

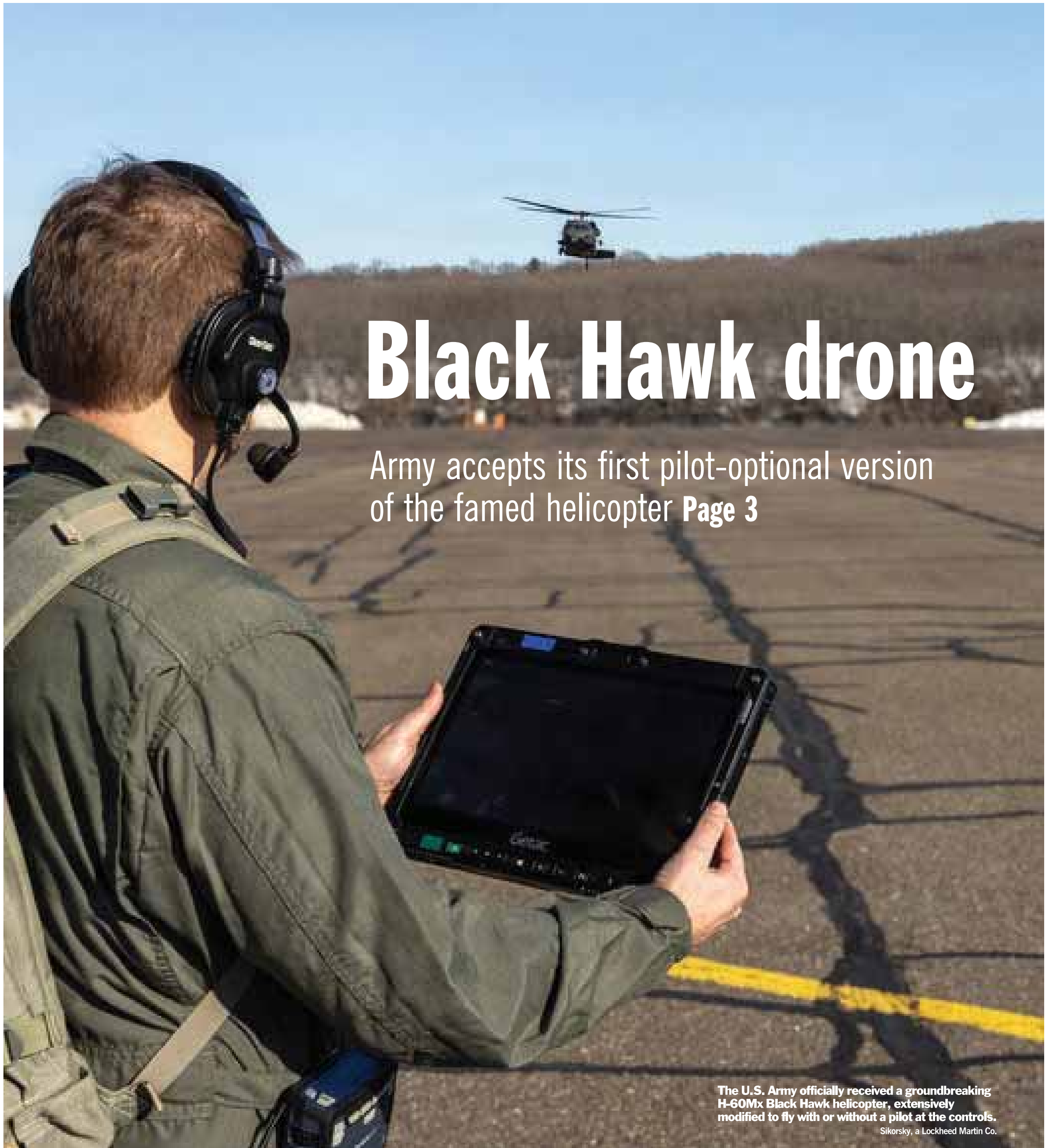
# STARS AND STRIPES®

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ITALY EDITION

APRIL 2, 2026



## Black Hawk drone

Army accepts its first pilot-optional version of the famed helicopter **Page 3**

The U.S. Army officially received a groundbreaking H-60Mx Black Hawk helicopter, extensively modified to fly with or without a pilot at the controls. Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Co.

Carrier laundries present wide array of danger **Page 6**



Venerable Warthog back at war during Iran campaign **Page 12**



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## COVER STORY

# Army accepts pilot-optional Black Hawk

H-60Mx would be able to fly in dangerous environments without risking pilots' lives

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army recently accepted its first optionally piloted Black Hawk helicopter, a modified version of Sikorsky's workhorse utility chopper that can be flown by pilots in the cockpit or by troops on the ground.

The OPV Black Hawk will soon enter a testing program to determine how and if the Army can integrate the aircraft into its inventory, according to a March 20 news release. The delivery comes after more than a decade of work on the first-of-its-kind helicopter led by Sikorsky — which is owned by defense giant Lockheed Martin — and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

"By proving out this technology, the Army aims to unlock a new era of aviation. One that will not only save lives but also ensure that critical missions can be completed under any circumstance," service officials said in the statement. "The delivery of this first OPV Black Hawk is more than just a hardware handover; it's a tangible step toward a future where technology and soldiers work together in new and powerful ways to ensure mission success."

Sikorsky and DARPA began developing the OPV Black Hawk as part of a program designed to ensure the safety of future troops. Piloting the helicopter remotely would allow the aircraft to fly into the most dangerous possible conditions without risking pilots' lives, officials have said.

As the program progressed, Sikorsky built out a program, known as the MATRIX Autonomy Mission Manager, which functions like a brain for the helicopter — giving it the ability to conduct missions autonomously. But Sikorsky officials said MATRIX would also provide new capabilities to pilots in the cockpit when they fly the optionally piloted aircraft.

When piloted, the new Black Hawk is flown by a "fly-by-wire" electronic flight control system, which replaces the long-standing mechanical flight controls in Black Hawks and most military helicopters, according to the Army.



U.S. ARMY

The U.S. Army officially received a groundbreaking H-60Mx Black Hawk helicopter, extensively modified to fly with or without a pilot at the controls.

"This makes the aircraft significantly more stable and easier to handle, particularly in challenging conditions where visibility is low," Army officials said. "By automating difficult maneuvers, the system dramatically reduces pilot workload, allowing the crew to focus less on the mechanics of flying and more on managing the critical mission at hand."

Sikorsky first flew the OPV Black Hawk in 2022. In October, it put the aircraft in soldiers' hands for the first time during a National Guard training event in Michigan.

"An optionally piloted Black Hawk aircraft can reduce pilot workload in a challenging environment or complete a resupply mission without humans on board," Rich Benton,

Sikorsky's vice president and general manager, said in a statement after that exercise. "In contested logistics situations, a Black Hawk operating as a large drone offers commanders greater resilience and flexibility to get resources to the point of need."

During that exercise, a National Guard noncommissioned officer with no aviation experience was able to learn in less than one hour to fly the helicopter in drone mode from a tablet, Sikorsky officials said.

