

AI in the field

Soldiers test tech developed for Army competition **Page 3**

A vehicle outfitted with self-driving software from Field AI sits alongside military vehicles during a training exercise at Fort Hood, Texas.

ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Sigonella issues safety rules amid Etna eruption **Page 7**



GAO: Military facilities fall behind in maintenance **Page 6**



Vicenza's Sky Soldiers facing 2K drones in exercise **Page 13**

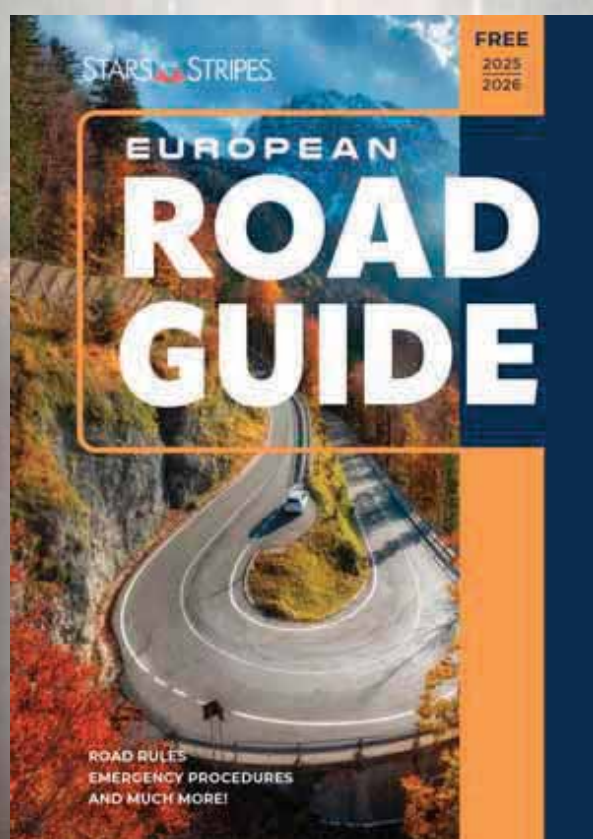
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COVER STORY

Technology that lets robots do the work

About 20 companies let Fort Hood troops test gear in training event

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

FORT HOOD, Texas — Technology companies got the rare opportunity to put their products in the hands of soldiers during a training event in August, with the Army and industry seeing in real time the potential of emergent software and hardware to enhance a combat unit's capabilities.

With a focus on autonomous capabilities and artificial intelligence, the 20 participating companies got a chance to experiment alongside 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, through Overwatch, an ongoing innovation competition managed by the Army Applications Laboratory in Austin to leverage the capabilities of robots to complete work without direct supervision.

Some of the tech could be chosen to travel with the brigade for an upcoming rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., for further evaluation, said Lt. Col. Nick Rinaldi, a program manager at the lab.

"[Army Applications Lab] is usually the intersection between what an industry partner can provide in terms of capability and what the warfighter needs to actually change and become more lethal, more contested-logistics capable," he said.

For one battalion, that meant incorporating a drone system that flies itself to conduct reconnaissance alongside the Ghost-X system troops already operate, said Spc. Logan Coleman, a drone team leader within 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment.

"We set up reconnaissance and found an entire battalion in 20 minutes," he said. "We got strikes off and cleared them in about an hour."

The entire brigade was in and out of the field last month in Texas heat above 100 degrees, conducting a standard training mission with its armored vehicles to prepare for the National Training Center while also experimenting with technology. Aside from the autonomous reconnaissance drones Coleman's platoon employed, other soldiers tested out drones that work in teams to complete reconnaissance missions, self-driving resupply vehicles and drones capable of carrying explosives.

As opposed to typical experimentation that aims to test the capabilities and constraints of new products, Overwatch's schedule was dictated by the brigade's training cycle, Rinaldi said. It's the flip side to the traditional, and still important, Army process of offering up a specific problem in need of a solution.

"We're learning how does this emerging technology change how we fight?" Rinaldi said. "Does it change it for the better?"

Small drone operations have become standard in combat units as the Army prepares to fight an enemy with similar capabilities, such as Russia or China, but now there's a need to push further into artificial intelligence and autonomous operations.

More plainly, how can soldiers let the robots do the work, Rinaldi said.

First Lt. Ronan Wyatt, a platoon leader for an armored strike platoon in the brigade's 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, said incorporating autonomous devices into their mission took the mental load off operators.

His soldiers experimented with a team of small reconnaissance drones from the company Havoc AI. The drones can be given a mission such as reviewing a route or specific area, then they work together in collaborative autonomy to get the job done.

When the drones return, soldiers can download their feeds and compare the new photos to old ones for any anomalies or signs of enemy activity.

"The operator can set the points, then go do something else," Wyatt said. "I don't have to have somebody glued to screens for 30 min-



PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Employees of Field AI monitor as soldiers use the self-driving vehicle as part of a training exercise Aug. 18 at Fort Hood, Texas.



Staff Sgt. Tyler Craig, a drone team leader with 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, uses a tablet to set the mission for drones using software from Havoc AI as part of a training exercise.

utes."

Another platoon trained with a Polaris vehicle outfitted with autonomous software from Field AI, which could be put on any vehicle.

"Human reconnaissance is more likely to survive if the robot has first contact," said 1st Lt. Austin Sumner, platoon leader of a scout platoon in 2-12.

He said they also used the vehicle to deliver water, batteries and food to troops set up about a kilometer away. The vehicle took the long way using roads, he said.

The Forward Support Company for 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment used a different type of vehicle to carry out a similar resupply mission, said Sgt. 1st Class Marquizes Canada. His crew experimented with the AZAK vehicle, which uses electric vehicle technology in its wheels to create a compact vehicle with low- and high-clearance benefits at the same time. It is driven by a remote control.

This allows for a smoother ride and for the vehicle to climb a 60-degree slope without slowing down, said Ben Meager, CEO of AZAK. It can climb terrain most vehicles can't, he said.

"We've been using it to carry heavy things, like loads of ice to resupply camps," Canada



A team of drones outfitted with collaborative automation software from Havoc AI prepare to launch Aug. 18 as part of a training exercise at Fort Hood.

said.

Typically the soldiers would carry the bags, but this moves full coolers through rough terrain with ease, he said.

However, it was the medics that found the vehicles most valuable. The AZAK model used at Fort Hood could support up to 600 pounds, so it moved injured soldiers, ice sheets and water across the shrubby, uneven land. Other models can carry up to 1,000 pounds, Meager said.

