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ITALY EDITION

Space operations

America's troops must
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top general
says
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The first photo of Earth as seen from the
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COVER STORY

Top general: Prepare now for space war

Joint Chiefs chairman says US must be ready to fight in all domains

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

America's armed forces must prepare to wage and win wars in all domains, including on and around the moon, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff said last month.

The task before U.S. troops is "to adapt right now, so the joint force is prepared to fight, endure, and win in global contested environments, from the seabed to cislunar space," Air Force Gen. Dan Caine told an audience of service members and defense industry leaders Sept. 16 at the Air, Space and Cyber Conference in Maryland.

Cislunar space refers to the vast region extending out from Earth's surface to and including the moon.

"Future conflicts will demand that we operate without the assumptions of uncontested access, secure rear areas, or uninterrupted or uncontested sustainment," he said.

Caine's comments came just days after Air Force Secretary Troy Meink acknowledged publicly for the first time that the U.S. has stationed weapons in Earth's orbit.

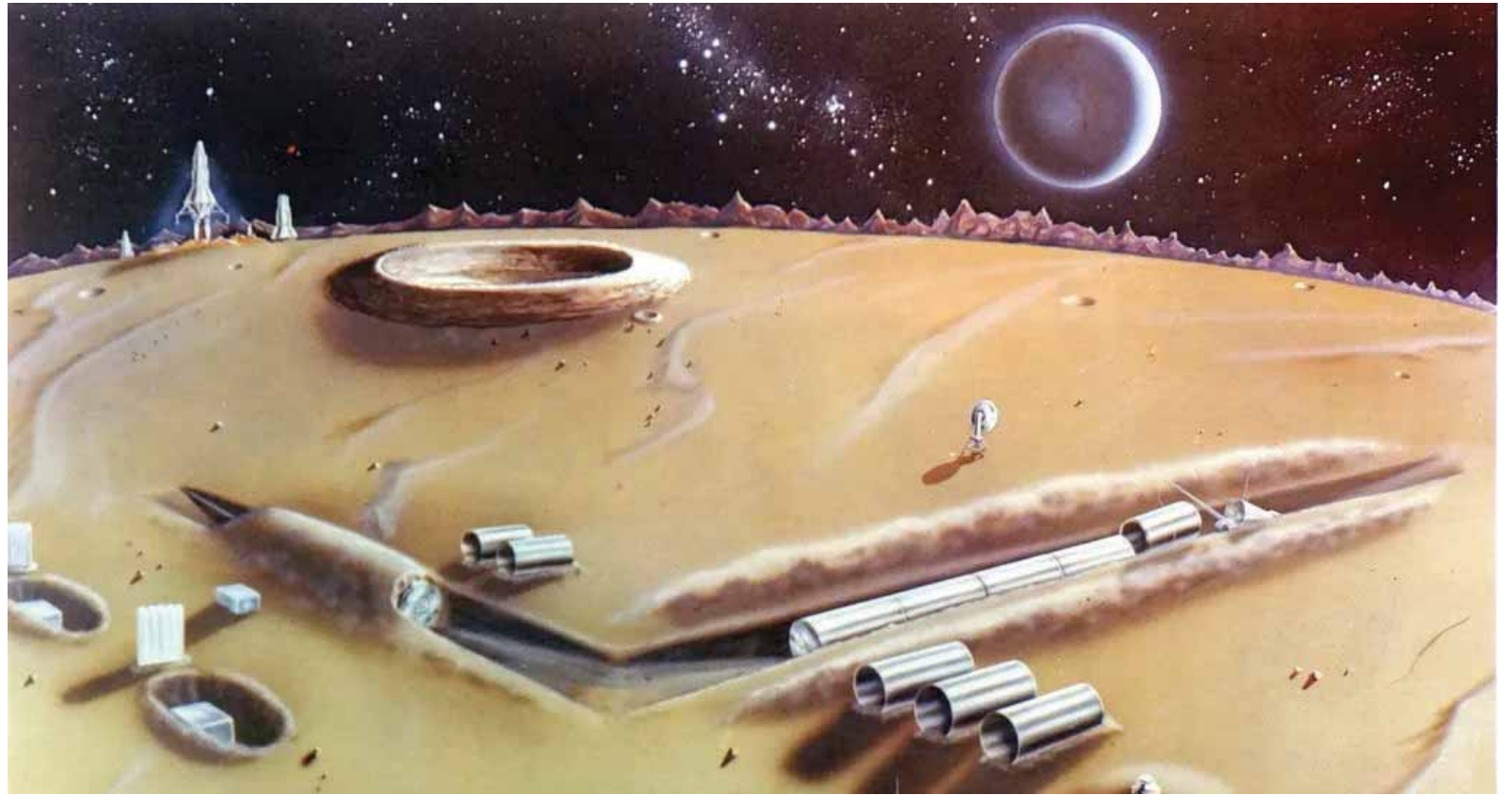
"We are increasing readiness against existing threats, and the United States has on-orbit space control weapons capable of defending the joint force against hostile adversary action," Meink said on the opening day of the conference hosted by the Air and Space Forces Association, a nonprofit organization with members of both services.

Meink did not disclose the type of weapons or when they were deployed.

"We're not going to talk about the specifics of what we're doing — whether we've tested it, not tested it, or anything else," Meink told



Caine



During the 1960s, the U.S. Army worked on plans for a base on the moon, calling the effort Project Horizon. This illustration courtesy of the U.S. Army depicts the outpost as it would appear by late 1965.

reporters.

Asked how the newly disclosed on-orbit capability fits with the current arsenal, Lt. Gen. Greg Gagnon, commander of the Space Force's Combat Forces Command, said "all weapon systems kind of complement each other, and you bring them together when you synchronize them in military operations."

The Space Force was created in 2019 during President Donald Trump's first administration. It was established to protect American military and commercial assets orbiting Earth, a recognition that space was poised to join land, sea, air and cyber as another contested warfighting domain.

The Space Force's online "Space Threat" fact sheet states that Beijing and Moscow

jeopardize U.S. interests in that domain.

"China and Russia are developing new space systems to enhance military effectiveness and end any reliance on U.S. space services," the fact sheet states.

Those nations are also "testing and fielding sophisticated counterspace capabilities with the intent to disrupt and degrade U.S. space-enabled capabilities," it continues.

The Chinese army "expects space to play an important role in future conflicts by enabling long-range precision strikes and denying other militaries the use of space-based information," according to the fact sheet.

Meanwhile, Russia regards space as "a warfighting domain and believes space supremacy will be a decisive factor in future

conflicts," it states.

The U.S. and China are among 95 signatories of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty that strove to implement international law to govern space exploration, weapons testing and territorial claims.

The Soviet Union, which included Russia until the federation dissolved in 1991, was also a signatory.

Two of the treaty's key requirements are that countries cannot place nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in Earth's orbit, on the moon or any other celestial body and that the moon cannot be used to test weapons of any kind.

Tribune News Service contributed to this report.

Weapon announcement comes amid deepening space race, experts say

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The United States' announcement last month that it has deployed orbiting space weapons could deepen a space race with competitors China and Russia, and it necessitates closer dialogue with the powers about space militarization, defense analysts said.

