's out there with the vaccine and encourage you all to get vaccinated as we get through this pandemic. I know it's really tough with COVID fatigue and we want to get back to our normal lives but I -- I think the vaccine is really going to be that answer for global -- on a global scale.

MSGT. CURTIN: Yes. Awesome points all across and we look forward to hearing more from you both and seeing what it is that as we go forward the research that you both are doing. We thank you for all the work that you're putting in, the extra efforts for your entire team here at the Headquarters EUCOM. And I appreciate you attending and talking with us today.

That was Lieutenant Colonel Octavia Jones, the USEUCOM Deputy Surgeon General and Major Megan Martin, the Chief of USEUCOM Force Health Protection. This has been "Inside USEUCOM." I'm Master Sergeant Jeff Curtin from Public Affairs Office and thank you for listening today. We appreciate your attendance and we look forward to talking to you again when the next episode rolls.

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