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ITALY EDITION

AUGUST 6, 2026

## Pinnacle of pizza

Some of Italy's best pies  
can be found near US  
bases **Page 3**

A "Carminuccio" pizza featuring pancetta, Parmigiano Reggiano, basil and burrata cheese is served up July 13 at the Vicenza pizzeria Acqua e Farina — Rosario Giannattasio, which was named one of the top 100 pizzerias in Italy in July 2026 and earned kudos for its dough and extensive wine list.

CHAD GARLAND/Stars and Stripes

Helicopter pilot  
now at controls  
of NSA Naples  
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Army's next heavy  
infantry vehicles could  
be souped-up pickups  
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AI sped US forces'  
airfield planning at  
start of Iran war  
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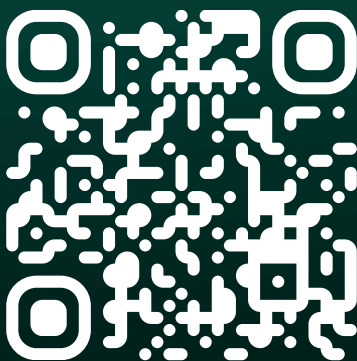
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COVER STORY

# Some of Italy's top pizzas found near US bases

Annual top-100 ranking shows American troops don't have to travel far for world-class treat

By CHAD GARLAND  
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — U.S. troops in Italy don't have to travel far for world-class pizza, with 30 of the country's best pizzerias within easy driving distance of military bases in Naples and Vicenza, according to a new annual pizza ranking.

Service members at Naval Support Activity Naples have the most plentiful options, with five of the top 10 pizzerias ranked in the 2026 edition of an annual guide for Italy located within about a 30-minute drive.

The publication is put out by 50 Top Pizza, which also produces annual guides for the best pizzerias in Asia, the United States, Europe and worldwide.

Despite its name, the Italy guide ranks the best 100 pizzerias in the country and provides an unranked listing of about 370 other spots deemed merely "excellent."

The results were announced last month in Milan, where Confine took the top slot, up from second place in 2025.

Naples and the Campania region, considered the birthplace of the humble cheese-and-tomato-topped pie, led the list with the most establishments represented in the Italy rankings this year.

Nearly two dozen ranked pizzerias in the Campania region are within an hour of the naval base in Naples. Meanwhile, U.S. Army posts in Vicenza and Pisa each have about a half-dozen ranked pizzerias within a similar distance.

Service members at Naval Air Station Sigonella have one option from the rankings within a 30-minute trek, while those at Aviano Air Base have the farthest drive to the nearest ranked pizzeria. Alano di Piave, home to No. 52 Pizzeria Da Ezio, is about 90 minutes away.

Many of the top-ranked pizzerias offer reservations, though not all do. Wait times and customer flow are factored into the rankings, which are based on a survey of 150 inspectors with no business ties to the establishments.

After the survey, inspectors anonymously visit and evaluate each pizzeria on seven factors, including the pizza, service, cleanliness, ambiance, wait times and drink selection. Preference is given to restaurants that offer local and regional beers and wines.

Here's how the results break down near each U.S. military community:

The world's best pizzeria last year and tied for No. 2 in Italy this year, I Masanielli — Francesco Martucci in Caserta, is one of the closest on the list to the Navy base in Naples. It fell slightly from the top slot it held five years running.

Third-ranked Palazzo Petrucci Pizzeria was noted for the panoramic terrace at its main restaurant on Piazza San Domenico Maggiore. That spot and its second location on Via Posillipo are both within about 40 minutes of base.

50 Kalo, which has two locations within about 40 minutes of base, frequently makes the annual list and landed in the fifth slot this year.

Patrons should note that its location in Piazza Sannazaro does not take reservations, while the one near the U.S. Consulate on Piazza della Repubblica is reservation-only.

Some of the other closest options include No. 8 Cambia-Menti, No. 9 Sasa Martucci, and No. 15 La Bolla, all about 25 minutes from base in Caserta.

Though the Veneto region was not nearly as well represented on the list as others, U.S. personnel in Vicenza can take heart that the guide's fourth-best pizzeria, I Tigli, is about half an hour east in San Bonifacio, near Vero-



PHOTOS BY SHANNON RENFROE/Stars and Stripes  
A marinara pizza is served at Antica Pizzeria Da Michele in Catania, Italy, near Naval Air Station Sigonella. Thirty of Italy's best pizzerias are within easy driving distance of U.S. military bases in Naples and Vicenza, according to the 2026 edition of the 50 Top Pizza guide.