Air Force Secretary Troy Meink offered no details about the nature or makeup of the weapons but described them as "on-orbit space control weapons capable of defending the joint force against hostile adversary action." He made the surprise admission during his keynote address Sept. 14 at the annual Air, Space and Cyber Conference at National Harbor, Md.

A Space Force spokesperson said the weapons were deployed to increase "readiness against existing threats," but declined to provide additional detail.

"Space control encapsulates the mission areas required to contest and control the space domain — employing kinetic and non-kinetic means to affect adversary capabilities through disruption, degradation and even destruction, if necessary," the spokesperson said in an emailed statement under the condition his or her name not be published. "These capabilities can be employed for offensive and defensive purposes at the direction of combatant commands."

The weapons could carry capabilities from directed energy to electromagnetic spectrum jamming technology to kinetic capabilities like missiles, according to experts. The weap-

ons are likely to be designed for use from space against threats in space and not against direct threats on the ground, said Philip Sheers, a defense fellow at Washington, D.C.-based think tank The Center for a New American Security.

Meink has not commented on why he chose to unveil the existence of the space weapons. The Space Force spokesperson did not address questions about the timing. Sheers speculated it could indicate that the U.S. believes competitors are deploying their own space weapons.

"It stands to reason that this is perhaps a response to some kind of burgeoning or latent capability the United States perceives in its adversaries, which there's plenty of evidence for," Sheers said.

U.S. intelligence revealed in 2024 that it believed Russia was developing space-based nuclear weapons, which would violate the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. Moscow has denied such a program, and Dmitry S. Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said Sept. 15 that Russia would push for the demilitarization of space among the international community.

China also condemned the U.S. space weapons on Sept. 15.

"We urge the U.S. side to stop expanding its military capabilities and preparing for war in outer space," foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said in a news briefing.

Despite their objections, the deployment of American weapons in space is likely not a surprise to those adversaries, said Dan Hart, a senior fellow with the D.C.-based Atlantic

Council's GeoTech Center.

"The argument could be made that China and Russia have been escalating, and (the U.S. is) responding," Hart said.

The Cold War-era Outer Space Treaty does not ban weapons from space but urges that space be reserved for "peaceful purposes" and prohibits the deployment of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, from space and the moon.

Meink's announcement could open the gates for new dialogue around space militarization and for cooperation on civil space affairs, said Hart, who has long called for the United States and China to cooperate on space activities.

"The Outer Space Treaty absolutely needs to be expanded upon," Hart said. "It definitely needs work, and I would say shame on us globally for not picking up the pen."

The space weapons announcement came just ahead of Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, telling U.S. troops they should begin preparing for conflict in all domains, including on and around the moon.

Sheers and Hart both said they could not envision a true space conflict soon. But space weapons could be used in an earthbound conflict to protect the critical satellites advanced militaries rely on for communications, reconnaissance and command and control capabilities, they said.

"Barring an explicit deployment of a major adversary weapon capability in space, like an orbital nuclear weapon or something as dras-



MALIA HEEMSOOTH/U.S. Air Force

Secretary of the Air Force Troy Meink delivers a keynote address during the 2026 Air, Space and Cyber Conference at the National Harbor, Md., on Sept 14.

tic as that, I would not hold my breath for an imminent, full-on, high-intensity space confrontation without a precipitating terrestrial event in the near term," Sheers said. "I think it is far more likely that terrestrial events, crises, and conflict that happen on Earth between countries on Earth bring in space as a natural extension of those crises."

Hart warned that deepening militarization of space brings with it the potential for misunderstandings that could bring conflict between top powers who are deploying increasingly more technology into orbit.

"China is catching up with us in launch, and so ... we're going to have a lot of systems up there, and how do we avoid miscalculation?" he said. "There's a lot of learning, and hopefully we find a way to have what we need to be confident that we can operate in space and avoid accelerating this ever-accelerating arms race."

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MILITARY

Pompeii monument honors 9/11 victims

Twisted steel from twin towers embedded in volcanic rock honors those who died in NY

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A twisted steel fragment from the twin towers, embedded in volcanic rock near ancient ruins in the southern Italian city of Pompeii, honors the victims of 9/11 while symbolizing the strength of U.S.-Italy relations, officials say.

The September 11 Monument is also a testament to Italy's unwavering support of America in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks 25 years ago, Capt. Benjamin Foster, commander of Naval Support Activity Naples, said during a wreath-laying ceremony and observance on Sept. 11 at Pompeii's Piazza Bartolo Longo.

"There is an Italian saying: 'Gli amici si vedono nel momento del Bisogno,'" Foster said. "You know your true friends in times of need. After September 11, Italy proved those words true."

He noted that Italy stood alongside other NATO countries in support of the U.S., affirming that an attack against one is an attack against all.

Italy continued to stand alongside the U.S. and its allies during the ensuing coalition and NATO operations, in which some Italian service members were killed.

"Their sacrifice — and the solidarity of the

Italian people — will never be forgotten," Foster said in his speech, a copy of which was provided to Stars and Stripes. "That same spirit defines our partnership today."

The ceremony, organized by the city of Pompeii, included Italian and U.S. officials and religious leaders, among other attendees.

"The joint presence of the Italian and U.S. authorities gives this commemoration the value of a shared memory capable of uniting communities and peoples in the name of the principles that terrorism tried to strike: freedom, democracy, civil coexistence and inviolable respect for the person," Pompeii Mayor Giuseppe Tortora told the Italian newspaper Metropolis.

Erected in 2010, the monument includes a steel beam from ground zero and rock from the Mount Vesuvius, which erupted in A.D. 79, killing more than a thousand people and destroying the ancient towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The symbols unite the U.S. and Italy in shared tragedy, according to the Metropolis report.

NSA Naples officials regularly have participated in the annual Pompeii commemoration of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people, including 411 of Italian origin.

During the ceremony, Foster also acknowl-



SEAN RINNER/U.S. Navy

Capt. Benjamin Foster, commanding officer of U.S. Naval Support Activity Naples, delivers remarks in front of the city's September 11 Monument during the City of Pompeii's 25th-anniversary commemoration of Sept. 11, 2001, in Pompeii, Italy.

edged that Italy hosts nearly 30,000 U.S. service members and their families at bases across the country, including at U.S. Army Garrison Italy in Vicenza, Aviano Air Base

and Naval Air Station Sigonella on Sicily.

"We do not take that privilege — or the trust of our Italian neighbors — for granted," Foster said.

Paratrooper 'to his core': Army veteran who helped many others dies at age 50

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

A retired Army paratrooper who served in two wars and in civilian life assisted in evacuating a gravely wounded reporter in Ukraine has died after a battle with cancer.

The phrase "send me" defined Sean Michael Lee's military career and his life afterward, according to an obituary for the 50-year-old native of New Canaan, Conn., who died Sept. 13 after a reported battle with esophageal cancer linked to burn pit exposure.

Lee spent more than 20 years in the Army and deployed several times to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division, his obituary says. He also served with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vicenza, Italy.

"He was, to his core, a paratrooper," it says. "Long after he took off the uniform, the values forged there remained the organizing principles of his daily life: duty, loyalty, competence under pressure, and an unwavering commitment to the person behind him."

After taking part in the invasion of Baghdad in 2003 and spending the first year of the war in Iraq, he returned to the country two years later to provide security for its first democratic elections, local online news outlet Patch reported in August 2012, as Lee was slated to return home from an Afghanistan deployment.