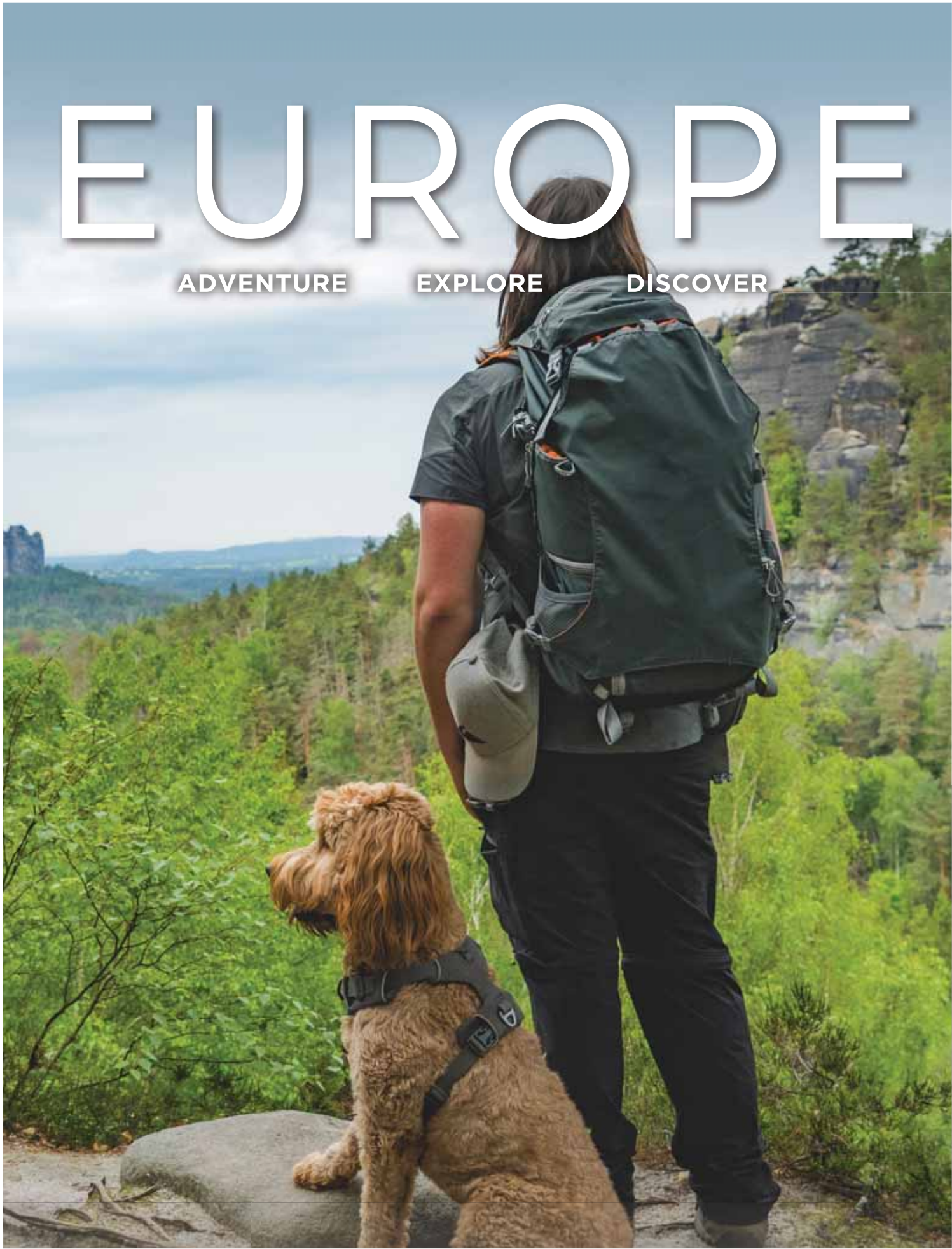
"It facilitates soldiers being able to sustain a fight," Canada said.

Sustaining combat operations may not be as exciting as talking about weapons systems, but it's the key to staying in the fight, Rinaldi said.

"I think one of our superpowers in the Army, really ground combat, is we maintain tempo better than any other country can. We have shock and effect and speed that no one else can reproduce, and we're the only ones that can do the logistics tails to do that," he said. "Now that we're going to get better at that, we're going to be more effective, more lethal, more capable."

A decision on which companies will move on with the brigade to the National Training Center depends on a variety of factors and measures set specifically to that technology, Rinaldi said. Not going isn't the end of the road for possible use within the Army — it just means it wasn't right for this unit and this mission.

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MILITARY

Magnets vs. steam drives catapult debate

EMALS advocates say it saves wear on both aircraft and catapults

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump wants the Navy to go back to the future by restoring steam catapults to launch planes from aircraft carriers, a directive that critics say will cost billions of dollars, exacerbate construction delays and introduce logistical hurdles.

The national security memorandum that Trump signed Aug. 13 would end the use of Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System, or EMALS, in future Gerald R. Ford-class carriers. The order directs Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and acting Navy Secretary Hung Cao to deliver a plan to Trump within 60 days outlining the timeline and resources needed to make the changes aboard the fourth Ford-class carrier, the future Doris Miller.

"The United States Navy has experienced a series of shipbuilding setbacks stemming from overly complex designs and iterative design change procedures," the memo states.

Magnets are out and steam is back in, Trump directed.

U.S. carriers use a CATOBAR (Catapult-Assisted Take-Off But Arrested Recovery) system. The 10 Nimitz-class carriers operated by the Navy use steam generated from the carrier's nuclear power plant to fling strike fighters 300 feet in under three seconds. The aircraft accelerates from zero to 160 mph and into the air.

With EMALS, currently only in service on Ford, electromagnetic coils under the deck are used to accelerate the shuttle attached to aircraft.

The directive doesn't call for tearing out existing EMALS systems.

USS Gerald R. Ford, commissioned in 2017, uses EMALS. So does the John F. Kennedy, which is scheduled to be commissioned in March 2027.

EMALS would also stay in the Enterprise, currently being built at HII Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia and slated for commissioning in 2030.

But beginning with the Doris Miller, the launch system would go back to steam under Trump's memo. The Navy's long-range plan is to add another six Ford-class carriers in coming decades, which would use steam catapults under the Trump directive.

So far, support for the return to steam has mostly come from within the Trump administration.

Jerry Hendrix, director of the shipbuilding office within the White House Office of Management and Budget, said in a series of tweets that critics of steam catapults aren't considering "the hard math driving these considerations." Hendrix contends that Ford-class carriers take too long to build because of complex designs.

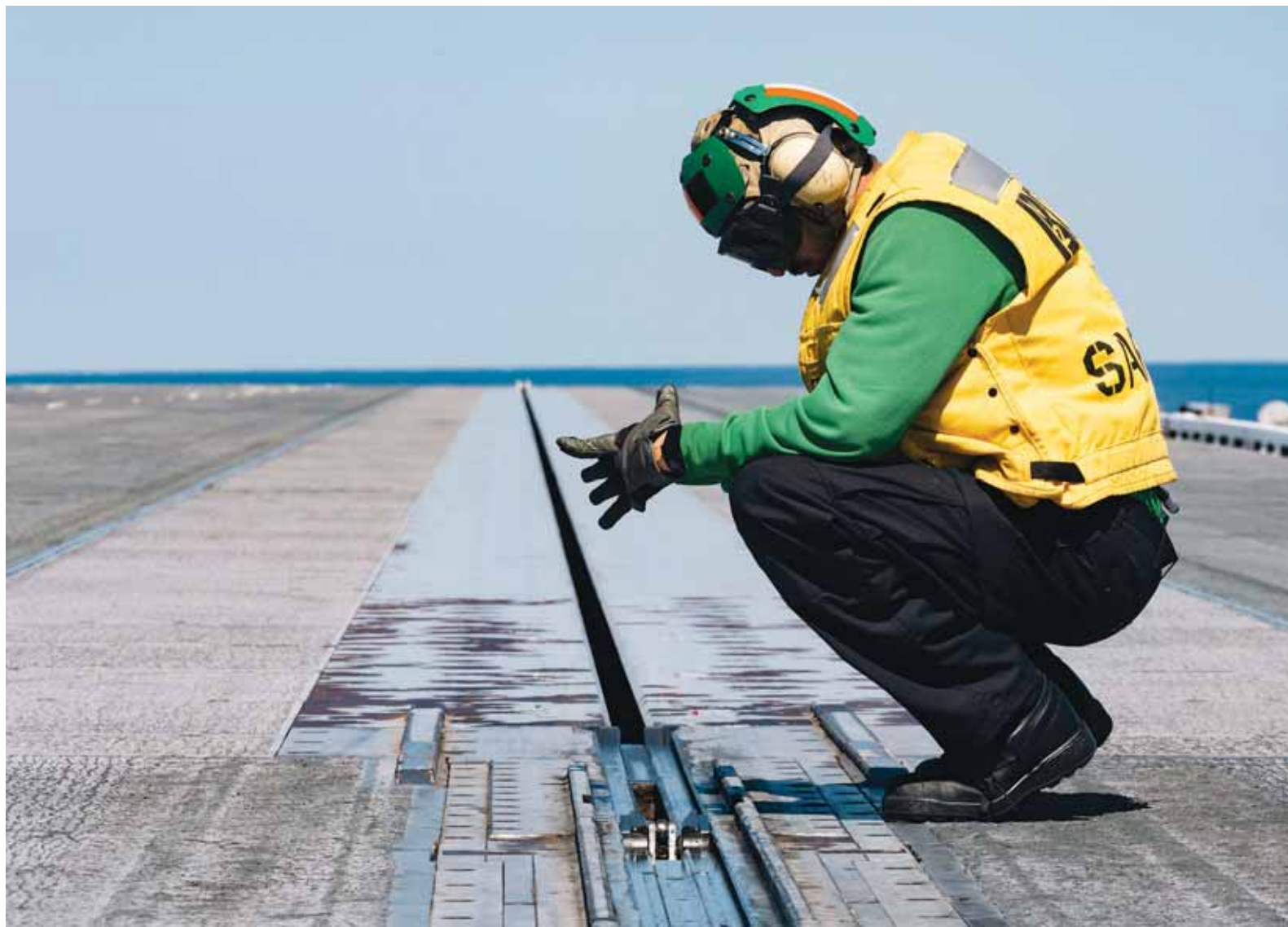
Although supported inside the White House, Trump's directive has faced widespread criticism.