Soldiers used the OPV Black Hawk during the exercise to maneuver external equipment, including High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, launcher pods around the training area. They also used it in a simulated medevac mission, Sikorsky officials

said.

Sikorsky is also developing a fully unpowered version of the Black Hawk, which it has dubbed the S-70UAS U-Hawk program. That version trades cockpit space for a 25% longer cargo area capable of transporting larger payloads than the current Black Hawk, including uncrewed ground vehicles, some missiles or extra internal fuel tanks for extended range, according to the manufacturer.

UH-60 Black Hawks have been an Army staple since the 1970s. The helicopters shuttle troops and supplies around battlefields and military posts across the globe and conduct the Army's air medevac mission.

The service expects Black Hawks to fly into the 2070s.

## Army pushes for yet another newer, lighter service rifle

BY LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army's ongoing push to upgrade its handheld firepower isn't slowing down, as it prepares to introduce yet another new rifle later this year, the service confirmed this month.

The XM8 carbine is the latest weapon expected to be field-tested by soldiers as early as October, an Army spokesperson told Task & Purpose. The Army's Program Executive Office did not immediately respond to questions about the rifle.

The service only standardized the M7 as its primary rifle last year, but the XM8 is not intended to replace it. Instead, it is being developed as a companion weapon.

Since awarding a 10-year Next Generation Squad Weapon contract to Sig Sauer in early 2022, soldiers have tested the M7 — formerly the XM5 — and the M250 automatic rifle, intended to replace the M4 and M249, respectively. The "X" designation indicates the weapons were in the experimental phase before standardization.

The program aimed to move away from decades-old 5.56 mm and 7.62 mm ammunition in favor of weapons that chamber 6.8 mm, which the Army's contract release in 2022 said would "increase accuracy and



DUKE EDWARDS/U.S. ARMY

A soldier fires an M7 rifle during a weapon qualification test at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in January.

(be) more lethal against emerging threats."

The Army began fielding the M7 in 2023, but it was not until May 2025 that the service officially designated it as the standard-issue rifle to replace the M4, accord-

ing to an Army release.

Still in early development, the XM8 is being designed as a carbine — which is typically lighter and shorter — version of the M7, making it easier for soldiers to

move in tight spaces while using the Army's new 6.8 mm ammunition.

The XM8 is about five inches shorter and roughly one pound lighter than the M7 and features a fixed buttstock, a Sig Sauer spokesperson confirmed to Task & Purpose.

Images of the experimental rifle gained traction online March 16 after the link to a military weapons website, SoldierSystems.net, circulated on the popular Army Reddit forum.

The website's article shared side-by-side photos of the M7 and XM8, highlighting the carbine's more compact design. The site reported that details of the XM8 first surfaced in February when the Army issued a new national stock number — often an early indicator that an item is entering the service's supply chain.

As of 2024, the Army planned to purchase more than 100,000 M7 rifles and 13,000 M250s by early 2030. It remains unclear what the timeline would be for adopting the XM8, if it moves beyond testing.

In contrast to the Army's shift toward larger-caliber weapons systems, the Marine Corps plans to retain its 5.56 mm rifles, with officials telling Stars and Stripes it will continue fielding the M27.

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## MILITARY

# Army chaplain's coffee quest led to rescue

Vicenza major credits divine providence for timing in incident along highway in Austria

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — A twice-thwarted attempt to satisfy a craving for cappuccino ended up turning an Italy-based U.S. Army chaplain into a godsend for two men seriously injured in a truck fire along an Austrian highway.

Chaplain (Maj.) Brian Bailey credited the timing to divine providence in explaining what recently led him to a rest stop in Angath, Austria, where a parked semi-truck had exploded into flames.

On March 8, Bailey was returning to U.S. Army Garrison Italy in Vicenza after attending a training class in Germany. He pulled into a roadside commercial area seeking a cappuccino.

The establishment was jammed with travelers, so Bailey drove on. To his disappointment, the next rest area where he stopped did not offer the beverage he was seeking.

"I thought, 'Let me try to do this one more time because I really want the coffee,'" Bailey said.

He continued down the highway, pulling into a third rest area at Angath Nord, about 42 miles northeast of Innsbruck, when he soon saw black smoke billowing near the building.

A closer look revealed a panicked scene, with the cab of a semi-truck in flames, its badly burned driver lying on the pavement and a second injured man closer to the burning vehicle. That's when the 41-year-old Iraq war veteran's experience kicked in.

"The training that I've received in the Army and the relationships I've had from people in my life, I felt like those were driving me to get out of the car, to run towards the fire and to run towards the burned man, not knowing what was going to come next," Bailey said.

Soon, Bailey was helping a Polish passer-by move the second injured man to safety.

The 37-year-old Lithuanian had injured his leg while trying to rescue the truck driver, Bailey said.

Using his medical training, Bailey checked both men's vital signs and stabilized them while directing bystanders to call emergency services.



Brian Bailey  
Bailey, center with glasses, attends to a man who was badly burned when the cab of the semi-truck he was driving exploded into flames March 8 at a rest stop in Angath, Austria.



Rick Scavetta/U.S. Army  
Chaplain (Maj.) Brian Bailey checks the temperature of the water in a baptismal font at U.S. Army Garrison Italy in Vicenza.

"In that moment, you realize how fragile life can be."

Chaplain (Maj.) Brian Bailey

At one point, the Polish man on the scene feared that the truck driver had died, but Bailey noticed he was still breathing, so he tilted the man's head back to help clear his airway.

Fearful that the truck driver might go into cardiac arrest, Bailey ran into the rest stop asking in his "best German" for an automated external defibrillator, he said. He obtained the device and went back to rendering first aid.

Bailey and the Polish helper continued their efforts, cutting away burned clothing, monitoring his pulse and administering chest compressions when necessary.

"It was kind of hard to feel for (a pulse) because his arms were burned," Bailey said.

"(It was) like just gently touching his neck to make sure he was still with us."

They also talked to him and occasionally raised his legs to help the blood flow back down to his chest as they waited for emergency medical personnel to arrive, Bailey said.

Eventually, the truck driver was flown by helicopter to a Bavarian hospital. The injured Lithuanian man, who also suffered burns, was taken by ambulance to a local hospital, the online news site Unsertirol24.com reported March 9. Their conditions are unknown.

Firefighters extinguished the truck blaze, which was caused by a technical defect, according to the Unsertirol24 report.

After the injured were evacuated, Bailey got back in his car, called his wife to explain what had happened and continued back to Italy.

He also relived the experience, thanking God for the injured Lithuanian man who pulled the driver from the burning truck and other people who helped at the scene.

"In that moment, you realize how fragile life can be," Bailey said.

## Pentagon: Chaplains to display religious insignia, not rank

By LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon is doing away with rank insignias for military chaplains, requiring them to instead display religious insignia as part of broader changes to the chaplain corps, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced.

Chaplains will still retain their ranks, Hegseth said in a video announcement March 24, but the change is meant to highlight the importance of the chaplain's role as a religious leader.