In the years after his military service ended, Lee continued to go where others needed help, including as part of the nonprofit Independence Fund, which helps provide wounded veterans with services and support.

"His entire life was in service to others," Steven Rozina, chief operating officer of Independence Fund, said in an interview with Fox News Digital. "Up until the very end, Sean was always thinking of others."

Amid the chaos of the Taliban's recapture of Kabul in 2021 as the Afghan government collapsed ahead of the U.S. withdrawal, Lee joined the nonprofit Save Our Allies in help-



SARAH VERARDO/The Independence Fund

After his military service, Lee helped evacuate thousands from conflict zones, including Fox News correspondent Benjamin Hall in Ukraine.

ing coordinate the evacuation of Afghan partners and others desperate to escape the country.

In early 2022, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Lee went to Poland and helped set up field hospitals.

After a Russian attack killed two Fox News journalists and wounded reporter Benjamin Hall near Kyiv in March of that year, Lee helped coordinate efforts to evacuate Hall to the Polish border and on to Landstuhl Medical Center in Germany.

"He saved my life, and so many others, and is everything that a hero should be," Hall wrote on X in response to the news of Lee's death. "Thank you for getting me home to my family and my daughters. We will never forget."

Lee answered the call again in 2024. After Hurricane Helene tore through western North Carolina, he rushed to the disaster zone and slept in his car while helping deliver aid and needed supplies to help struggling communities rebuild.



Department of Defense

Sean Michael Lee — seen when an Army paratrooper in Baghdad — was a 20-year Army veteran and member of the 82nd Airborne Division. He died Sept. 13 after a battle with esophageal cancer.

"Again and again, when circumstances were dangerous, chaotic, uncomfortable, or seemingly impossible, Sean went," the obituary says. "That was the pattern of his life."

While others came and went, Lee "never stopped" and just kept helping, sleeping in a tent so he could continue supporting communities ravaged by the storm, the nonprofit HunterSeven Foundation wrote in an Instagram post.

The foundation, which is focused on combating cancer, learned about Lee's stage 4 cancer diagnosis earlier this year, after Save Our Allies founder and Independence Fund chief executive Sarah Verardo asked for a review of Lee's medical reports.

The obituary lists Verardo, the widow of a critically war-wounded veteran, and her children as among Lee's survivors. She is one of two "sisters the Army gave him" along with veterans mental health advocate Danica Thomas, also a widow of a combat soldier.

Other survivors include his brother, James Lee, who also served in the Army and was

injured in the blast of an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan, as well as James' wife and son.

Before his death, Lee had been working at the Department of Veterans Affairs as a political appointee under Secretary Doug Collins.

And even up to the end, he was still anticipating the next mission, making sure there were plans for hurricane response and earthquake contingencies and asking how can we help more people, Rozina told Fox News.

Though Lee was proud of his missions and the lives he saved, the obituary says, "the titles and headlines were never what mattered most to him."

"He was proudest to be a paratrooper, a brother, and an uncle," it says.

"Sean leaves this life surrounded by the family the Army gave him and joins the brothers who were waiting for him on the other side," including the husbands of Verardo and Thomas.

Lee will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

MILITARY



Photos from U.S. Air Force

Anduril Industries' FQ-44 "Fury" fighter drone is seen in a test flight.

Air Force names 'loyal wingman' drones

'Vengeance,' 'Fury' will fly with fighters to boost firepower

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The two new uncrewed Collaborative Combat Aircraft the Air Force hopes to fly operationally by the end of the decade recently were given official names by Air Force Secretary Troy Meink.

The General Atomics FQ-42 will be called "Vengeance," while the Anduril Industries FQ-44 will be called "Fury," Meink said. He announced the names during his keynote address at the Air & Space Forces Association's Air, Space & Cyber Conference in National Harbor, Md., on Sept. 14.

The Air Force plans to order 1,000 of the uncrewed aircraft, with 150 flying by the end of the decade and 500 by 2032.

In Air Force naming conventions, F stands for "fighter" and Q for "unmanned" or drone. FQ aircraft are often called "fighter drones" and their role accompanying



The General Atomics FQ-42 "Vengeance" drone takes off.

crewed aircraft is dubbed "loyal wingman."

The aircraft will fly alongside and support crewed aircraft such as the F-35A Lightning II and the future F-47 sixth-generation fighter, offering additional surveillance and defense to air crews in combat.

The fighter drones are designed to carry air-to-air missiles to give crewed aircraft additional firepower in air combat.

Meink praised the project for achieving its first flight 18 months after the contracts

were announced.

The FQ-42 Vengeance first flew in August 2025, while the FQ-44 Fury flew two months later.

Anduril posted video on X in July showing the FQ-44 Fury firing an inert AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile, or AMRAAM, during flight testing at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

The AMRAAM is U.S. military's main beyond-visible-range air-to-air missile.

"We're one step closer to getting CCA to the warfighter with this live fire test!" Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ken Wilsbach posted on X at the time.

"The CCA program is a critical part of a larger, integrated system-of-systems designed to extend the reach and effectiveness of crewed aircraft, giving U.S. warfighters an overwhelming advantage in future conflicts," the Air Force said in a statement.

Navy signs contract for unmanned carrier-based tanker

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The Navy reached a key aviation milestone last month, awarding a contract worth over half a billion dollars for construction of three aerial refueling drones designed to bolster its carrier air wings, officials said.

The \$562 million deal with Boeing includes three MQ-25A Stingray drones and advanced acquisition of components needed to support the unmanned aircraft, the service said in a statement Sept. 14.

The drones are intended to free up F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets for combat missions, according to the Navy's statement.

The service hopes to use the MQ-25 in place of modified Super Hornet fighter jets typically used for midair refueling, according to a Congressional Research Service report in August.

Earlier this year, USS Theodore Roosevelt became the first operational aircraft carrier compatible with the MQ-25, according to the report. Roosevelt is expected to deploy to the Middle East soon.

The MQ-25 is the world's first fully integrated carrier-based unmanned aircraft. It also is capable of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, according to Boeing. Initial delivery is expected to begin in 2029, the Navy said.

The contract award marks a pivotal transition from development to reality, Capt. Daniel Fucito, unmanned carrier aviation program



U.S. Navy

The first painted MQ-25A Stingray sits on the ramp at Boeing's production facility in Mascoutah, Ill., on Aug. 31.

manager, said in the Navy statement.

The MQ-25 has been under development since 2016, part of a more than 25-year push by the Navy to develop multi-mission carrier-based unmanned combat drones, according to the Congressional Research Service report.

With a wingspan of 75 feet and a length of 51 feet, the drone would carry a fuel capacity of 14,000 pounds at a distance of 575 miles. That's roughly the same as an F/A-18 but less than previous Navy tankers, the report said.

The Navy envisions an eventual fleet of 76 MQ-25 drones, 67 of which would be operational.

The remaining ones would be used as test and development aircraft, according to the report.

The report raised questions about the Navy's plan to begin limited production of the MQ-25 before fully completing testing and development could result in additional delays. How the service planned to manage that risk should be considered, the CRS report stated.

Other concerns included cybersecurity testing of software for the drone and its ground control station, and management of technical issues discovered during testing and development, according to the report.