Bryan Clark, a former Navy officer who is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, said retrofitting steam catapult systems into the design of future carriers would require expensive and time-consuming changes that "risks crippling fleet readiness — already at its lowest point in decades."

Clark noted the supply chain and steam catapult production lines shut down after the last Nimitz-class carrier, USS George H.W. Bush, was commissioned in 2009. Restarting manufacturing would demand massive financial investments and extended lead times and delay the Ford-class program further.

Proponents say the EMALS system can be more precisely calibrated for the type and weight of aircraft being launched.

Whereas steam catapults jerk the plane down the deck when engaged, EMALS magnets both push and pull the shuttle, attaining



GLADJIMI BALISAGE/U.S. Navy

Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Equipment) 2nd Class Thomas Myers performs a prelaunch inspection on an Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System on the flight deck of the USS Gerald R. Ford. President Donald Trump is calling for a return to steam catapults for future carriers.



BRIANNA BARNETT/U.S. Navy

Airman Ariana Claxton lifts a covering from the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launching System on the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford.

launch speeds without the initial jolt. In the long run, EMALS proponents say it saves wear on both aircraft and the catapult system itself.

Under routine operations, Ford can launch 160 sorties per day during sustained 12-hour operations, compared with about 120 for Nimitz-class carriers, according to the Navy. That means three Ford-class carriers with EMALS can launch as many planes as four Nimitz class carriers using the steam system.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, the chief of naval operations, speaking last month at the Tailhook Symposium in Reno, Nev., said that during its recent deployment, Ford produced between 120% and 130% of the Nimitz-class sorties, according to Aviation Week. "We saw numbers in that that were as advertised," he said.

Clark said changing the design at this point



JAYDEN HOWARD/U.S. Navy

Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Equipment) 2nd Class Cameron Stroup signals to launch a deadload sled using EMALS during deadload testing on the Pre-Commissioning Unit John F. Kennedy.

"The Ford also has been costing the Navy \$100 million less to operate per year than its predecessors because they replaced all the ship's steam equipment with electrical."

Bryan Clark

former Navy officer, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute

would push the delivery of Miller into the late 2030s.

"The Ford also has been costing the Navy \$100 million less to operate per year than its predecessors because they replaced all the ship's steam equipment with electrical," Clark said.

With more electrical systems, the number of crew needed on the carrier is about 500 less than Nimitz-class carriers. Operating a steam catapult requires a crew of 12, while the highly

automated EMALS system needs only two to operate.

Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, is a supporter of Trump's \$1.5 trillion defense spending plan. But he's against abandoning EMALS, which is developed in part in Tupelo, Miss.

"I think there's overwhelming support in the Congress and in the Pentagon for moving forward with EMALS," Wicker said in a Aug. 18 statement.

MILITARY

Military facilities behind in maintenance

GAO: Pentagon not asking for enough funding for repairs

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A Pentagon practice of not requesting enough money from Congress to fully maintain its facilities has left an estimated \$285 billion repair backlog, posing a risk to military missions and the living conditions of personnel, a government watchdog said.

The Government Accountability Office also found that the Defense Department does not have enough workers to address the backlog and does not consistently track work orders, which could help prioritize repair needs.

“DOD has not fully determined the risks to its mission and to the quality of life of its personnel as a result of not meeting its funding goal. Fully determining and communicating these risks would provide better information to DOD and Congress to weigh budget priorities,” according to the report released Aug. 21.

The GAO noted that barracks have been a particular issue where installations do not always identify the full need to Congress.

“Officials at five of 10 installations we visited during that review told us they had more barracks projects in need of funding than they included in their submissions for funding requirements due to competing priorities,” the GAO reported. “We recommended that each military service develop and implement a method to ensure that the service has visibility into all military construction funding needs identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are chosen to be submitted for funding.”

The report offered 13 recommendations to alleviate the problem that included conducting risk assessments, identifying and solving worker shortages and evaluating and updating policies around maintenance data and priorities.

Mark Sinder, deputy assistant secretary of defense for infrastructure, modernization and resilience, responded to the GAO report and mostly agreed with its concerns.

“[The Defense Department] recognizes that over the past decade, funding levels required to maintain the built environment have competed less favorably against higher military budget priorities. Installation [director of public works] and [civil engineer squadron] staff work to ensure as much as possible with the available sustainment re-



Senior Airman Kyle Corcoran, a heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration specialist assigned to the 5th Civil Engineer Squadron, inspects an infrared heater at the Combat Arms Training and Maintenance building on Minot Air Force Base, N.D., last year.

sources that facility conditions do not impact mission readiness,” he wrote.

Sinder disagreed with a recommendation to strengthen his office’s oversight on the military departments because it lacks the staff to do so.

The Defense Department’s real estate portfolio includes more than 736,000 facilities across the globe valued at \$2.6 trillion as of fiscal year 2025, according to the GAO. About one-third of the buildings are more than 50 years old.

While the Pentagon has a goal of funding 90% of its maintenance needs, the GAO found it has only funded facilities at about 80%.

That percentage varies widely from base to base. The Army’s Fort Benning, Ga., received 83% of the recommended facilities funding, and Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota got 40%, according to the GAO. At Minot,

officials told the GAO that its B-52 aircraft parking area was more than 30 years beyond its expected lifespan.

The services have taken steps to implement this recommendation, but only for barracks and not to all other types of buildings and other infrastructure, according to the report.

The GAO has considered the Pentagon’s management of facilities high-risk for more than 20 years, and it noted that better management could save billions of dollars. Instead, the maintenance backlog more than doubled in the last five years — up from \$137 billion in fiscal year 2020.

In recent years, news reports have shown how the maintenance backlog and staffing shortages have affected troops.

Last month, the Medical Education and Training Campus housing at Joint Base San

Antonio-Fort Sam Houston in Texas was deemed unsafe and the services are still evacuating about 5,200 service members to new alternate locations.

Four years earlier, 1,200 soldiers were removed from barracks at Fort Bragg, N.C., because of relentless mold and an outdated central heating and air conditioning system.

Fort Hood, Texas, was so low on maintenance staff last year it called in a dozen airmen to tackle air conditioning repairs after service requests topped 1,000. The base had trouble keeping workers amid a federal worker buyout program that was followed by a hiring freeze.

The GAO cited the federal employment programs as part of the problem keeping workers, adding that hiring in remote locations and private sector competition also made it hard to hire.