Eliminating rank insignia will also help junior officers or enlisted personnel feel more comfortable approaching officers, or potentially senior officers, about sensitive subjects, like addiction, relationships or struggles with faith, he said.

"A chaplain is first and foremost a chaplain, and an officer second," Hegseth said. "This change is a visual representation of that fact."

The Pentagon late last year announced plans to overhaul the military's chaplain corps, which Hegseth said had become too focused on political correctness and secular

humanism.

He eliminated the Army's spiritual fitness guide and vowed to streamline the military's faith and belief coding system.

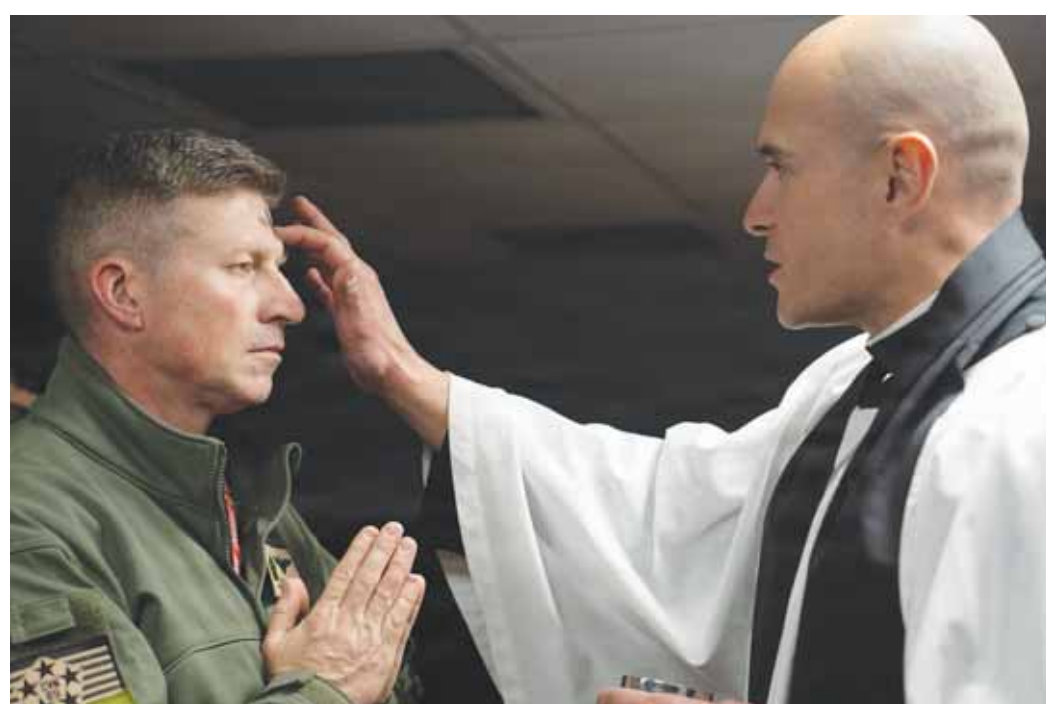
Since 2017, the Defense Department has recognized 221 groups as religious denominations or belief systems, ranging from mainstream to obscure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

That system was impractical and unusual, Hegseth said this week. Moving forward, the Pentagon will use 31 religious affiliation codes.

"This brings the codes in line with its original purpose: giving chaplains clear, usable information, so they can minister to service members in a way that aligns with that service member's faith background and religious practice," he said.

More than 80% of service members identify as being religious, Hegseth said, without citing a source.

Hegseth called the latest reforms the first steps toward returning chaplains to their esteemed positions as moral anchors of the



Jamison Sutton/U.S. Navy  
Navy Chaplain (Lt.) Jesus Dominguez, right, applies ash to a sailor's forehead during an Ash Wednesday service aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower on Feb. 18.

armed forces.

"In combat, in crisis, in loss, a warfighter needs more than a coping mechanism," Heg-

seth said. "They need truth, 'big T truth.' They need conviction. They need a shepherd."

## MILITARY

# 'Smorgasbord of danger' in carrier laundry

## Blaze aboard Ford reportedly took over 30 hours to put out

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — A potent mixture of flammable materials, equipment pushed beyond its limits and human error could be behind a fire last month aboard the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, according to a shipping expert.

"It's just a smorgasbord of danger all put together," said Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

The Ford, along with nearly 4,500 personnel, was operating in the Red Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury, the ongoing joint American and Israeli military campaign against Iran.

The carrier left Norfolk, Va., in late June for a then-routine deployment to Europe that unexpectedly included duty in the Caribbean Sea and the Middle East.

That extended time at sea also could have been a factor in the March 12 fire in the main laundry areas, Mercogliano said.

"Equipment that normally would be serviced and taken down may be running at levels past when they need to run," Mercogliano said. "Anytime you go past normal operating hours, the chances of mechanical and human error increase."

Three sailors aboard the ship were injured as a result of the fire, which the Navy said was fully contained the same day.

None of the injuries were life-threatening, and two of the sailors have since returned to duty, while the third remains in stable condition after being flown off the ship for treatment.

It's not clear how the fire started, and the Navy has released few details. The fire did not impact the ship's propulsion plant, and Ford remains fully operational, the Navy said at the time.

The cause of the Ford fire is under investigation, a U.S. military official said.

"As it is being investigated, the ship's forces are inspecting and overhauling affected spaces," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The official didn't say whether crew living quarters had been affected. But there are indications the fire may have displaced hundreds of sailors, potentially destroying bedding and personal possessions.

On March 17, the Navy Exchange said it had liquidated its inventory of black boots available for sale at several bases in Europe in support of Ford.

The New York Times reported that more than 600 sailors and crew members had been uprooted by the fire, sleeping on the floor and on tables. It took more than 30 hours to fully extinguish the fire, according to the NYT report.

The Ford arrived at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete following operations in the Red Sea, the U.S. 6th Fleet said in a statement.

The port call in Greece allows the carrier to "undergo efficient assessment, repairs, and resupply," the 6th Fleet said, adding that the Ford remains "fully mission capable."

Shipboard laundry and dry-cleaning facilities on aircraft carriers are vast areas situated in the lower deck areas of vessels.

They house industrial washers capable of extracting dirt, grease and other gunk from fabric and powerful dryers that can churn out as much as 100 pounds of clean uniforms and other items per cycle for thousands of personnel.

The facilities also include pressers, irons and other equipment and piles of clothing, bedding and other items in various stages of



ALEXIS FOWLER/U.S. Navy

A sailor checks dryer vents in a laundry room aboard the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford, on Nov. 5.



U.S. Navy

An F/A-18F Super Hornet aircraft, attached to Strike Fighter Squadron 213, lands on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford while operating in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury, on March 2.

laundering.

They require huge amounts of electricity and generate significant heat, requiring ample air conditioning to keep sailors and equipment cool.

Electrical problems and delayed maintenance of equipment, including uncleaned lint filters in laundry areas, are among the chief causes of fires on ships, said a Navy sailor not authorized to comment publicly who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Those fires most commonly happen in mechanical spaces, laundry areas and berthings, where high temperatures and combustible

materials are factors, the sailor said.