In May, acting Secretary of the Navy Hung Cao authorized moving the MQ-25 program from research, engineering and development into the production and deployment phase, the service said.

The benchmark approval allows for production of a small number of the drones used for final operational testing and initial fleet deployment.

"This will expand the operational reach of the air wing while preserving the service life of F/A-18E/Fs, improving readiness across the Super Hornet fleet," the Navy statement said.

MILITARY

Higher levels of 'forever chemicals' hit young vets

PFAS exposure more likely in troops than civilian counterparts

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Younger veterans are substantially more likely to have dangerous levels of toxic “forever chemicals” in their blood than non-veterans the same age, a nationally representative study reported.

The study was led by researchers from Brown and Harvard universities and published Sept. 14 in the academic journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

Among 20- to 39-year-olds, 52% of veterans — about 1.8 million people — exceeded the threshold of 20 nanograms per milliliter, compared with 30% of civilians, the study found.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine recommends medical follow-up for people whose levels exceed that threshold because PFAS exposure has been associated with health problems including kidney and testicular cancers, as well as ulcerative colitis.

The data stops short of definitively connecting PFAS exposure to military service, but does show that people who serve are more likely to be impacted, researchers said.

“There’s something very specific about being a veteran that makes you much more likely to have these elevated concentrations compared to civilians,” one of the study’s co-authors, Christian Hoover, said. Hoover recommended that young veterans speak to their doctors about getting PFAS blood testing, so exposures can be documented.

The study analyzed 15 years of publicly available survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Researchers applied national survey weights to the sample to produce estimates representative of more than 200 million U.S. adults.

PFAS, or human-made per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are long-lasting chemicals used to make products resistant to heat, oil, stains, grease and water. They are also found in firefighting foam historically used at U.S. military bases worldwide. PFOS and PFOA are two common types.

There is sufficient evidence that PFAS causes cancer in lab animals and limited evidence that PFOA causes testicular and kidney cancer, according to the World Health Organization. They are called “forever chemicals” because they break down slowly and can stay in both the environment and the human body for long periods of time.

The data show that approximately 58% of all U.S. veterans were above the 20 nanograms per milliliter threshold, versus 36% of their civilian counterparts, which equates to roughly 13 million veterans, according to the study.

After accounting for factors like race, ethnicity and age, veterans were 1.8 times more likely than civilians to have elevated PFAS concentrations in their blood, Hoover said.

PFAS can be excreted from the body over time through urine or blood and have a half-life between 1.5 and 8 years, depending on the compound, Hoover said. That may explain why older veterans had lower concentrations of PFAS than their younger counterparts.

Researchers found no difference between veterans over 40 and the civilian population, Hoover said. The half-life is the time it takes for blood concentrations to decrease by half.

Female veterans, who accounted for only 6.5% of the veteran sample, were 37% less likely than civilian women to have elevated PFAS levels.

More study is needed to determine why female veterans had lower levels, Hoover



CLAYTON A. WREN/U.S. Navy

Damage Controlman Nicholas Pollick collects a sample of an aqueous film forming foam during a countermeasure washdown aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Pacific Ocean in 2024. The foam is the PFAS-based “forever chemical” firefighting agent the Pentagon plans to phase out fleet-wide by October 2027.



VICTORIA ARMSTRONG/U.S. Navy

Petty Officer 3rd Class Alexander Scott unclogs an aqueous film-forming foam sprinkler on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln.

said.

Veterans may encounter PFAS through numerous sources, including contaminated water, burn pits and possibly heat-resistant products, he said. Differences in occupation and where veterans served could also account for the divergence.

“Groundwater contamination is one of probably many different sources, and we aren’t clear on those from this study alone,” Hoover said.

Health insurance provided by the Veterans Health Administration does not cover blood tests for PFAS and the tests are not currently available at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers, Hoover said.

The VA did not respond to questions about the study's findings, whether veterans should be tested or Hoover's comments. A VA spokesperson, Quinn Slaven, said that VA physicians can order PFAS testing through commercial lab partners when "deemed medically necessary."

"I think it is important that the VA consider expanding testing at VA facilities and through the VHA coverage," Hoover said. "This is an enormous oversight and of great concern to this group."

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A VISIT TO *Fabulous* FLORENCE

BY STACY ROMAN
Stars and Stripes

DEEP IN THE HEART OF ITALY'S FAMED TUSCANY REGION IS A PARADISE FOR ART LOVERS, HISTORY BUFFS AND FOOD AFICIONADOS. THE CITY OF FLORENCE (KNOWN AS "FIRENZE" IN ITALIAN) IS TEEMING WITH RICH CULTURAL EXPERIENCES. FROM ANCIENT LANDMARKS TO STUNNING GALLERIES AND CATHEDRALS, YOU'LL WANT TO PUT FLORENCE ON YOUR ITALIAN BUCKET LIST.



A BRIEF HISTORY

Florence was initially founded around 59 BC as a Roman garrison and military stronghold. As the region grew, the city became a robust trading and commercial center. During the early part of the 9th century, Florence began to prosper and develop its cultural identity. Cathedral domes and spires popped up between the late 13th century through the 1400s. The gilded Renaissance period established its stronghold in the Tuscan capital. Home to the artistic geniuses Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Botticelli, and literary and political philosophers such as Dante, the Medici family and Niccolò Machiavelli, the city flourished and has retained its cultural influences today.

WHAT TO SEE

With so much fantastic art stemming from this area, it can feel as though there is an endless choice of galleries to choose from. If you have limited time, you'll likely want to hit the two most well-known ones, Uffizi Gallery and Accademia Gallery. The Uffizi Gallery was initially constructed in the late 1500s and is one of the most popular galleries in Italy. Paintings and sculptures from Raphael, Botticelli (including the famed "The Birth of Venus") and da Vinci line the walls. If you need to take a break, walk through the Garden of the Camellias or the manicured Boboli Gardens for some fresh air.

The Accademia Gallery on the outskirts of the city center houses some of the world's most renowned Renaissance-era sculptures. There are plenty of breathtaking paintings courtesy of Italian artists such as Pontormo, Botticelli and Orcagna adorning the halls and a newer exhibit featuring musical instruments by string craftsman Antonio Stradivari and inventor of the modern piano Bartolomeo Cristofori. However, most visitors come to see Michelangelo's statue of "David" in all its glory. Because of their popularity, be sure to purchase your tickets for both museums before you go.

If you're clamoring for fresh air, take a stroll along the riverfront of the Arno River. Several

bridges connect the two sides of the city. While these crossings were designed in the Middle Ages, only one is still original. Near the end of World War II, the retreating German army destroyed all the bridges in Florence except one—Ponte Vecchio. Although it's now lined with kitschy souvenir shops, it's still a remarkable piece of history to check out.

THE CATHEDRAL

Admittedly, there are quite a few churches and cathedrals within Florence. There is one that stands out—the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. "Il Duomo" is one of the largest churches in the world and is known for its massive dome and bell tower, which pierces the Florence skyline. Filled with ornate mosaics and intricate frescoes, admission to the cathedral is free. If you're feeling adventurous, for a small fee, visitors can climb the steps to the top of the dome for a jaw-dropping panorama of the city below.