Engineer battalion unit gives GTA VI perk for reenlistment

By DEVIN KLECAN
Stars and Stripes

Some Georgia-based soldiers could get the OK in November to steal cars, rob banks and revel in the thug life — at least virtually — in one of the decade’s most anticipated video games, so long as they commit to a few more years in uniform.

Officials of the 9th Brigade Engineer Battalion out of Fort Stewart are offering an extra four days off timed to the Nov. 19 release of Grand Theft Auto VI as an enticement to get soldiers to extend their enlistments by at least two years.

The offer was detailed in a July 28 memo signed by battalion commander Lt. Col. Ryan Hodgson, which Task & Purpose confirmed as authentic after a photograph of it was shared on the Facebook page of U.S. Army W.T.F! Moments.

Any active-duty enlisted soldier assigned or attached to the unit who is eligible for reenlistment and does so between Aug. 1 and Nov. 14 will be authorized to use the special pass Nov. 20-23, subject to commander approval, the memo states.



ROCKSTAR GAMES

Gamers are expected to have the ultimate release this November in the form of Grand Theft Auto VI, by far the biggest title this year.

The four-day liberty dates coincide with the release of the latest installment of Rockstar Games’ Grand Theft Auto series.

The incentive was the brainchild of a career counselor with the engineer battalion, partly to remind soldiers of impending reenlistment dates, Lt. Col. Angel Tomko, a Fort Stewart spokesperson, told The Associated Press.

The game’s release promises to be among the biggest entertainment events of the year, with publisher Take-Two Interactive’s CEO Strauss Zelnick calling preorder sales “unprecedented and astonishing.”

Set in the fictional U.S. state of Leonida, which resembles Florida, the game gives players the opportunity to virtually explore Vice City with their friends online, engaging in various criminal activities in the game’s underworld.

According to the game’s promotional materials, drenched in neon pinks, blues and oranges reminiscent of the 1980s TV series “Miami Vice,” one of the game’s main characters is an Army veteran-turned-drug runner who sets off on a crime spree with a street-smart girlfriend fresh out of prison.

The game was originally announced in February 2022. Since its first official trailer was released on YouTube in December 2023, it has amassed almost 300 million views. An exclusive, extended look into Grand Theft Auto VI premiered Aug. 28 on Netflix.

The engineering battalion incentive was specifically created to provide time off for the

game’s “highly anticipated release,” the memo states.

Its purpose is “to promote retention, boost morale, and reward the continued dedication of the soldiers within the 9th Brigade Engineer Battalion.”

Units often offer internal incentives on top of Army-wide bonuses to help sweeten the pot in encouraging soldiers to stay on. They can include time off, extension of time at their current post and other perks.

As of early August, 20 of the 130 eligible soldiers in the battalion had taken the command up on the offer and signed on for between two and six years of service, Task & Purpose reported.

Users on social media platforms and online forums such as Instagram and Reddit voiced mixed opinions on the offer.

“This commander knows ball,” wrote Facebook user Brian Griffin, responding to the post.

“For re-upping, they should give you a PS5 and GTA 6 with a 4 day pass,” wrote Michael Miser, another Facebook commenter, referring to the PlayStation 5 game console.

MILITARY

Sigonella issues safety rules after Mount Etna death

Base guidelines call to ‘increase awareness’ after an American tourist struck by lightning

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A Navy base on the island of Sicily has issued safety requirements for personnel who may want to hike Europe’s most active volcano, which has been erupting.

The guidelines for the Naval Air Station Sigonella community were issued Aug. 18, just days after an American tourist was fatally struck by lightning while in a restricted section of the roughly 11,000-foot-tall Mount Etna.

NAS Sigonella is located about 31 miles south of the volcano, which continues to spew ash and lava during its most recent eruptive phase.

Recreational hiking above 6,500 feet on Etna is prohibited for base personnel unless they are part of a tour led by Morale, Welfare and Recreation guides or certified alpine or volcanological guides, NAS Sigonella said in a Facebook statement.

Hikers also must follow Italian government protection bans limiting or restricting access to specific sections of the mountain, according to the statement.

In addition, “personnel must check weather forecast prior to visiting Mount Etna, follow the buddy-rule, and avoid if there is a forecast for storms, lightning, or severe weather advisory in the Catania province,” the base said.

A 29-year-old American tourist on the mountain died Aug. 16 after being hit by lightning during a storm, The New York Times reported.



ZACHARY DALTON/U.S. Navy

Mount Etna can be seen behind Naval Air Station Sigonella, Italy.

The man was found in serious condition in a restricted section of the mountain sometimes used to get closer to the summit, according to the report.

Operations at the installation include Navy P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, an MQ-4C Triton drone detachment and a Space Force contingent.

The base is the Navy’s second-largest security command, behind only Naval Support Activity Bahrain in the Middle East, according to the service.

In a separate statement, NAS Sigonella said it had issued the guidance to “increase awareness and vigilance in adhering to safety standards.”

Etna’s current eruption has disrupted hundreds of flights at the nearby Catania airport and deposited ash and debris over



ALEXANDER MITCHELL/U.S. Marine Corps

Marines hike up Mount Etna on the Italian island of Sicily in this undated photo. Nearby Naval Air Station Sigonella issued safety requirements this week for hikers seeking to visit the volcano, which has been erupting for about three weeks.

the region, including the base.

NAS Sigonella remains fully operational and officials are monitoring the eruption, including an ash plume rising 19,685 feet, the base said.

Protocols are in place to preserve flight safety, and sweeper trucks were routinely clearing ash deposits from runways, hangars and flight lines, according to the statement.

Etna’s ongoing eruption has drawn tourists eager to get a glimpse of the volcano. The local civil protection agency has limited

access to the mountain, warning that volcanic activity and weather can create dangerous conditions.

The base has warned community members to expect travel delays at Catania airport and urged drivers to reduce speed on roads that could be slick with ash.

The advisory also cautioned people against wiping ash from car windshields or windows with a dry cloth or shirt, as doing so could scratch the glass. Instead, windshields and wipers should be rinsed with water.

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BY ERICA FOWLER
Stars and Stripes

The complex story of the Roman civilization has a multitude of lessons to teach us about power, people and life in ancient times, which is what fascinates its many visitors every year. Nowhere in the world will you get a more concentrated explanation about how Romans changed the world than in the heart of the “Eternal City.”

For the best experience, I recommend visiting in the tourist off-season, but then again, I’m not a fan of the summer heat or heavier crowds. It does take a bit of planning and prioritizing to book tickets ahead for sites you want to see, check opening hours and ensure you take full advantage of your time in the city.



COLOSSEUM AND FORUM-PALATINE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA

You’ve seen it in movies and depictions of everything Italian, but standing on the arena floor of the massive Colosseum of Rome will still have you feeling awestruck. Book tickets well in advance from the official vendor: ticketing.colosseo.it/en/.

Right next door is the Roman Forum, and the best view of this site is from the Palatine Hill terrace. Seeing all three sites in a single day is possible, however, there are a variety of ticketing options sold. The most basic gives you 24 hours to see them all, including a scheduled entry time for the Colosseum.

Check out the website to decide what you’re most interested in seeing. Do you want to explore the hypogeum (underground portion) of the Colosseum or actually walk out onto the arena floor as the gladiators did? For both of those, you will need to book the Full Experience ticket. Some ticketing options include the SUPER sites, which stands for “Seven Unique Places to Experience in Rome.” These are other historically significant and magnificent interior spaces in the Forum and Palatine archaeological park.



BASILICA DI SAN CLEMENTE

A perfect example of the literal layers of history in Rome is at the Basilica di San Clemente, a six-minute walk from the Colosseum. An ornately painted and gilded interior of a 12th-century basilica welcomes you just past the cloisters.