If Ford's firefighters, known as damage controlmen, couldn't immediately put out the fire, they would have sealed the area to isolate the blaze, Mercogliano and the sailor said.

That method takes time for flames and heat to subside.

It's also why any adjacent compartments, such as a berthing area, would have been evacuated, Mercogliano said, adding that smoke and heat damage may also have affected adjacent compartments.

Mercogliano compared the length of time it may have taken to completely extinguish the

**"Equipment that normally would be serviced and taken down may be running at levels past when they need to run."**

Sal Mercogliano  
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

fire on Ford and ensure there were no hot spots to that of a similar event in August aboard the USS New Orleans near Okinawa, Japan.

In that case, it took 12 hours before a fire aboard the amphibious transport dock ship was fully extinguished. Two sailors were slightly injured.

Ensuring that a fire is fully extinguished, inspecting affected areas and making sure there is no chance of a reflash isn't an easy, quick process and can take hours, the sailor said.

Indications that the Ford fire was limited to the main laundry areas and potentially a berthing space are signs that damage controlmen and sailors quickly responded defensively to the fire.

In the aftermath of serious ship fires, such as the one on the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard in July 2020, the Navy has redoubled its focus on firefighting and training, Mercogliano noted.

That focus is front of mind for all service members who train daily with the mindset that fighting ship fires is every sailor's responsibility, the sailor said.

"It's not something that can be put on the back burner," they said.

MILITARY

# Army increases max enlistment age to 42

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
Stars and Stripes

Those in their late 30s and early 40s can now join the U.S. Army.

The Army increased its maximum enlistment age to 42 in March, bringing its accession policy closer in line with most of the United States' other military services, according to updated service regulation documents.

Individuals up to 42 with or without prior military service can enlist in the Regular Army, the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve, according to the updated Army Regulation 601-210 published March 20. AR 601-210 is the regulation that governs policies and procedures for the Army's enlistment process.

The Army in recent years had capped the enlistment age at 35, although it did accept some older recruits with waivers, officials said. The policy did not change the Army's minimum ages for enlisting, which remain 17 with parental permission or 18.

The updated enlistment age brings the Army in line with the Air Force, Space Force and Coast Guard, which all accept recruits up to 42. The Navy accepts recruits up to 41, and the Marine Corps only accepts enlisted recruits up to 28 years old.

It is not the first time the Army has accepted older recruits. The service temporarily increased its maximum enlistment age to 42 in 2006 as it struggled to fill its ranks amid major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The service dropped its enlistment age back to 35 in 2016.

The Air Force and Space Force were the most recent services to raise their max enlistment age

in 2023 when they moved it from 39 to 42 amid a yearslong recruiting slump that saw Air Force recruiters fall short of their enlistment goals for multiple years.

But the Army policy change comes amid a solid recruiting environment in which its recruiters have reached or surpassed their goals in the last year and report being on track to meet their 2026 recruiting aims.

The policy change is meant to better align the service with Defense Department standards, an Army spokesperson said.

The updated Army regulation also allows recruits who have a single marijuana possession or drug paraphernalia possession conviction to enlist without a waiver. Such convictions previously would have technically barred potential recruits from enlisting, but those with such convictions were often granted waivers to join the service.

All of the U.S. military services also allow exceptions to their enlistment policies via waivers. The Air Force, for example, recently allowed 51-year-old David Goggins to enlist. Goggins is a storied former Navy SEAL who entered the Air Force as master sergeant and was assigned to the Special Warfare Training Wing, according to an Air Force spokesperson.

In 2023, Rand Corp. analysts suggested the Army raise its maximum enlistment age to help it increase recruiting at a time when the service had just missed its recruiting goals by about 25% in 2022.

In a 2022 study, Rand analysts found that older recruits might perform better. It found recruits between 25 and 35 were about 15% less likely to wash out of initial entry training than younger recruits.

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# HIKING AT LAGO DI BARCIS NEAR AVIANO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MELVINA TAYLOR  
Contributing Writer

**M**AKE AMAZING MEMORIES BY SOAKING IN THE JAW-DROPPING VIEWS OF LAGO DI BARCIS AND HIKE THE TRAILS SURROUNDING THE LAKE TO GET THE MOST SCENIC PANORAMAS OF THE EXPANSIVE TURQUOISE WATERS. AT THE FOOT OF THE FRIULIAN DOLOMITES, LAKE BARCIS IS LOCATED A SHORT 30-MINUTE DRIVE NORTH OF AVIANO AIR BASE.

## Dint Trail

Situated in the Cellina Gorge, the Dint Trail is suitable for a variety of different skill levels and time constraints. Bring your pup along so that they can enjoy the views too. There is a map right at the trailhead that outlines the various routes you can choose, each with its own unique point of interest labeled 1-7. Luckily, one of the best views is at stop number one. Take a picture of the map before setting off so that you have a guide.

The journey to marker one is a simple stroll through mossy woods and rock structures. In about 10 minutes, you will reach the observation deck. Featuring a glass bottom, it can be unnerving to walk across and out past the mountain. For the brave-hearted, look down and see the gorgeous waters of the canyon below. If that is not for you, the incredible view towards Lake Barcis is still enough to make this stop worthwhile. The jagged, sometimes snowy, peaks of the surrounding hills slope gently towards the shoreline of the turquoise lake. The crystal-clear waters reflect the blue sky, deep green



trees and white fluffy clouds above. It's like something from a picture book.

The many trails at this one location make it a place you can revisit again and again. Continuing past point of interest number one leads to more and more beautiful scenery, and a higher level of hiking difficulty. Only do what is within your skill level. The trailhead map includes warnings and details about the risks of each section of trail and what's prohibited. It is an important read before embarking on your hike.

## How to Get There

There are a few different hikes around Lake Barcis, but the Dint Trail area provides the best views. When looking at Lake Barcis on a map, the Dint Trails are on the southeastern corner of the lake. If you type "Sentiero del Dint" into Google Maps, the trailhead will come up. For parking, look for the cafe named "Osteria Ponte Antoi" to the right of the trailhead. In front of this cafe is a free parking lot. There is also limited street parking nearer to the trail entrance. The drive from Aviano is easy and scenic with views of the towering mountains and crystal-clear streams.



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# Charming Catania

BY KAREN BRADBURY  
Contributing Writer

Catania traces its history back to the year 729 B.C. when Greek settlers founded Katane. Through the years, the city in the shadow of Mount Etna has alternately prospered and met with devastation. An earthquake in 1169 led to thousands of deaths, and another in 1693 destroyed much of the city. Catania owes its unique present-day appearance to 18th century reconstruction in a Baroque style making extensive use of lava rock. With a population of around 310,000 inhabitants, today it's Sicily's second-largest city after Palermo.