GOOD EATS

As the capital of Tuscany, known for its rolling hills and spectacular vineyards, there is no shortage of good eats in Florence. While typical (and delicious) Italian fare is available, the foods in this region are influenced by its history and traditions. For instance, the savory dish "ribollita" is a local soup/stew concoction made with

chunks of day-old bread, tomatoes and cannellini beans. Another delicious offering is "tagliere," a veritable smorgasbord of regional meats and cheeses. Be sure to top off the day with creamy, frozen gelato. Are you feeling culinarily adventurous? Sign up for a Tuscan cooking class or a wine tour of the nearby Chianti vineyards so you can bring a taste of Florence home with you.



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STARS AND STRIPES

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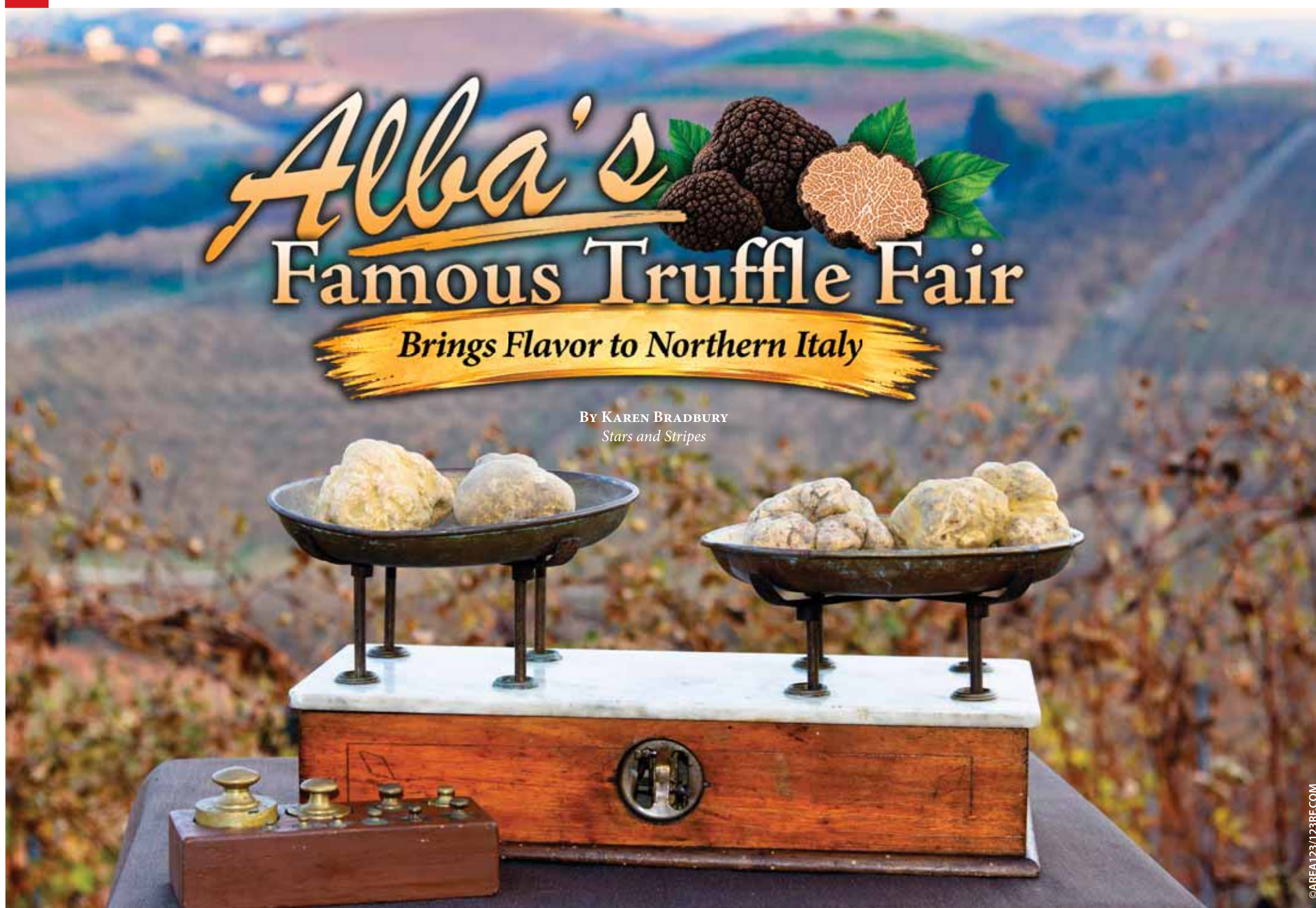
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Truffles, mmm mmm!

Not those chocolatey ones you can buy in Belgium, but those fabulous funguses that add just the right umami notes to all kinds of savory dishes. And as autumn is the season in which they are harvested, it's also the perfect time of year to get your hands on some.

Truffles grow over much of southern Europe, with countries including Italy, France, Croatia and Spain producing much of this tuber that is impossible to cultivate and instead searched out in the natural spaces in which it thrives. Truffles are usually found around the roots of certain types of trees such as oaks, hazel and beech and demand a particular type of soil. As they grow underground, assistance is needed in finding them, and that comes in the form of animals that can sniff them out.

Female pigs are excellent at this task, namely because there's a chemical in truffles that smells like a sex hormone found in the saliva of male pigs. But the problem is their hoofs and snouts cause a lot of damage when they try to unearth this snack they find incredibly tasty. Therefore, most truffle hunt companions are dogs, who have no desire to eat the truffles. Italy's most popular

truffle-sniffing breed is the Lagotto Romagnolo. However, given the right training, even mixed breeds of humble origin can do the job as well as any pedigreed pup.

There's no need to go out on a truffle hunt (although they can be arranged) to procure this pricey gourmet treat that's oh-so-tasty when served over pasta or risotto. To buy, sample or savor Tuber magnatum Pico, make your way to Italy's famed Fiera Internazionale Tartufo Bianco d'Alba, the International Alba White Truffle Fair. Alba is a city in the region of Piedmont that's known far and wide for the truffles that grow in the nearby Langhe Hills, considered among the world's best.

The annual truffle fair, now in its 96th edition, is not one event but many.

There's the World Market at which prize truffle specimens are sold, some of which will go for thousands of euros. At the World Market, there are also experts onsite ensuring that you are purchasing the best truffles for whatever you are using them for. At the market, not only will you find truffles but also a selection of the best local food products as well as wines for purchase.



There are also wine tasting and food areas so you can try everything right there before committing to larger purchases to bring home.

The Alba Truffle Show offers cooking shows starring top chefs, along with the chance to sample food pairings and fine wines of the region. Foodies will delight in tasting and learning about truffles along with various cheeses, beers, wines, teas and sauces. The town's historical center also features an exhibition area. Visitors can also take part in one of the Weekend Truffle Sensory Analyses where you can explore the truffle with more than just your taste buds. You will learn how to identify high-quality truffles, how to store your truffles and how to best appreciate your truffles.

Those hoping to raise future gourmets can introduce their children to haute cuisine at the Alba Kids Truffle, a pavilion dedicated to the education of young ones and their families. Here, kids can partake in games, activities and creative workshops in an environment that is created solely for them. The focus is on hands-on learning and entertainment made with all natural materials.

The fair takes place on Saturdays and Sundays from Oct. 10 through Dec. 6, 2026.