The magnificent display is just the start of your journey backward through time as you walk down steps through a simple side door to an archaeological site underneath the

Basilica. This is where you can view the 4th century basilica and even further down, the remains of a first-century alleyway of former shops and even a temple of Mithras. Access to this area is ticketed, and you must book ahead at the website.



PANTHEON

The Pantheon is a brilliantly engineered structure that was built as a Roman temple to all gods in the first century. It served as a Christian church and an important burial site for several famous Italians during the Renaissance and even into the 19th century.

Its design has been replicated as a model of impressive power across the world, as any classical rotunda of a capital building or monument will show you. Its massive spherical dome has an opening at the top, the “oculus,” which beams sunlight (or rain!) into the space.

The first Sunday of every month, entrance is free. On other days, you can book tickets ahead of time at the official museum vendor: direzionemuseiroma.cultura.gov.it/en/pantheon. Adults are seven euros; those under 18 are free, but still need a ticket reserved.

TREVI FOUNTAIN

Relatively youthful compared to the many ancient sites of Rome, the Trevi Fountain is a

quintessential site that many have put in their travel photo albums. It is an eight-minute walk from the Pantheon and free to gaze at.

However, if you’d like to approach the fountain or toss a coin, the city now charges a two-euro fee for anyone who is not a resident of the City of Rome. It can be booked ahead of time online at fontanaditrevis.roma.it, or you can buy tickets in person at local museums and tourist information points.

If you want a photo without ridiculous crowds, go early in the morning. You will not be able to access the area directly beside the fountain, nor can you toss in a coin. That space opens at mid-morning (times vary). At nighttime the area will still be crowded, as the toss area doesn’t close until 10 p.m.



VICUS CAPRARIUS

If it wasn’t for its discovery in the 1990s, this first-century residential complex would still be buried under the affluent neighborhood of Trevi. This is a low-cost hidden gem where you can explore ancient underground archways and hear the trickling pools of the still-active Virgin Aqueduct. The water feeds into the Trevi Fountain nine meters above. Reservations are made via a WhatsApp message; details are on the website at www.vicuscaprarius.com.

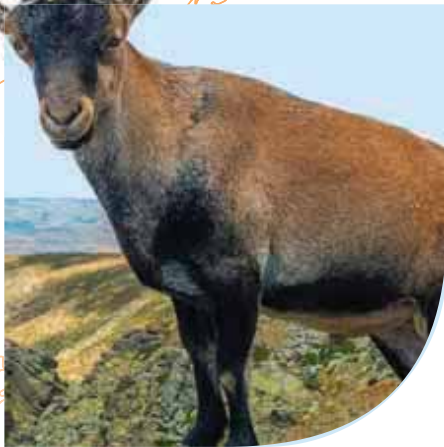




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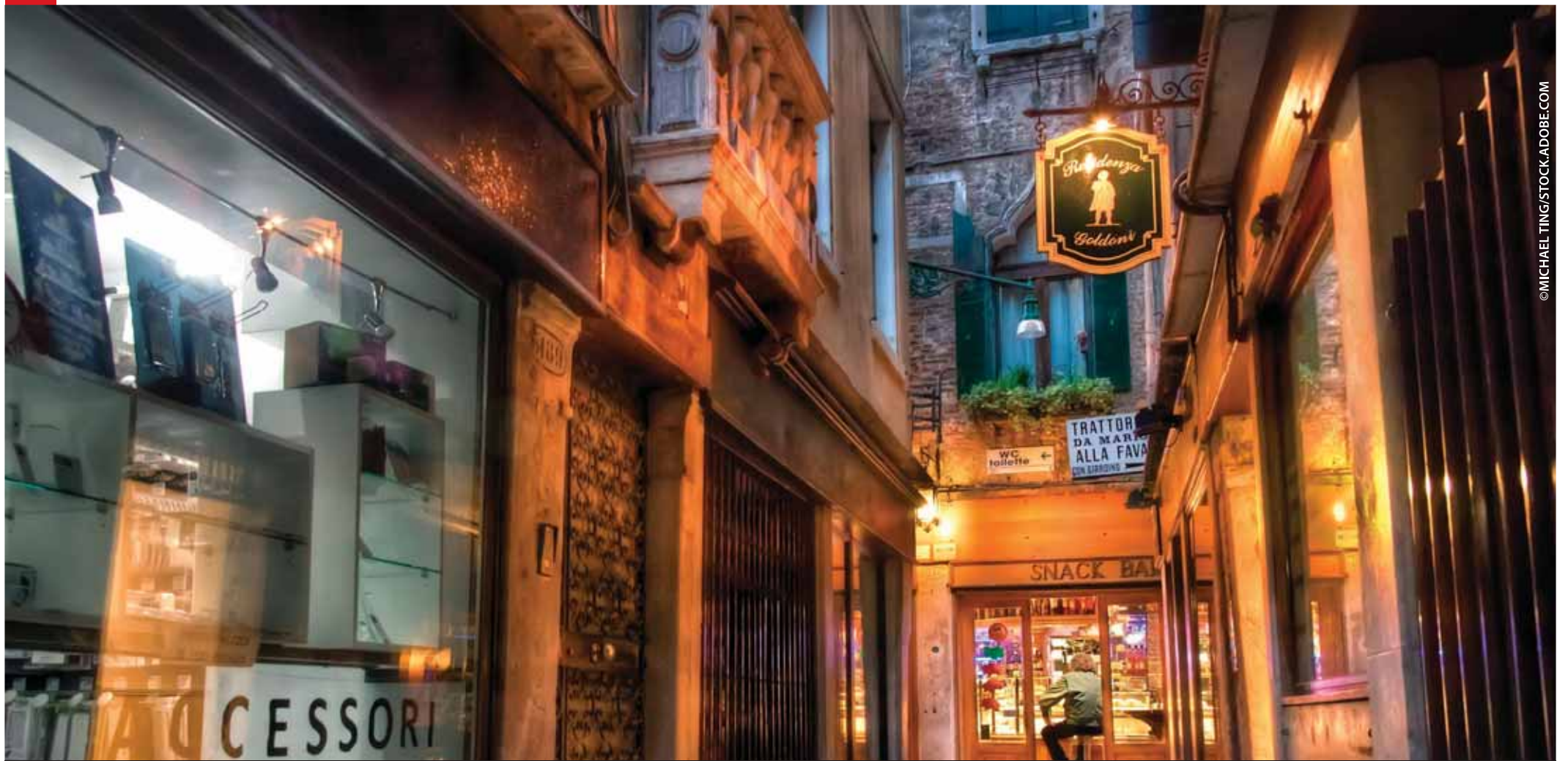
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VISITING VENICE

on One Street

By KATE LEAHY VOIGTS
Contributing Writer

Venice is both touristy and local, bustling and tranquil, crowded and deserted; however you understand it, though, this gem is a “must-see” for visitors to the diverse Veneto region. I’ve visited Venice more than a dozen times, and it always surprises and delights.

With this guide, you can enjoy a local café, a delicious meal, a gondola ride and an overnight stay, all along a single street. It changes names every block or so as it winds from west to east, but begins as Calle Barcaroli. These recommended experiences are so close together, you can pick the order that works best for you. Now, plan your trip.

An authentic Venetian café where you’ll encounter more locals than tourists is Al Teatro Café. I typically stop here for a stand-up coffee or aperitivo (a spritz or prosecco), before lunch or dinner. One of my favorite visits was just prior to Christmas, when the wise proprietor knowingly pushed the tables against the walls to accommodate the stream of locals popping in for a quick drink or snack to connect with friends and wish a “buon natale” to all before heading home. Regardless of when you stop by the prices are great and the people watching “prima classe!”