With a history dating back nearly a millennium, Saint Agatha's Cathedral was named in honor of a teenage girl who was tortured and martyred in 251 for refusing to recant her Christian beliefs. Destroyed by the 1693 earthquake and recon-

structed in the mid-18th century, the cathedral's most impressive sights include its striking gray and white lava and limestone façade, a medieval Roman sarcophagus containing the ashes of Aragonese kings, and a portrayal of the 1669 eruption of Mount Etna in the sacristy. In February each year, the city's patron saint is venerated as part of a large religious festival. The bust of Saint Agatha and her relics are placed in an ornate cart which is pulled through town by her devotees.

The city's most charming monument, the Fontana dell'Elefante carved from black lava rock, is found on the Piazza del Duomo. Nicknamed Liotru by the locals, the elephant is one of the most recognizable symbols of the city. Mystery and legend surround the landmark's origins. One story holds that the statue was the work of an 8th century nobleman who turned to the making of idols. The statue was restored by famed architect Giovanni Battista Vaccarini between 1735 and 1737, who added the Egyptian-styled obelisk to the elephant's back. Why the elephant's trunk points directly to the Cathedral of Saint Agatha is another matter of speculation, with some suggesting its magical powers could shield the city from the eruptions of Mount Etna.

The city's main shopping street, Via Etnea, runs from Piazza del Duomo to the foothills of the mountain it is named after. By day, it buzzes with shoppers in search of the latest fashions and bargains, while in the evening hours, locals enjoy their daily "passeggiata," or a leisurely walk. Serving as an oasis of green is the Giardino Bellini, where shaded benches invite you to sit and people watch.



Across the street is the Pasticceria Savia, known for its local "granita" (shaved-ice dessert) and Sicilian staple "arancino." The arancino is a conical, filled ball of rice that's been breaded and fried. The most typical filling is ragu, a tomato, meat and pea sauce, but other variations with eggplant, mushrooms, sausage and pistachio are popular as well. It is also the topic of a long-standing Sicilian dispute. While residents on the eastern side of the island use the masculine form of its name, ending with an "o," Sicilians to the west refer to it in the feminine, "arancina."

For fresh fish and foods of all kinds, head to La Pescheria, a market where all manner of sea creatures and fresh food await. Nearby seafood restaurants offer a mouth-watering selection of squid, tuna and sea bass along with a variety of shellfish. The Osteria Antica Marina restaurant, smack-dab in the middle of the market, is popular with locals and tourists alike.



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STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATIE WELLS  
Stars and Stripes

**I**taly is the place to be if you are gluten-free (GF), especially if you love pastries, and Napoli (Naples) does not disappoint. On a recent trip, a new friend and resident graciously showed me around like a local. When the awkward question of what we should eat came up, I started my “well... I’m actually gluten free...” spiel when she glanced over at me and said, “No way!” She was newly gluten-free as well. So, on our adventures, we made it a point to try the local GF eats.

Our first stop was Leopoldo Cafebar. We ducked in from the chaos that is the heart of Naples, and found that we had the place mostly to ourselves. The pastry case had a generous, separate selection of gluten-free options such as cakes, sweet breads and the first item on my new list of favorites—Sfogliatella Riccia, which was perfectly golden. We paid a small service fee to sit and have our pastries while sipping cappuccinos. The layers of my Sfogliatella Riccia peeled back with ease, the filling sweet and tangy with the perfect twist of lemon. It turns out there are two locations of the Leopoldo. The other shop, Leopoldo Cafebar-Senza Glutine, is entirely gluten free and located near the National Archeological Museum.

Our second stop was 120 Grammi Spaghetti Takeaway, a ticket-based restaurant, where we got a box of pasta to go. This place was, to put it simply, cool. It’s not often I find a small hole in the wall type place with great GF options. My pasta carbonara was six euros, with simple in-

gredients, generous portions and it was freshly made. My friend and I soon realized this spot was a hidden gem. We found a bench in a quiet courtyard and dug into the creamy pasta with crispy pork cheek while watching a man park his motorcycle, remove his seat and take it into a building.

Next up was an entirely gluten-free grocery store, Il Forno Del Celiaco (The Oven of Celiac), just a seven minute-drive from Naples Support Site in Gricignano di Aversa. This place is a GF haven. It had a small cafe with freshly baked pastries and savory snacks. Italian treats, cookies, breadsticks, crackers, flour variations and differing shapes of pasta filled the aisles and there were plenty of refrigerated and freezer options. Even in October, the store already had beautiful gluten-free Panettone for the holidays.

We visited several other grocery stores with gluten-free sections, and in my opinion, Naples does a great job offering GF options.



**AiC (Associazione Italiana Celiachia)**

The Italian Celiac Association has high standards for making kitchens safe from cross-contamination. Look for the red AiC logo when eating senza glutine, or gluten-free in Italy. You can often find the logo on the menus, windows and doors of an establishment. The accreditation is a sign that a food venue follows a strict process to ensure food is safe for people with celiac disease to consume. To research gluten-free restaurants beforehand, download the AiC Mobile App.



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## MILITARY



U.S. Air Force

An A-10 Thunderbolt II flies over the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility during Operation Epic Fury on March 9.

# A-10 Warthog back in action in Iran war

## Congress put brakes on Air Force plans to retire attack aircraft just 3 months ago

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Three months after Congress put the brakes on Air Force plans to retire its fleet of 162 A-10s this year, the versatile Warthog is back in the fight, this time in a maritime mission chasing Iranian naval vessels.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefly mentioned the A-10C Thunderbolt II at a Pentagon briefing March 19 about the war in Iran, calling the attack aircraft by its familiar nickname.

"The A-10 Warthog is now in the fight

across the southern flank and is hunting and killing fast attack watercraft in the Strait of Hormuz," Air Force Gen. Dan Caine said.

AH-64 Apache helicopters are also prowling the same area, flown by the U.S. Army and "some of our allies ... to handle one-way attack drones," Caine said.

U.S. Central Command on March 15 released imagery of A-10s receiving fuel in flight while supporting Operation Epic Fury, with a caption stating the aircraft "can loiter for hours, standing by and ready to execute a mission whenever needed."

The A-10, first built in the 1970s for use against Soviet tanks in Europe during the Cold War, is designed to provide close air support to ground troops, capable of loitering near hot spots and operating under 1,000-foot ceilings. Its firepower includes a seven-barrel Gatling gun that can deliver nearly 4,000 rounds a minute, according to the Air Force.

Its maritime mission in the current war isn't its first foray over water.

In 2011, an A-10 engaged two small Libyan watercraft in the country's port of Misrata, destroying one and forcing the Libyans to

abandon the other, U.S. Africa Command said in a statement at the time.

Despite the Warthog's versatility, the Air Force has been trying to divest the aircraft for years, citing maintenance costs and its vulnerability to modern air defense systems.

Congress in this year's National Defense Authorization Act directed the Air Force to keep at least 103 of the aircraft, with 93 to be designated as primary mission.

The service was also supposed to brief lawmakers on its future plan for the A-10 by the end of last month.

# Army hypersonic battery nears readiness in Wash.

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

TACOMA, Wash. — The top general for the Army's hypersonic weapons program says the Dark Eagle battery based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in the Pacific Northwest will receive its first operational missiles soon.