A sign outside Antica Pizzeria Da Michele marks the chain's 50 Top Pizza award.

na.

As with many of the ranked sites, diners shouldn't expect the typical Margherita. Served in four or eight slices, the "high gastronomy" pizza at I Tigli features toppings

like oven-roasted pigeon, glazed sweetbreads, beef tartare and ceviche.

The guide spotlights a beef burger served on a sesame focaccia and topped with bacon, spinach and Monte Veronese cheese, as well

as the dessert menu.

Six more of the ranked pizzerias are within about 45 minutes of the Vicenza bases, including the city's own Acqua & Farina — Rosario Giannattasio, which eked into the No. 100 spot and earned kudos for its dough, toppings and extensive wine list.

A bit farther afield are Gigi Pipa in Este, ranked 29th; Premiata Fabbrica Pizza in Bassano del Grappa, at No. 54; Pedrocchino in Campodoro, in the 77th spot; CUORE — Luca Brancati in Marano Vicentino, at 87; and Zio Mo' in Legnago, which holds down the 99th spot.

The relatively small number of troops at the U.S. logistics hub near Pisa have a fair number of highly ranked pizza places in the vicinity, including 22nd-ranked Apogeo in Pietrasanta, about 30 minutes away.

La Fenice in Pistoia and Officine del Cibo in Sarzana, the top pizzerias in Tuscany and Liguria, respectively, are both within an hour of the base.

Nearly a dozen unranked pizzerias that were deemed excellent are also within an hour's drive.

At No. 82 on the list, Sazi e Sani in Catania is about 20 minutes from the naval base in Sigonella. The only ranked pizzeria near the base, it was recognized for its standout wine selection.

About eight of the 26 other pizzerias on Sicily listed as excellent in the guide are within an hour or so of the air station, including Corte dei Medici and L'Evoluzione, both in Catania, and Cortile Siciliano in Tremestieri Etneo.

For Aviano personnel, any of the roughly half-dozen places that made the unranked list are at least an hour away.

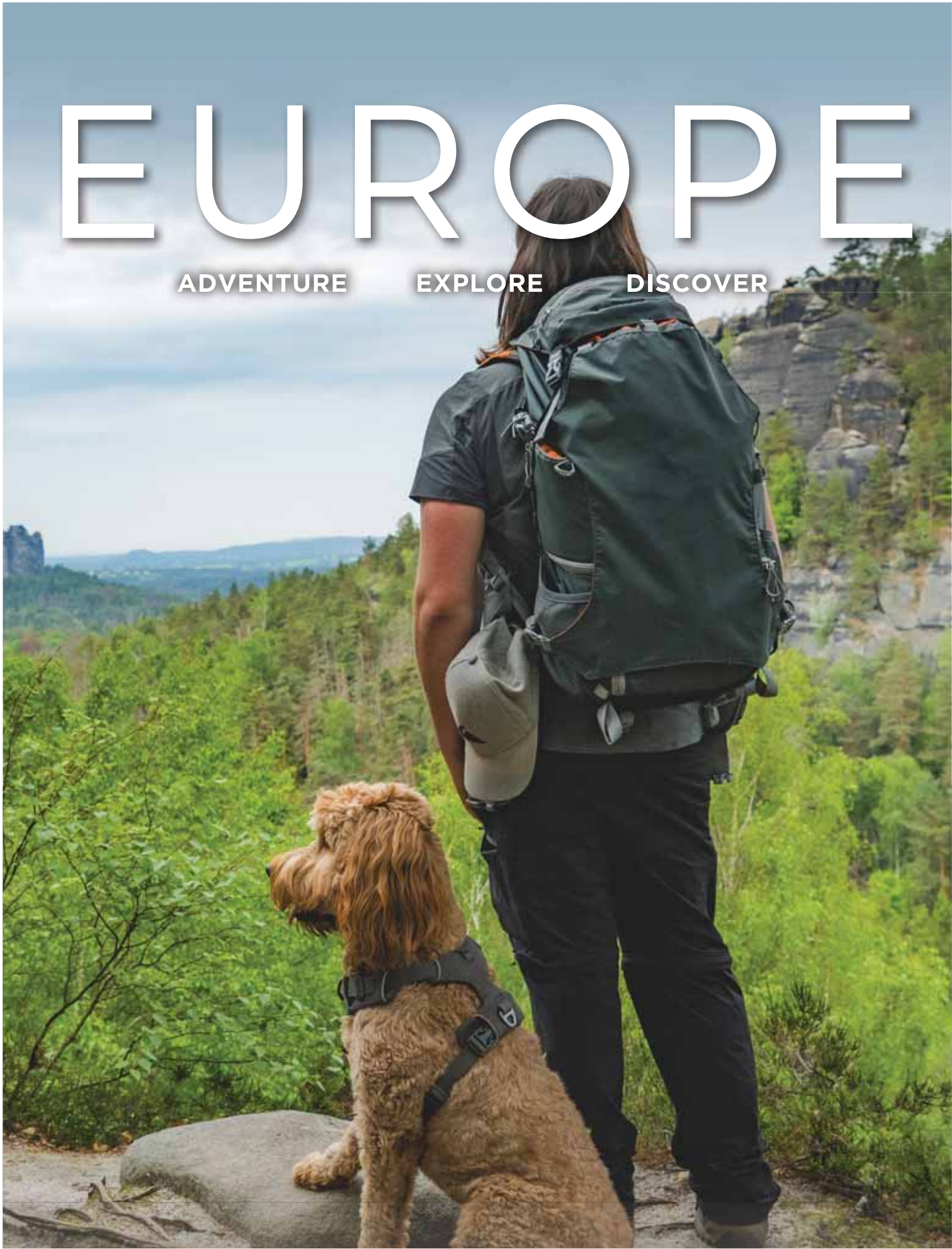
The complete 2026 guide, including the additional "excellent" pizzerias, is available at 50toppizza.it