A short walk from the Al Teatro Café, you’ll find Da Cherubino Restaurant. The food, service and atmosphere are great, equally so for lunch or dinner. With its casual vibe, diverse menu (including pizzas and salads), it won’t bust your budget. Although Da Cherubino has a large capacity (it’s much bigger than it appears from the street-side), you might consider reserving a table the day prior, or a few hours before your intended show-time because of its popularity.

While in Venice, you must enjoy a gondola experience. Yes, it’s touristy, but it is also enchanting. Officially called Gondola Bacino Orseolo, I recommend grabbing a gondolier at the end of the road where people have nicknamed the canal the “gondola corral.” At this picture-pretty spot, you’ll find twenty to thirty gondoliers queued up throughout the day and well into the evening, ready to deliver a thirty-minute ride which typically runs about 100 euro, regardless of the number in your party. It’s a kitschy, fun, must-do activity, particularly for first-time visitors. As your gondolier poses for great pictures, you can sit back, soak in the sights and enjoy the shouts of

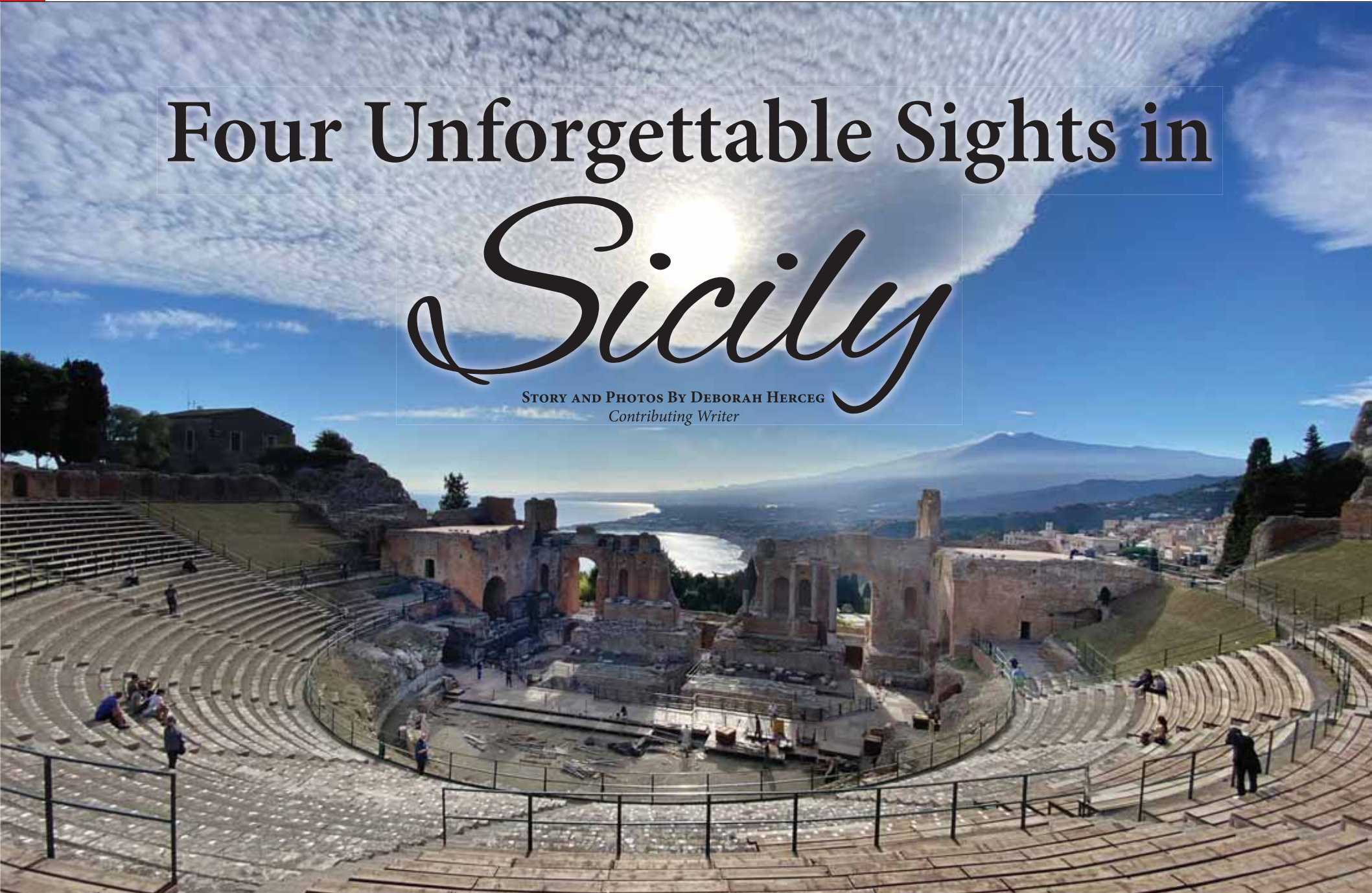


“oye!” (pronounced oy-ay) as you cruise through the tight turns of the canal network.

Venice is bursting with overnight accommodation options, from fancy hotels to modest private rooms and apartment rentals, for budgets from luxury to basic. Here are a couple of options, keeping it on one street as promised. First, the Hotel Cavalletto & Doge Orseolo (4-star) is located at the gondola corral. The next option I recommend, only mere steps from Saint Mark’s Square, is Hotel Mercurio Venezia (3-star). Be aware accommodation prices vary significantly based on the night of your stay. Take advantage of military training holidays and long weekends to stay on a Thursday, Sunday or Monday evening, when you’ll find greater availability and thinner crowds.

If you are lucky enough to stay overnight, head to Piazza San Marco after dinner to enjoy the “dueling” orchestras of the Caffè Florian and Caffè Lavena. No need to pay the cafes’ entertainment surcharges or order a 20-euro bellini to enjoy the sounds and sites. You’ll have plenty of company listening and watching while strolling through the square Napoleon dubbed “the world’s most beautiful drawing room,” after the day-trippers have departed.

Venice is a maze of tiny streets connecting named and unnamed piazzas. Don’t attempt to GPS your way with an inevitably unreliable cell signal. You might consider buying a “Mapa di Venezia” for 3 euros at the Tourist Information (TI) office just outside the Venezia Santa Lucia train station; it is on the left when exiting. Otherwise, use the ubiquitous yellow and black “Per Rialto” and “Per San Marco” signs to orient yourself.



Four Unforgettable Sights in Sicily

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DEBORAH HERCEG
Contributing Writer

Sicily is truly the land of sun, fire and history. It is a great place to visit all year round. We planned our trip for November as it was still warm enough to enjoy the sunshine and simultaneously escape the grayness of German winter.

We took a RyanAir flight into Catania and spent six wonderful days in Sicily. We rented a car for island travel and hired a local company for some local tours. After exploring much of Sicily, these four sites were our most memorable experiences.

The first and most adventurous place we visited was hiking on Mt. Etna. At 3000m tall, Mt. Etna is the highest active volcano in Europe, and it continuously erupts. The journey up the volcano involved a ride in a huge trekking vehicle and a guided hike up the mountain. We hiked near “fresh” lava and felt the warmth as we walked by. Once we returned from our excursion, we visited a local shop where we tasted the goodness of fresh local products (olive oils, jams and honey).

We booked our tour with a local tour operator for ease of navigation and to have an off-the-beat-en track guided adventure. It is also possible to drive and book your own tickets to a designated part of the mountain at www.funiviaetna.com.

Next up: getting an iconic picture at the Taormina Ancient Theater. The views of the

Taormina Ancient Theater were absolutely breathtaking — with sweeping vistas of Etna and the dramatic coastline. As we walked through the theater, we could almost hear the echoes of the ancient Greek tragedies.

During the peak of summer, it’s recommended to purchase tickets to ancient theater ahead of time to ensure you can get in. Visit the official website at aditusculture.com/en/esperienze/taormina for details and booking.