"We are so close to that first battery being fully equipped with all of its capabilities that I don't want to spoil the surprise when we actually get there, but we're within a few weeks," Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano said in a Bloomberg News report published March 18.

Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 17th Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force, based at JBLM, has been designated to operate Dark Eagle, the popular nickname for the officially named Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) system.

Hypersonic weapons can travel at five times the speed of sound (Mach 5) and combine high speed with maneuverability, making them difficult for anti-missile systems to target.

Dark Eagle is a trailer-launched boost-glide vehicle system.

The first stage uses a common booster developed in cooperation with the Navy, which plans to field a sea-launched hypersonic weapon.

The second stage of Dark Eagle is a warhead that can travel in excess of 3,800 mph, with aerodynamics that allow Army controllers to shape its trajectory and move it erratically in ways to avoid interception by anti-missile batteries. Its maximum range is 2,175 miles.

Russia has developed hypersonic weapons such as the Avangard, and China has both the DF-17 and longer-range DF-27 hypersonic glide missiles.

The Pentagon has said Dark Eagle would carry only conventional, non-nuclear warheads. The main damage effect would be the kinetic energy of hitting a target at an extremely high speed.

The Russian and Chinese missiles are rated by U.S. intelligence sources as being capable of carrying nuclear and conventional



PERLA ALFARO/U.S. Army

The 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force deploys two launchers of the Long Range Hypersonic Weapon System — nicknamed Dark Eagle — to Northern Territory, Australia, on July 9, to participate in Exercise Talisman Sabre 25. The U.S. Army says the hypersonic missile battery will receive its first operational missile soon.

warheads.

The Army designation of an operational hypersonic missile battery would be a major step for the \$12 billion Dark Eagle program, which has faced development and testing delays. Lockheed Martin is the prime contractor.

In July 2025 the 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force deployed the Dark Eagle system to the Northern Territory of Australia during the

Talisman Sabre exercise. The missile was not fired during international military exercises.

Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said Aug. 2 that sending the Dark Eagle to Australia was a significant achievement, proving it could be moved and set up in potential combat areas.

"It validates the Army's ability to deploy, position, and exercise command and control in a forward environment."

MILITARY

# Most Army horses sent into retirement

## Equine units disband at Fort Irwin, Fort Sill and Fort Huachuca

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army has begun moving horses from three bases directed to save money by ending their equid programs — sending some horses into civilian retirement, others to a new duty station and some into new jobs with Customs and Border Protection.

The Army announced in July that Fort Irwin, Calif., Fort Huachuca, Ariz., and Fort Sill, Okla., had one year to disband ceremonial horse units that brought to life the service's cavalry history through presentations and community outreach.

Units at Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Riley, Kan., were initially included in the reduction but have since been saved.

The Army projected that cutting all five units — which maintain horses, mules and donkeys — would save \$2 million each year. It pledged to pump the savings into weapons and training.

That estimate is now roughly \$1.1 million, the service said March 10.

Though Fort Sill officials are finalizing plans, forts Huachuca and Irwin have begun rehoming animals and closing operations.

Maj. Gen. Richard Appelhans, commander of the Army Intelligence Center of Excellence and Fort Huachuca, presided last month over a ceremony to formally inactivate the base's horse unit, B Troop.

"B Troop, your journey from a visionary idea in 1973 to a beloved and indispensable organization is nothing short of extraordinary and has left an indelible mark on our Army and Fort Huachuca," he said during the ceremony. "The spirit of this troop is now woven into the very fabric of Fort Huachuca."

Unlike other ceremonial units, B Troop relied on volunteers from active, Reserve and retired military personnel alongside Defense Department civilians and military family members for up to 50 community events each year. It presented the U.S. Cavalry standards of the 1880s and had a Ladies Auxiliary whose members dressed in period-specific dresses and rode sidesaddle during parades.

B Troop had seven horses remaining as of last month's ceremony. Five have transferred to Customs and Border Protection, the base said. A decision has not been made on the future of the remaining two horses — 15-year-old Sherman and 18-year-old Ben.

Fort Irwin did not host a ceremony but has already moved its horses, the base said. Eight horses were transferred to El Centro Customs and Border Protection for duty on the southwest border, two horses went to the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley along with a trailer, and three horses found medically unfit for continued operational service were adopted by local civilians.

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment kept the horse detachment's trophies and awards and will put unit legacy items into the base's Heritage Museum. A decision on what to do with the stables is pending, according to Fort Irwin.

Capt. Patrick William Gurnow, commander of Fort Riley's Commanding Generals Mounted Color Guard, said that their two additions from Fort Irwin — Scout and Bradley — have



Photos by U.S. Army

Sully and Bradley take breaks on the road during the move from Fort Irwin, Calif., to Fort Riley, Kan. While Fort Irwin's horse units have been disbanded Fort Irwin's will continue.



B Troop is inactivated at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., during a ceremony on Feb. 27.

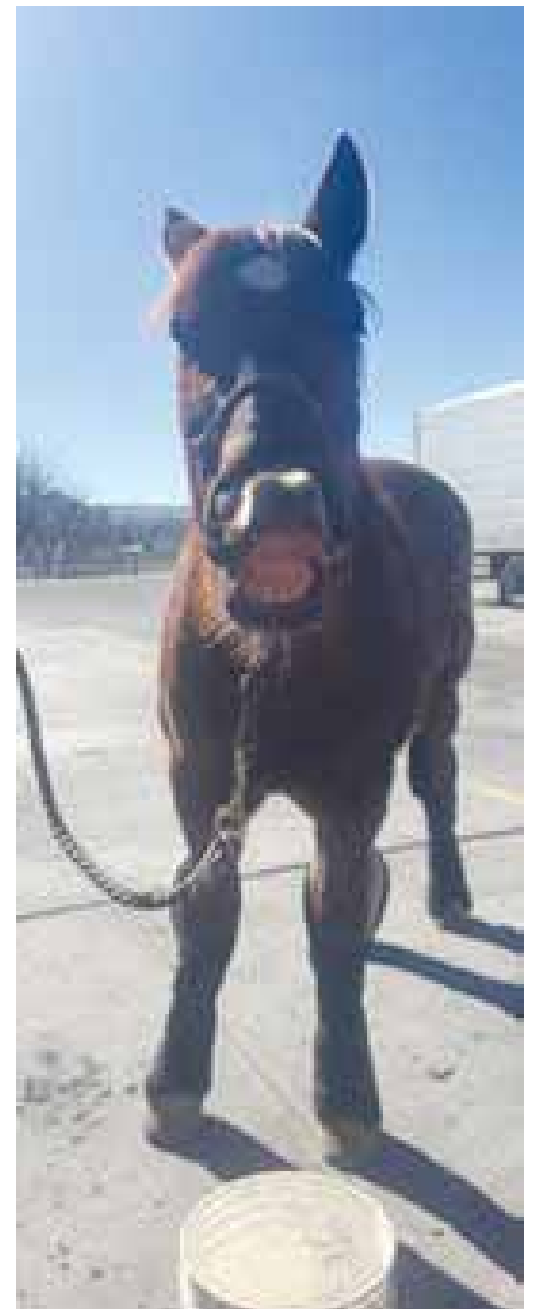
transitioned well to their new home and will participate in riding events this summer.