BY KIMBERLY KEPHART
Contributing Writer

These words sat with me inside the Basilica Cateriniana Di San Domenico in Siena. Still in yesterday’s boots, I stood before the reliquary housing the head of St. Catherine of Siena. In front of me, I had walked into that church a few hours after finishing 48 kilometers on foot, and the sentence landed perfectly. Goosebumps. Life had recently provided some bumps in the road, and, at this moment, I was right where I needed to be.

What is the Via Francigena

The Via Francigena is roughly a 1,200-mile pilgrimage route that has carried travelers from Canterbury toward Rome since the 10th century. This route is far less crowded and commercialized than the Camino de Santiago.

Walking the entire route is a month-long undertaking, which is likely why it feels out of reach for military spouses and service members. Like the Camino, it’s broken into official stages, each one connecting a town with lodging and transit. Any single stage, or a handful of them strung together, can be walked on its own. For those of us on a single income or on a budget, this is a perfect way to experience Tuscany and, of course, the Camino.

The Part I Walked and Where I stayed

I chose the segment from San Gimignano to Siena, about 48 kilometers over three walking days plus a day to arrive and settle in, roughly four days total door to door.

- Night one is in San Gimignano itself, a hilltop town of medieval towers that has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1990. I stayed at Hotel La Cisterna within the city walls and spent the evening in town before the trail started.
- Day two covers 12 kilometers to Colle Val’Elsa, through vineyards and quiet farmland, and includes the route’s three river fords. In dry weather, they’re a simple crossing; after heavy spring rain, the last one can be difficult. I stayed at Hotel La Vecchia Cartiera, a converted paper mill in town.
- Day three, 16 kilometers, starts off by following the beautiful Elsa River through a shaded



park before Monteriggioni comes into view, a walled village from the 13th century, built to defend Siena. I stayed at Hotel Il Piccolo Castello, about two miles outside the village. After a long day, I decided to keep the walk to Monteriggioni until the next morning.

- Day four, the longest at 20 kilometers, asks the most. A detour off the marked trail leads to the Hermitage of San Leonardo al Lago, a centuries-old chapel kept alive by a single caretaker. Along the way, you can stop at small rest stops that locals prop open for pilgrims like Ristoro Pellegrini Donativo. A stretch of exposed, unglamorous road near Pian di Lago follows, and you just have to endure. Then, as you near Siena, a series of Hills asks more of you; the trail enters the city through Porta Camollia, the same gate pilgrims have used for thousands of years. I stayed at Hotel Chiusarelli, close enough to Piazza del Campo.

How to do This Yourself

Getting there and booking a room: Take the train to Poggibonsi-San Gimignano, then a short local bus into San Gimignano’s historic center. From Siena, regional trains connect back to Florence in about 75 minutes and from there to any major airport. Because the towns along this route



“Be who you were meant to be, and you will set the world on fire.”
– St. Catherine of Siena

are small, rooms should be booked early.

Navigating the route: The trail is waymarked with white and red markers and a pilgrim figure symbol, walkable independently with a guidebook or a self-guided operator like SloWays, whose app includes an offline route planner.

Keeping it on a budget: The pilgrim hostel network along the route, known as “ostelli,” costs well under what a hotel would cost per night and puts you in the company of other walkers. I hit a lot of dead ends with these; I was thankful for Sloway’s help.

When to go: Spring and early fall bring the mildest weather. Summer heat makes the exposed sections, like the road near Pian di Lago, considerably harder. April was PERFECT.

In a country where many of us will only be stationed in or near for a handful of years, this is a perfect way to see Tuscany through a different lens. Somewhere around that hermitage and seeing that quote by Saint Catherine, life’s questions stopped feeling like a weight and started to feel like something I could carry, and I think everyone should experience that feeling.

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MILITARY

New career field amps up base defense

Air Force plans to develop new weapon system, establish job dedicated to defending its facilities

By JANIQUA ROBINSON
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force plans to develop a new weapon system and establish a career field dedicated to defending its bases from attack, the service's top officer announced.

Chief of Staff Gen. Ken Wilsbach unveiled the initiatives Sept. 14 during his State of the Air Force address at the Air & Space Forces Association's Air, Space & Cyber Conference at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Md.

"For decades, American air and space power has often operated from a position of sanctuary. Those days are over," he said.

"We can no longer treat point defense as a side hustle. We must make it a core function of air and space power."



Wilsbach

Wilsbach offered few details about either initiative but said the new weapon system would combine kinetic and nonkinetic capabilities to protect air bases.

The new career field would train airmen specifically to support the point-defense mission and become reality in two years.

The Air Force has described point defense as protection against a range of airborne

threats, from small drones to cruise missiles.

"Together, these two new initiatives will strengthen our defenses, reinforce our ability to generate air and space power under fire and protect our greatest advantage, our airmen and guardians," Wilsbach said.

Point defense gives an air base commander authority to employ "organic air and missile defense capabilities" to protect critical forces or installations, according to an Air Force document published in April 2025.

That document also cited a 1984 memorandum of understanding that gave the Army primary responsibility for the air defense of Air Force bases worldwide. The agreement has since expired.

Wilsbach also used his keynote to honor airmen killed supporting Operation Epic Fury — the U.S. and Israel's military campaign against Iran — and discuss the operation's logistical challenges and risks.

Six airmen died March 12 when a KC-135 Stratotanker crashed in western Iraq.

U.S. Central Command said the aircraft went down over friendly airspace and that the loss was not caused by hostile or friendly fire.

"Protecting the force and generating combat power are inseparable," he said. "We need our airmen trained equipped and ready to fight from the opening moments of a conflict."

US Air Force seeks to keep more bombers mission-ready

By CLAIRE JENQ
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force recently announced the "North Star Readiness Campaign," aimed at increasing the number of mission-ready strategic bombers.

The service hopes to solve logistical issues that have plagued the upkeep of its aging fleet of B-52 Stratofortress and B-1 Lancer bombers by ensuring a streamlined parts pipeline, as well as upgrading the bombers to last until the 2050s.

Air Force Global Strike Command has partnered with the Air Force Materiel Command and the Defense Logistics Agency to hold regular "aircraft-on-ground" meetings to identify any parts delays. The meetings have accelerated shipments from a week or more to as little as two to three days, the Air Force said in a news release Sept. 8.

"The North Star Readiness Campaign is our commitment to ensuring the warfighter has the nation's bomber force ready to go at a moment's notice," said Gen. S.L. Davis, commander of AFGSC.

Airmen, mechanics, DLA representatives and supply chain members are working together to identify any issues that could delay maintenance.

"For example, our Airmen built a localized playbook to optimize the phase main-



DEVYN TAYLOR/U.S. Air Force

A B-52H Stratofortress flies over another B-52H parked on the flightline at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam.

tenance process which drastically reduced maintenance timelines while strictly maintaining safety and security. They are the ones with the hands-on experience, and we would be remiss if we didn't leverage their expertise to drive these improvements," said Chief Master Sgt. Shane Anderson, the NSRC change management lead.

The Air Force said that the efforts have already produced results. Since the cam-

paign was implemented, the number of mission-impacting part problems has decreased from more than 450 to around 160.

The Air Force currently operates 76 B-52s, according to the service's website.

The first modified version of the B-52 resulted in a fatal crash at Edwards Air Force Base in California that killed eight people in June. The Air Force said that the modernization efforts would continue while the crash is investigated.