For folks that truly enjoy history, Villa Romana del Casale will not disappoint. This Roman Villa contains one of the world’s most impressive collection of well-preserved Roman mosaics. There are mythological narratives, athletic “bikini girls,” hunting scenes and so much more. It offers a vivid glimpse into a Roman life of luxury.

The Villa Romana del Casale is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and archaeological park. Tickets can be purchased at the gate.

The most impressive sights on the island were inside the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento. This is one of the best-preserved Greek temple complexes in the world, and the sight is extraordinary beyond belief.

As we walked through the park in the afternoon, the temples were bathed in Sicilian sunlight. Before leaving, we stopped at cafe for some Aran-



cino, a deep-fried rice cone filled with ragù, and my favorite chocolate cream-filled cannoli.

It’s possible to buy tickets to the Valley of the Temples ahead of time at the Italian Coop Culture website (ticketing.coopculture.it), but it is also just as easy to buy them at the gate when you arrive.

During peak summer tourist season, pre-booked tickets may help you avoid long lines.

While Sicily offers so much for every traveler, these sights left a lasting impression on our family and offered countless opportunities to browse local artisan shops.



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MILITARY

Army tests balloons as eyes high in the sky

Craft carry variety of sensors, equipment

By SHATYRA COX
Stars and Stripes

At roughly 60,000 feet above Poland, small balloons flew higher than commercial airliners as part of an Army test to determine whether the stratosphere could provide another place for battlefield sensors and communications equipment.

The Army recently launched the micro high-altitude balloons from Powidz, a major U.S. military logistics and aviation hub in western Poland, as part of Cold Raptor.

The exercise is the latest in a series of experiments involving more than 50 launches over the past year to determine how the relatively inexpensive platforms could support military operations.

Cold Raptor was part of a broader effort to strengthen NATO's defenses known as the Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative.

The balloons can carry intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance sensors, communications equipment and electromagnetic warfare payloads, including technology used in navigation warfare, according to Maj. Don Duong, chief technology officer for Multi-Domain Command-Europe, the Army organization overseeing the experiments.

The platforms can provide what Duong described as "organic coverage and dynamic augmentation."

Sgt. Shakir Claxton, a balloon operator with the command, said the floating aircraft are one part of a broader sensing effort that also incorporates drones and electronic warfare capabilities.

Some balloons launched during Cold Raptor carried experimental payloads for communications extension and domain awareness, officials said.

The command didn't disclose further details about the capabilities tested or the specific operational requirements it was looking to address.

The experimentation comes as the Army seeks new ways to monitor the battlefield and keep troops connected in increasingly complex environments where traditional systems may be disrupted or unavailable.

It offers an example of how "traditionally scientific test platforms can be leveraged in novel and innovative ways," Duong said.

The Russia-Ukraine war has already reshaped how the Army trains and prepares for combat, as the widespread use of drones and electronic warfare highlights the need for forces to operate while under constant threat of detection and disruption.

Micro high-altitude balloons operate in the stratosphere at approximately 60,000 to 70,000 feet. When inflated, they are about 33 feet tall and can carry payloads weighing 20 to 45 pounds, according to a manufacturer datasheet provided by the command.

During Cold Raptor, the balloons launched from Powidz were recovered near Ustka, a Baltic Sea spa town about 190 miles to the north, according to the Army.

Duong described the balloons as a "cost-effective and responsive, launch-on-demand" way to carry payloads depending on operational requirements.

They can enable sensing and communications coverage in complex terrain by flying above weather and congested airspace, Duong said.

The command would not provide an approximate cost for a balloon or mission, saying details could not be discussed outside the Defense Department.

The Poland training represents another step in a series of experiments aimed at determining how the balloons could operate in Europe.

During Cold Raptor, soldiers validated procedures for launching, controlling, monitoring and recovering the balloons.

The exercise also tested whether teams



PHOTOS BY RAJHEEM DIXON/U.S. Army

Sgt. Eric Atwater Jr., left, and Sgt. Keaton Thompson of Multi-Domain Command-Europe prepare high-altitude balloons for launch at an airfield in Tehachapi, Calif., on April 22. The command recently launched balloons from Powidz, Poland, as part of a larger effort to determine how they could support military operations.



Troops prepare to test a high-altitude balloon at Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

could operate from separate locations while maintaining communications, said Sgt. Eric Atwater Jr., a signal sergeant in Multi-Domain Command-Europe.

The balloons' course was managed and monitored by soldiers who were in a different place from the Powidz launch site.

In addition, the exercise helped authorities understand the challenges of operating balloons in Europe, where countries are relatively close together. Launches therefore



Soldiers from Multi-Domain Command-Europe prepare to launch a high-altitude balloon at an airfield in Tehachapi, Calif., on April 22. Several such balloons were tested in Poland in August as part of the NATO exercise Cold Raptor.

require coordination with assorted governments and airspace authorities.

Cold Raptor built on lessons from previous balloon experimentation at the National Training Center in California, as well as in Sweden.

In California, soldiers launched balloons simultaneously from separate locations, requiring coordination with different airspace agencies to obtain launch and recovery clearances.

The experimentation later moved to Europe, where soldiers have had to account for Baltic wind currents and temperatures at different layers of the stratosphere while

piloting the balloons, Duong said.

"Every exercise thus far has presented unique challenges that sharpened these capabilities," he said.

The Army previously launched three micro high-altitude balloons from Kosta, Sweden, during exercises Sword 26 and Aurora 26. The balloons carried experimental sensing and communications payloads as they traveled through the Baltic region.

The command will now evaluate the results of the Poland tests and share its findings with Army offices that decide whether new equipment should be developed or purchased, officials said.

MILITARY

Sky Soldiers facing 2K drones in exercise

Saber Junction tests how forces adapt to battlefield modeled on Russian tactics

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — The ongoing evolution of warfare in the two years since the Italy-based 173rd Mobile Brigade (Airborne) participated in the Saber Junction exercise was never more evident than it was just ahead of their arrival.

The resident opposition force at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Bavaria — the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment — laid out what it had in store for the incoming Sky Soldiers, from new reconnaissance and attack drones to the latest in electronic jamming equipment.

“It’s not going to be the same fight they saw two years ago, but they’ve been changing too,” battalion commander Lt. Col. Michael Cryer said. “Everybody’s adapting right now. This will be a good test.”

The leader of 7th Army Training Command, Brig. Gen. Terry Tillis, said things might not go well for the 173rd, at least initially.

“We have 1,900 autonomous systems in this rotation,” Tillis said as he surveyed the equipment on the eve of the exercise. “That’s a lot.”

The domains covered include space, the cyber arena and electronic warfare, while the arsenal in the field ran the gamut from autonomous systems to weapons of both the direct and indirect-fire variety as well as aviation assets, Tillis said.

Another feature is replication of long-range artillery strikes, he added.

Saber Junction tests regional plans in support of NATO’s Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative against a peer threat designed to mimic the Russian military.

Other participants this year include Germany, Italy, Poland and Ukraine. This year’s exercise, which ends Sept. 13, is shaping up to be the most tech-focused version of Saber Junction to date.

It features over 5,000 U.S. and European troops, including 3,300 Vicenza, Italy, and Grafenwoehr, Germany-based soldiers from the 173rd.

During this year’s exercise, a battalion from the 173rd that was tasked with absorbing lessons about drone tactics from the Ukrainian military will present what it’s learned, an Army official said recently, amid headlines about the service ordering the battalion to phase out its focus on drone tactics and return to “core warfighting tasks” as an infantry unit.

This iteration is also the first for a new company of the 1st battalion that was fielded in January and specializes in reconnaissance at all ranges.