The unit, which honors Civil War-era cavalry soldiers, already had a horse named Scout, so the new horse was renamed Sully in honor of Brig. Gen. Alfred Sully, who led troopers during the Civil War and on the American frontier from 1841-1879.

During the cross-country move, troopers

unloaded the American Quarter horses every five hours for 45-minute breaks to stretch, walk and drink water, Gurnow said. Then they had 14 days in quarantine before joining the herd.

"They've already made friends with the current horses and are enjoying the Kansas grass and more than 200 acres of their new home," he said.



Sully takes a water break during a stop near Albuquerque, N.M., on the move from Fort Irwin, Calif., to Fort Riley, Kan.

## MILITARY

# IG: General left classified maps on train

## Officer also suffered concussion in night of drinking in Kyiv

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
Stars and Stripes

The Army general responsible for coordinating support for Ukraine left a tube of classified maps behind on a train in Europe and lost control of the sensitive material for 24 hours, according to the Pentagon watchdog.

Gen. Antonio Aguto, a three-star general at the time, was also found to have sustained a concussion following a night of heavy drinking at a social event in Kyiv, leading to incoherence and confusion in a briefing the next day.

The Department of Defense Office of Inspector General report, released March 12, investigated incidents that occurred between April and May 2024. Aguto was commander of the Wiesbaden, Germany-based Security Assistance Group-Ukraine. Aguto relinquished command of the group in August 2024, having presided over its activation in 2022. He retired the same month.

The Inspector General received three anonymous complaints between May 20 and May 24, 2024. The IG initiated an investigation June 6, 2024. The IG also investigated a subsequent allegation that Aguto's counterproductive leadership style created a "toxic environment" within Security Assistance Group-Ukraine headquarters, the report states.

The IG interviewed Aguto and 33 witnesses.

On March 24, 2024, Aguto and his staff traveled to Kyiv as part of the security assistance mission. Part of the trip required them to travel on the Department of State chartered train from Poland to Ukraine.

Aguto and witnesses said he decided to bring a set of classified maps to Kyiv for this trip. Aguto and a witness told the IG that the maps were not packaged in accordance with directives because the maps were too big to wrap and the map tube was too small.



JARVIS MACE/U.S. Army National Guard

**Lt. Gen. Antonio A. Aguto Jr., the commanding general of Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, visits soldiers on at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, in 2024.**

"I used [sic] these maps quite frequently regardless of where I'm at to brief officials on the status of what's going on in Ukraine, uh, which is my job," Aguto said.

The general and his staff boarded the chartered train on April 3 to begin their journey back to Wiesbaden.

"When they arrived in Poland, the witness performed a quick scan of the train and did not notice anything out of the ordinary, but he did not see the map tube come off the train," the 56-page report states.

Aguto did not recall who discovered the map tube was missing, but his executive officer alerted him. It was found on the train the next day and returned, via staff with the U.S. Embassy Ukraine.

Aguto told investigators he took responsibility for the loss of the maps "because I am the senior guy."

Mishandling of classified information comes with severe penalties. Consequences range from official reprimand and loss of

clearance to being fired in the case of nefarious intent.

The second incident involving the general occurred on May 13, 2024. During a nearly six-hour dinner, a military engagement, a witness said Aguto drank two bottles of Chacha "throughout the course of the night." Chacha is a Georgian brandy containing 40-50% alcohol.

One witness said Aguto "appears drunk to me." Aguto told the IG he was "at some level of intoxication."

During a meeting in Aguto's hotel room that night to go over his schedule for the next day, two witnesses reported seeing him fall backward and strike his head on the wall. The witnesses did not see him trip on anything.

"Aguto told us that he remembered being near a table and trying to move a chair just before falling and hitting his head against a wall. He said that he felt 'woozy' after the fall and sat down, and then things got 'a little uhm blurry for lack of a better terms [sic],' the

report states.

Aguto stated that he had medical conditions that could have contributed to the fall.

One of the witnesses thought Aguto might have had a concussion.

Early in the morning of May 14, Aguto said he had another fall.

"He told us that he could not remember much about the circumstances of the fall and could not remember where he fell or what he hit his head on, but he said it caused a mark on his forehead that he described as 'a bump, probably it was red, about a quarter of an inch long,'" according to the report. When asked to compare the falls, Aguto said that the next morning, he "did not feel well at all," and described that he had a headache and was extremely tired.

He also told the IG that he felt a little "woozy," "dizzy," confused, and found it "really hard to focus."

As he met staff in the hotel lobby ahead of a morning meeting with then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken, witnesses reported Aguto acting lethargic and "not himself," and staff said they suggested he cancel the meeting.

Aguto slowly responded, "I got it."

En route to the U.S. Embassy, and running late, Aguto and his staff decided to walk the remaining 50 meters to the embassy's main gate. Shortly after exiting the vehicle, Aguto fell forward, striking his right elbow and jaw, as well as tearing his jacket and shirt sleeve, the report says.

Aguto was later taken to a local hospital and diagnosed with a concussion.

Investigators found Aguto's falls had been a result of "overindulgence" in alcohol, saying he should have considered the effects before drinking so much. Whether he was permitted to consume more than two drinks, the IG report states he knew at the time he had important meetings to attend the following morning.

Aguto disagreed, saying he "acted in good faith" and had received verbal permission from Gen. Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe, to drink at the dinner in light of the "cultural significance" of drinking at such events.

The IG report did not substantiate the allegations of counterproductive leadership during Aguto's time in command.

## DOD sets stricter rules for beard waivers

By MARC CASTANEDA  
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is tightening regulations governing religious exemptions to military grooming standards, requiring more detailed reviews and stricter documentation across all service branches.

A March 11 memo from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth directs the military to standardize how religious accommodation requests are submitted, reviewed and approved, with an emphasis on consistency across the services.

Under the policy, troops are expected to remain clean-shaven unless granted an exemption on a case-by-case basis for sincerely held religious beliefs.

Applicants must submit detailed docu-

mentation demonstrating the sincerity of their beliefs and how grooming requirements conflict with their religious practices.

Required materials include a sworn written statement affirming the belief, a description of the belief and its basis, an explanation of how shaving interferes with that belief and supporting evidence, such as statements from religious leaders.

False statements could result in disciplinary action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Service members whose requests are denied may leave the military, according to the memo.

The guidance follows earlier moves by Hegseth to tighten grooming standards. In September, he ordered an end to permanent medical shaving exemptions and signaled

limits on religious waivers that have allowed some troops to wear beards in recent years.

At a gathering of senior military leaders that month in Quantico, Va., Hegseth criticized what he described as widespread abuse of shaving exemptions.

"No more beardos," he said. "The era of rampant and ridiculous shaving profiles is done. Simply put, if you do not meet the male-level physical standards for combat positions, cannot pass a [physical training] test or don't want to shave and look professional, it's time for a new position or a new profession."