In August, the Government Accountability Office released a report warning that the Air Force's plan to modernize its B-52 bombers with replacement engines before completing critical portions of developmental flight testing could lead to higher costs and project delays.

The service is projected to spend \$21 billion to modernize the engines, radar, weapons systems and communications, according to the report.

Inert model of future ICBM 'stacked'

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force has erected an inert version of the new LGM-35A Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile at a launch pad at Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, the Pentagon said Sept. 14.

"This is more than a milestone — this integration demonstrates our commitment to moving forward with the pace necessary to modernize the ground-based leg of our nuclear triad," said Gen. Dale White, director of critical major weapons systems for the Department of Defense.

The "stacking" is the first full visual representation of the missile that the U.S. plans to put into hundreds of new silos in the north central United States as the land-based leg of the nuclear deterrence "triad."

The missile has no warhead or fuel, so there is no risk of detonation.

It would replace the Cold War-era LGM-30 Minuteman III currently spread among 450 silos arrayed around F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana and Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota.

In addition to ICBMs, the nuclear triad also includes sea-

based Ohio and future Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines and B-52 Stratofortress, B-2 Spirit and future B-21 Raider manned bombers.

The stacking concluded a four-month test to prove the viability of each of the missile's stages, propulsion, shrouds and components assembled into a single vehicle on the test pad.

"The vertical integration event demonstrated the maturity of the missile's design and verified that all critical subsystems are on track for initial flight testing in 2027," the Air Force said in a statement.

The stacking also was used to test logistics, transport and specialized lifting cranes that will be used to install future missiles into silos. A prototype silo is being built in Utah.

"Sentinel is no longer conceptual or designs for what the nation's next-generation ICBM looks like; it's a physical, fully integrated system that is one major step closer to being ready for flight testing," said White.

White said Sentinel remains on track to field "initial capability" in the early 2030s.

The Air Force has said the process of switching over from the Minuteman III to the Sentinel is expected to take well into the later part of the century.



Northrop Grumman

An inert LGM-35A Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile erected on a test pad at Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif.

MILITARY



JARON WILLS/U.S. Navy

A sailor launches an F/A-18E Super Hornet from the flight deck of Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Nimitz in the Pacific Ocean. A House Oversight Committee subpanel report said the Navy is equipped to study long-term aviator brain health but has not done so.

Report: Navy ignoring pilot brain health

Congress urged to force Pentagon to confront issue in wake of suicides of three F/A-18 aviators

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

A House Oversight Committee subpanel in a report on Sept. 8 criticized the Navy for failing to examine whether the physical demands of flying its fighter jets can cause lasting brain injuries that contribute to mental health problems among aviators.

The investigation showed that the Navy did not take meaningful action to address the issue despite the suicides of three F/A-18 Super Hornet pilots several years ago and persistent concerns about the potential neurological effects of extreme flying.

"Despite internal warnings and external reporting, the Navy has not taken the steps necessary to determine whether it is systematically exposing its aviators to long-term brain injury," stated the report, compiled by the panel's military and foreign affairs subcommittee.

The committee's Republican leadership — chairman James Comer, of Kentucky, and subcommittee chairman William Timmons, of South Carolina — said the Navy's lack of thorough investigation was "concerning and a disservice to those who serve."

Lawmakers launched a probe into the

issue after The New York Times reported in 2024 about the potential cumulative toll of repeated catapult launches from aircraft carriers and other high-speed maneuvers on the brains of fighter crews.

The resulting committee report found that the Navy internally attributed mental health issues primarily to operational stress rather than neurological injury.

When Navy leadership questioned Navy medical experts on whether flying was causing brain injuries, the medical team said there was no evidence or research of the problem, so there was no need to investigate further, the report said.

The report also cites a 2024 memo by a Navy doctor and former pilot that sought to raise the alarm about the issue but did not spur substantive action. After two former pilots died by suicide, the doctor conducted an independent study and surveyed 20 aviators, finding widespread mental health problems.

The memo was widely shared among Navy personnel, including by a Navy captain who emailed it to several admirals.

"Feedback from the bro-network is that this is a hot topic ... and it is affecting reten-

tion of our senior aviators," the captain wrote. "These suicides, may, or may not be linked by common causes. But we will not know until we choose to study this problem with the same vigor we tackle other challenges in [the] community."

The committee report said the Navy and its vast research enterprise are well-equipped to study long-term aviator brain health but have not done so. The estimated cost of conducting such a study is \$3.9 million — about the cost of training one to two elite pilots.

"Given the Navy's substantial investment in human capital, failing to allocate comparable resources to understanding risks and protecting that investment, particularly in terms of long-term health, is unfortunate," the report stated.

The Navy responded to lawmaker scrutiny in April with a study of 8,500 active-duty naval aviators. The study found no significant increase in diagnosed neurological conditions among aviators exposed to high gravitational forces, but it did not account for conditions that could emerge later in life.

"Critically, the study does not resolve whether repeated exposure to high-G forces

and other stressors may result in cumulative or delayed neurological effects, underscoring the need for longitudinal research," the committee report stated.

Naval aviators endure up to nine Gs of force during sharp, high-speed maneuvers, making their bodies and gear feel nine times their weight. High vertical G-forces rapidly pull blood away from the brain toward the lower extremities.

The report says Congress should step in to force the military to confront the issue. It recommends legislation that would require the Pentagon to study the long-term neurological risk to all aviators and establish a program focused on aviator brain and mental health.

It also recommends that the Pentagon reform medical policies to reduce the stigma around seeking mental health care, particularly among aviators who may avoid treatment for fear of losing their flight eligibility.

"Naval aviators who have potentially suffered from traumatic brain injuries and other neurological ailments deserve the ability to seek out healthcare without feeling ostracized or weak," Comer and Timmons said in a statement.

\$1.7B development brings privatized barracks to sailors

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy signed onto a \$1.7 billion development to provide more than 8,000 beds for junior enlisted sailors stationed around Hampton Roads, Va.

The five-year agreement signed July 1 with Hunt Military Communities, a major partner in military family housing, will be the service's first large-scale privatization of barracks. The Navy estimated the contract will save the government more than \$325 million, which it said will go into other quality-of-life projects.

"This agreement reflects the direction we want to take across our barracks portfolio: delivering high-quality, cost-effective housing solutions that provide modern, reliable homes for service members and prudent value for taxpayers," said Adam Dontz, deputy assistant defense secretary for housing.

The contract includes housing for up to

8,098 sailors through a \$450 million new facility in Newport News and renovations and new rooms added across 16 facilities in Hampton Roads, according to the Navy. The work includes 712 bedrooms in seven buildings at Naval Air Station Oceana; 614 bedrooms in three buildings at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story; and 5,272 bedrooms in six buildings at Naval Station Norfolk.

The new barracks in Newport News will house 1,500 sailors assigned among the many Navy bases in the region and replace aging facilities, such as Huntington Hall Naval Berthing Facility.

The project also received an interest-free loan from the Commonwealth of Virginia to the city of Newport News, the Navy said. That support was instrumental to securing the project, said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, which oversees the Navy's housing.