Led by Capt. Luther Salmon, it deploys the latest drone and electronic warfare technology to provide timely and accurate battlefield intelligence to planners trying to provide the most realistic test.

The collection of drones and detection equipment laid out by company soldiers Aug. 26 on the eve of Saber Junction wouldn’t have been out of place at the largest of tech conferences.

There were surveillance drones like the Skydio X10, Vesper, eBee Vision, Vector AI, Stork, Neros Archer first-person-view attack drones and the multi-purpose C100, which can observe and drop munitions.

“This is the future right now,” said drone expert Sgt. 1st Class Eric Navarro. “If you can’t hide from these things, it’s not going to be a good day for you.”

Across the road, Sgt. Robert Nemec and his team were readying a host of electronic warfare devices that can be carried by soldiers to



A reconnaissance drone sits next to a mock enemy vehicle used by the opposition force ahead of exercise Saber Junction in the Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, on Aug. 26. The exercise is designed to replicate a peer adversary modeled on Russia as part of NATO’s Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative.



Sgt. Kollin Foster, with 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, operates a Vector AI reconnaissance drone at Hohenfels. The drone is part of the opposition force’s new Eerie Company, a reconnaissance unit fielded in January that feeds real-time battlefield intelligence to commanders during the exercise.

detect and disrupt enemy communications.

Their toolkit included the TLS Manpack system and Beast+, as well as the drone-detecting EchoShield high-fidelity radar. They were also outfitted with the vehicle-mounted Titan detector and jammer and the Mk4 drone-disabling gun.

The plan was to have the Sky Soldiers parachute in the night of Aug. 26. They would set up a defense that would immediately be attacked by the opposition force in their black and tiger-striped uniforms.

Then, in the coming days, they would go on the offensive. Both sides plan to employ drones and counter-drone technology.



Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment set up an EchoShield radar system used to detect and track drones at Hohenfels. The radar is one of several new electronic warfare tools the opposition force is fielding this year, along with jamming systems designed to disrupt enemy communications and disable drones.

MILITARY

Raytheon to boost Tomahawk production

Pentagon ‘using every available tool to meet the demand of current operations’

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Star and Stripes

A new \$22.9 billion Navy contract with Raytheon will boost production of the long-range Tomahawk cruise missile to more than 1,000 missiles per year, according to a company statement.

The deal will accelerate Tomahawk production at “unprecedented speed,” acting Navy Secretary Hung Cao said in a statement Aug. 17, adding that the Pentagon is “using every available tool to meet the demand of current operations.”

The deal comes amid news reports and studies raising concerns that the Iran war has significantly reduced U.S. weapons stockpiles.

The Iran war has placed “unprecedented strain on inventories” of Tomahawks and other high-end precision munitions, according to a report in August by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Its analysts estimate that more than 1,000 Tomahawks have been fired during the war with Iran, roughly one-third of the estimated pre-war U.S. inventory of just over 3,000 missiles.

Executive branch officials have denied that there is a shortage.

Raytheon President Phil Jasper called the Tomahawk “the Navy’s most important strike weapon.”

A Tomahawk launched from ships and submarines can precisely strike targets up to 1,000 miles away, even in heavily defended airspace, the company says.

Under the seven-year contract, Raytheon is expected to produce more than 1,000 Tomahawk missiles per year, Raytheon’s statement said. The company currently makes 60 per year, according to Reuters.

It’s uncertain how quickly Raytheon will be able to ramp up Tomahawk production. The company, based in Waltham, Mass., relies on a network of subcontractors and smaller firms for the missiles’ thousands of components, The National Interest reported in March.

The process from order placement to completion can take 18 to 24 months, the publication said.

Under the new contract, the company will “collaborate closely with hundreds of small and mid-sized suppliers nationwide,” according to the statement.



U.S. Navy

Guided-missile destroyer USS Frank E. Petersen Jr. fires a Tomahawk missile during Operation Epic Fury on Feb. 28.

Agency seeking faster, more nimble hypersonic missiles

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon office responsible for weapons innovation is seeking a “revolutionary leap” in design for a faster and more maneuverable Next Generation Hypersonic Cruise Missile.

In a request for information, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency asked for submissions for a scramjet-powered missile that can fly more than five times the speed of sound and also evade advanced missile interceptors.

“Future U.S. military operations face increasingly significant challenges from the rapid proliferation and advancement of highly capable Integrated Air Defense Systems (IADS) by peer adversaries,” the RFI says.

Submissions are due by Oct. 6.

The need for new U.S. hypersonic weapons was presented in an October 2025 Atlantic Council report.

“Any future U.S. battle against a great power rival, and particularly against the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Indo-Pacific theater and the Russian Federation in the European theater, will be fought in a highly contested environment where U.S. battlefield dominance will be challenged,” the report states.

Russia and China already field hypersonic weapons.

Russian President Vladimir Putin says the 3M22 Zircon can fly 1,000 kilometers at speeds of up to Mach 9. Originally developed as a ship-launched missile, the Zircon has been adapted for ground launch, according to

Russian military statements.

Russia has used the Zircon in attacks, according to Ukrainian officials. They claim some have been shot down using U.S. Patriot anti-missile batteries.

China has developed the YKJ-1000 missile, which Beijing says surpassed Mach 7 during tests last year. It has a range of up to 1,300 kilometers, Chinese officials say. The developer, Lingkong Tianxing Technology, says the missile can be mass produced for “one-tenth” the price of most missiles.

Also, the hypersonic Changjian-1000, or “long sword,” was shown off in its launch container at a military parade in Beijing in 2025.

The U.S. is working on hypersonic missiles and has test-fired the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon, called the Dark Eagle. It’s an intermediate-range surface-to-surface boost-glide hypersonic weapon.

But the U.S. is behind its peer adversaries in developing air-breathing hypersonic cruise missiles that can fly low and weave through defenses. The U.S. has the Tomahawk cruise missile, but it flies at subsonic speeds, with a top mark of about 885 kilometers per hour.

The RFI suggests the successful entrant would need to beat the performance of current weapons by significant levels.

“This demonstrator must establish the foundation for a next-generation capability that delivers a revolutionary leap in operational performance — specifically in range, cruise speed and/or altitude,” DARPA said.

The RFI says that though scramjet technology has been proven, the current development is too slow and expensive.



BRANDON RICKERT/U.S. Army

From left, U.S. Army Capt. Alexander Vahadji, of 7th Infantry Division; Adm. Samuel J. Paparo, commander of U.S. Pacific Command; and Lt. Col. Alexander Mullin, 7th ID, observe soldiers training in June with the Dark Eagle Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon.

“Existing concepts often achieve predictable, incremental gains in isolated performance metrics, representing evolutionary improvements rather than the disruptive capabilities required for future conflicts,” the RFI says. “Furthermore, legacy manufacturing processes often result in systems that are too expensive and complex to produce at the scale required for peer conflict.”

At the center of the request is technology using a scramjet — a combustion ramjet that burns fuel while the air flowing through the engine is faster than the speed of sound. It uses the engine’s forward speed to compress incoming air, then injects fuel into the high-speed airflow. It has no moving parts such as turbines or compressors.

The RFI asks companies to address missile design, launch platforms and production/price.

The new missile should be able to make mid-course maneuvers, have a smaller heat and radar signature, and have “survivability” against anti-missile defense systems. The possibilities include air-launch from bombers or fighters and vertical ground launch.

Proposals should have “the ability to scale to different missions,” and distances from 250 to 2,000 nautical miles.

The RFI says that DARPA wants to be able to test the new missile on an “optimized, accelerated schedule” instead of “relying on traditional, sluggish acquisition models.”

“DARPA strongly encourages responses to this RFI from non-traditional defense contractors and emerging technology developers,” the RFI states.

Testing should be able to be done with “fewer observable indicators” that could be seen by other nations.

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