The new policy requires unit commanders to evaluate requests for sincerity and assess whether facial hair could interfere with mission requirements or protective equipment. Reviews must include input from immediate supervisors, chaplains and other sources at the commander's discretion.

Requests will be evaluated under the legal standard of "compelling government interest" and "least restrictive means."

Commanders must consider potential impacts on readiness, including whether facial hair could affect the seal of gas masks or other protective gear, as well as broader safety risks and mission demands.

Army Sgt. Clay Stephens, a medical logistics specialist with the 101st Airborne Division who identifies as a Nordic Pagan, said the new process appears more rigorous than previous policies.

"Now it's more thorough to make sure you are truly sincere," he said by Facebook Messenger on March 19. "Does it suck for people



RAYONNE BISSANT/U.S. Army

**Army Sgt. Clay Stephens, who identifies as a Nordic Pagan, says new process for religious beard exemptions appears more rigorous than previous policies.**

trying to get one for the first time? Absolutely. Will it stop Soldiers from BSing the system? Absolutely."

Stephens said he believes everyone should have a choice of growing a beard.

"Other countries do it, why shouldn't we?" he wrote. "However, just don't step on those truly trying to follow their religious beliefs."

Officials who deny requests must provide written explanations outlining operational risks and why alternative accommodations were insufficient.

Previously approved religious accommodations must be reviewed within 90 days. The policy takes effect immediately, with implementation plans due within 30 days.

Stars and Stripes reporter Janiqua Robinson contributed.

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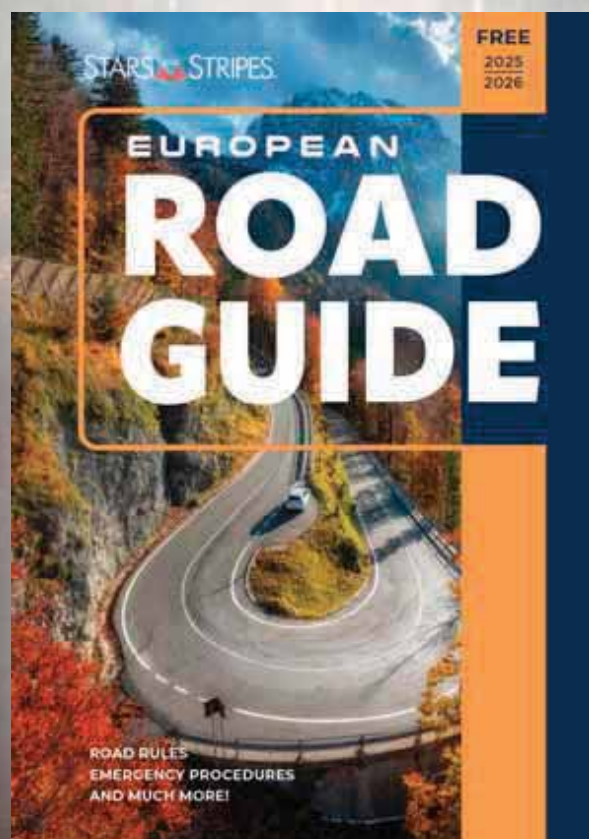


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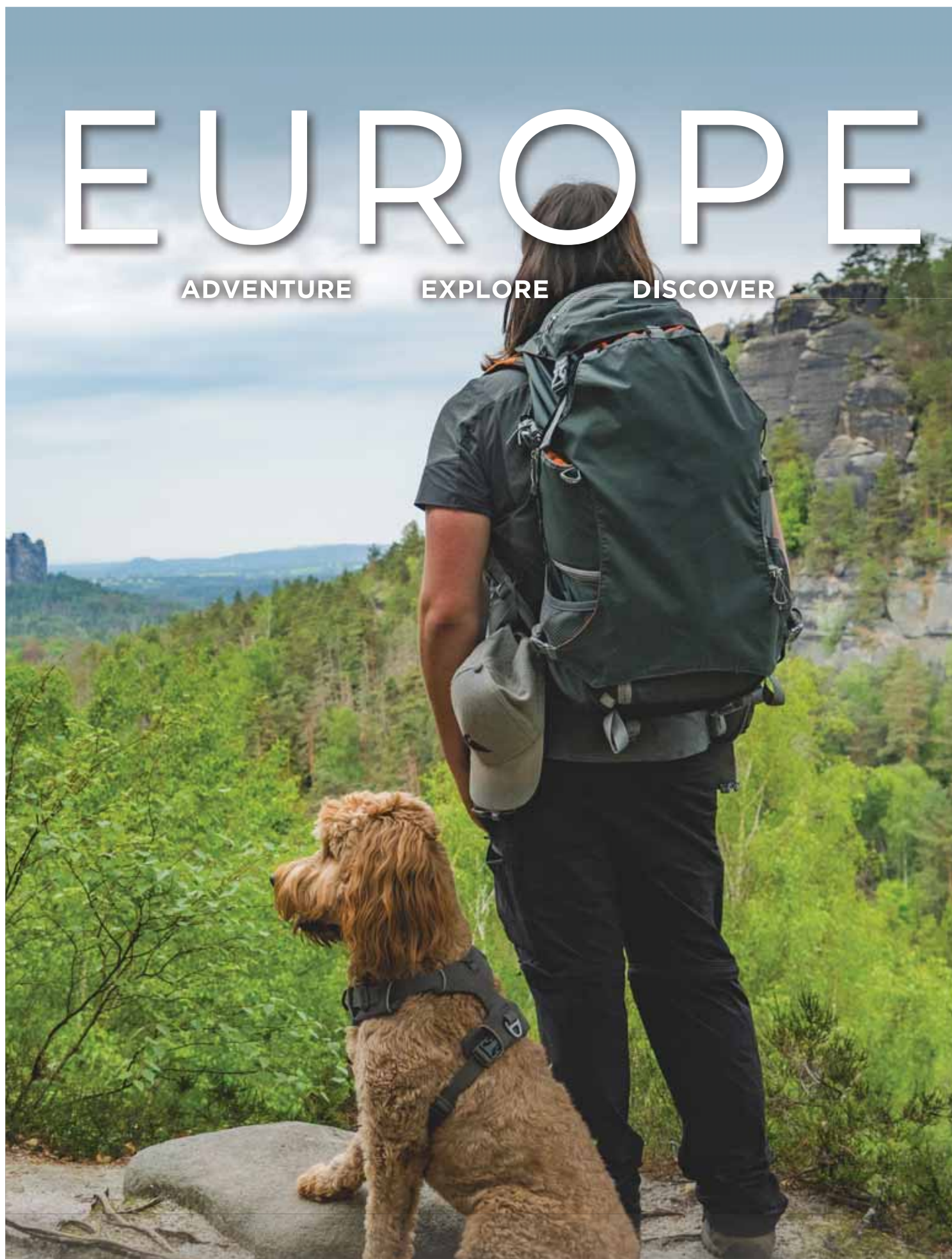
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