The military began in 1996 to privatize housing for families on its bases to improve the quality of homes available. The program had initial success at this, but much has been done in the last decade to mitigate a drop in quality and poor maintenance, which forced some families to live with mold, lead paint, water and sewage leaks and pest infestations.

Hunt Military Communities was recently involved in litigation for such conditions, including a lawsuit filed by an Air Force chaplain two months ago. Nine families filed lawsuits in 2019 against the company. Eight were settled out of court this year, and the ninth was awarded more than \$91,000 by a jury in Texas.

Hunt already partners with the Navy to manage housing for more than 3,600 junior enlisted sailors through Homeport Hampton Roads at Norfolk and Newport News. That project also includes a mix of apartments,



JENNIFER CASTILLO/Defense Department

New barracks in Newport News, Va., will replace aging facilities such as Huntington Hall Naval Berthing Facility, above.

recreational amenities and a pool.

Across the United States, Hunt has more than 60,600 homes at 59 military bases.

MILITARY



Skyeton Inc.

A technician adjusts the camera payload on a Raybird drone before launch. The U.S. Army awarded a \$10.64 million contract to Skyeton Inc., the American arm of Ukrainian drone maker Skyeton, for Raybird reconnaissance drones.

US Army makes deal to aquire combat-tested Ukrainian recon drones

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

The Army has awarded a Ukrainian defense manufacturer's U.S. subsidiary a \$10.6 million contract involving its Raybird reconnaissance drone system, which has been used extensively on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Defense Department announced Sept. 18 that Skyeton Inc. received the contract for Raybird unmanned aircraft system hardware and services. The work is expected to be completed by Dec. 15.

The Raybird weighs less than 50 pounds, has a wingspan ranging from 10 to 14 feet and features an array of sensors and cameras used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

The drone can remain airborne for more than 28 hours and has a range of about 1,500 miles. A system consisting of three drones and a ground station costs about \$1 million, according to the Skyeton website.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has used short-, medium- and long-range drones to counter Russia's larger military.

The conflict has since evolved into intense drone warfare on both sides, transforming the way wars are being fought around the globe.

Ukraine's innovative use of the technology has brought the conflict deep into Russian territory, with strikes on military installations, retail warehouses and oil refineries.

The U.S. Army has responded by launching modernization efforts in both offensive and defensive drone operations.

Those efforts have included testing Ukrainian-made systems. Ukrainian manufacturer F-Drones delivered 2,000 F10 attack drones to the U.S. military this summer for evaluation under the Pentagon's Drone Dominance program, Stars and Stripes reported in August.

Skyeton was founded in 2006 and has since grown to more than 500 employees at facilities in Ukraine, Slovakia and the U.S., according to the company's website. Skyeton Inc., based in North Las Vegas, Nev., is the Ukrainian manufacturer's U.S. subsidiary.

The Raybird was adopted by the Ukrainian military in 2018. Its small size helps make it resistant to electronic warfare and difficult for most air defense systems to detect, the company's website said.

Raybirds have gathered intelligence from deep within Russia. Due to its work with Ukrainian armed forces, the company's Kyiv office was destroyed in a Russian attack in May, the company announced in a statement.

In July, Skyeton announced plans to build its flagship manufacturing facility in Fayetteville, N.C., according to a statement from the state's Commerce Department. The company plans to invest \$3.1 million on a 28,500-square-foot facility.

"Expanding our manufacturing footprint in North Carolina is about more than opening a new facility," Skyeton CEO Quito Saez said at the time. "It's about strengthening America's defense industrial base, creating high-quality American jobs and delivering combat-proven capabilities closer to the warfighters we exist to serve."

Evaluation process for promotion of colonels, Navy captains changing

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the military this year will start evaluating colonels and Navy captains for one-star positions as part of a new process.

"While the backbone of our military is our NCOs (noncommissioned officers) and our petty officers, victory depends on the commanders who lead them. America needs warfighters who can master a chaotic battle space," Hegseth said in a video posted on X on Sept. 22.

The Joint Warfighter Evaluation follows Hegseth's May memo to begin assessing service members' ability to wage joint warfare as part of promotion and advancement considerations for officers and senior noncommissioned officers.

Hegseth in the video acknowledged tasking Stuart Scheller, who currently serves as the secretary's senior adviser of personnel and readiness, and his team a year ago to challenge "generations of promotion assumptions."

Scheller is a former Marine lieutenant colonel who criticized senior military leaders for the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Since taking office, the secretary has repeatedly called for a focus on merit, physical fitness and combat effectiveness, arguing those traits should guide how the military develops and promotes leaders.

Hegseth, a 46-year-old Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News host, has previously said the U.S. military has promoted too many leaders for the wrong reasons based on race, gender quotas and "historic firsts."

"Real toxic leadership is endangering subordinates with low standards. Real toxic leadership is promoting people based on immutable characteristics or quotas instead of based on merit," Hegseth said during a sweeping address last year to top military leaders in Quantico, Va.

The video and memo do not specify how the Pentagon will define or measure "joint warfighting ability," including how the concept would apply to service members in career



CRYSTAL BURGESS/U.S. Coast Guard

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth meets with crew members aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Gridley at Panama City, Panama, in August.

fields that rarely participate in joint operations.

Joint military experience is not a new concept for advancement evaluation. In 2007, the Pentagon was required to establish different levels of joint qualification for officer development, according to the National Defense University.

The Defense Department maintains a Joint Qualification System that recognizes officers for joint assignments, education and training completed throughout their careers.

Hegseth has blocked a number of Navy, Air Force and Army promotions to one-star admirals or generals. Some of the previously reported blocks included African Americans and women.

Each military branch typically convenes a board to review candidates for promotion.

The defense secretary can halt the promotions of officers if they have professional, physical, mental and moral failings that could jeopardize their ability to lead, according to Pentagon policy.

Monument to Medal of Honor recipients clears final hurdle

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has signed a bill to locate a monument honoring Medal of Honor recipients at the National Mall, after the House and Senate unanimously endorsed the legislation.

The future National Medal of Honor Monument will be placed within the highly restricted Reserve within the National Mall, according to the Hershel "Woody" Williams National Medal of Honor Monument Location Act, which Trump signed on Sept. 10.

The national monument will cost an estimated \$50 million, but no taxpayer dollars will be used to pay for the project, according to the National Medal of Honor Museum Foundation.

The nonprofit foundation will be responsible for raising private dollars to fund the monument's design, development and placement at a permanent site.

"President Trump and members of Congress from both parties have united around a project that represents the spirit of selfless service our country so desperately needs," said retired Maj. Gen. Patrick Brady, a Medal

of Honor recipient and board member of the National Medal of Honor Museum Foundation, based in Arlington, Texas.

Trump signed the bill during a special ceremony at the Texas museum, attended by several Medal of Honor recipients.

The Medal of Honor is the highest military decoration awarded for bravery and valor in military action. A total of 3,555 medals have been bestowed upon recipients since the award was established by President Abraham Lincoln in 1861, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

There are currently 65 living Medal of Honor recipients, according to the society.

"Many of the Medal of Honor Recipients are in the twilight of their lives. The foundation plans to work thoughtfully with the relevant agencies so that as many recipients as possible can see this monument to their service and sacrifice completed," a foundation spokesman said.

A dedicated website on the project is in the works to provide information about the fundraising campaign and plans for a design competition for the monument itself, the foundation spokesman said.

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