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PRT: A New Twist for an Old Program

By the time you read this article, the Navy's autumn physical readiness testing will be in full swing. Many Reservists will plan to participate in the semiannual physical fitness assessment without any preparation and, thus, run the risk of injury and even possibly death. Among 256 demobilized Naval Reservists who are currently on an extended active duty, "Medical Hold" status, 192 are for orthopedic injuries or illnesses, of which most are related to the PRT and preventable. Commander Naval Reserve Force, in a strong attempt to change the attitude of "just-in-time PRT," has released a new message (DTG 191716Z Aug 03) to encourage a culture of physical fitness as defined by OPNAVINST 6110.1G (Physical Readiness Program).

According to this Instruction, "Physical fitness is a crucial element of mission performance and must be a part of every Navy member's life. The principal goal of the Physical Readiness Program is to create a culture of fitness to enhance a member's ability to complete tasks that support the command's mission." The Instruction specifically directs all Navy personnel to maintain personal physical fitness by regular exercise and proper nutrition. The COMNAVRESFOR message shifts the current focus from a semiannual "exercise stress test" to ensuring that members are fit and injuries are prevented.

While it is the responsibility of the unit commanding officer to integrate physical training activities into the work cycle, it is the responsibility of the individual member to maintain a lifestyle that promotes health and physical readiness. The COMNAVRESFOR message emphasizes promoting a healthy lifestyle by authorizing physical readiness training to be conducted

on drill time. The message goes on to state, "Per the OPNAVINST, individual service members shall develop and maintain a fitness program which includes aerobic, flexibility, muscular strength, and endurance exercises at least three times per week. Furthermore, service members shall report for the PRT and physical training with a level of fitness that ensures safe participation." If a member is not fit enough to ensure safe PRT participation, as noted in the physical activity risk factor screening questionnaire (PARFQ), i.e., sedentary, does not exercise regularly, etc., then the member should be enrolled in a remedial fitness program until fit to participate safely in the PRT.

Individuals who are sedentary and do not regularly exercise, even though they can pass the PRT, are not in compliance with the OPNAVINST. The intent and directive contained in the OPNAVINST to exercise regularly cannot be overlooked. Regular, weekly physical exercise is just as important, if not more so, as the PRT itself. Regular exercise and embracing a healthy lifestyle will ensure safety and a healthy outcome when participating in the PRT.

The COMNAVRESFOR message states that members who admit to a sedentary lifestyle and do not maintain a personal fitness program will be enrolled in a fitness enhancement program (FEP) and will not be permitted to participate in the PRT until the member acquires a level of fitness that ensures safe PRT participation. When a Reservist is out of standards, enrolled in a FEP, and is scheduled to perform AT, ADT, ADSW in a high visibility assignment, the unit CO must obtain concurrence from the gaining command that the member's assignment is acceptable and acknowledgement that the member will continue enrollment in a FEP. Furthermore, drill periods may be extended to include physical fitness training, nutritional guidance, and other non-physical training that promotes a healthy lifestyle.

It is difficult and nearly impossible to monitor completely and accurately the health and fitness of every Naval Reservist. Unlike the Active Component who receive their health care through the Military Healthcare System, the Reserve Component obtain their medical services through innumerable providers and healthcare systems, which do not lend themselves to tracking. Keeping CNRF informed of one's health through the Reserve Center Medical Department Representative and the REDCOM is crucial. Individuals must be honest with themselves and the Unit PRT Coordinator when answering the PARFQ. For those individuals who are not actively engaged in regular physical training, placement in a fitness enhancement program should not be considered as punitive, but rather as a means of encouraging and promoting a positive attitude toward wellness and fitness. Perhaps one positive approach would be to have the Unit Commanding Officer to encourage sedentary Reservists to maintain an exercise log, which would be reviewed by the Command Fitness Leader (CFL) on drill weekends.

The current fitness program and evaluation through a semiannual PRT test falls significantly short of fostering a regular health and fitness lifestyle. In a Naval Reserve Force composed of an older and less physically conditioned population, continuation of the current emphasis on the semiannual PRT test without a greater emphasis on physical conditioning and fitness may be hazardous to the health of the Naval Reserve population. With the Navy Surgeon General's emphasis on wellness and health promotion coupled with the Secretary of Defense's plans to restructure the Active and Reserve Components, perhaps it is high time to pay more attention to the fitness of the most important element in the Department of Defense, the human. ♣