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MILITARY

# Europe-based wings give support in Mideast

## All 3 fighter units apparently tapped to deploy jets

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon is relying heavily on Europe-based fighter crews as tensions escalate in the Middle East following the collapse of a temporary U.S.-Iran ceasefire.

Only three fighter wings are permanently assigned to U.S. Air Forces in Europe, and all three have apparently been tapped to deploy combat jets to the region in recent weeks, according to media reports and public flight-tracking data.

The list includes F-16s from Germany and Italy, F-35s and F-15Es based in the United Kingdom and accompanying aerial tanker support from Europe.

A defense official on July 21 declined to discuss troop movements or numbers, citing operational security.

Warplanes began hastening to the Middle East after an interim deal to end military operations and reopen the Strait of Hormuz fell apart July 8. President Donald Trump declared the ceasefire over following significant attacks by both sides.

U.S. Central Command said late July 21 that it had completed 11 consecutive evenings of strikes against Iran, including attacks on Iranian military operations centers, maritime capabilities, aircraft hangars, drone storage facilities and military logistics infrastructure.

Among the combat forces at CENTCOM's disposal are F-16 Fighting Falcons from the 480th Fighter Squadron at Spangdahlem Air

Base in Germany, and F-35 Lightning II jets from the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath in England, according to reporting from Air & Space Forces Magazine.

Italian news outlets and ItaMilRadar reported July 18 that F-16 Fighting Falcons, likely from the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano Air Base in northern Italy, traversed the eastern Mediterranean.

ItaMilRadar, an open-source intelligence project focused on monitoring and analyzing military aviation activity over Italy, also tracked a group of F-15E Strike Eagles headed to the Middle East from RAF Lakenheath. The aircraft were supported by KC-135R Stratotankers operating from Istres-Le Tubé Air Base in southern France.

The significant contribution of combat power from all three Air Force wings in Europe is unusual, said David Deptula, a retired Air Force lieutenant general and dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.

"Whether this precise combination of deployments is technically unprecedented would require a detailed review of USAF deployment records," Deptula said July 21, adding that it is "operationally significant."

But tapping all three wings for combat support in the current fight with Iran, even though it leaves commanders with fewer options to respond rapidly if Russia attempts to exploit the situation, is hardly a surprise, he said.



ZACHARY JAKEL/U.S. Air Force

Three F-16 Fighting Falcons assigned to the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano Air Base, Italy, fly in formation.

He noted that at the end of the Cold War, USAF had nine fighter wings with more than 600 aircraft.

"This is not simply a European basing issue," he said. "It reflects the dramatic de-

cline of the U.S. Air Force as a whole.

"We have reached the point where sustaining even one small-scale contingency can require drawing heavily on forces assigned to other critical missions," he said.

## Bill would require USAF to retain at least 126 A-10s

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force would be forced to reverse efforts to cut the A-10 Thunderbolt II fleet and delay its retirement under bipartisan legislation introduced last week.

The bill would require the Air Force to retain a minimum of 126 of the twin-jet A-10 attack planes through at least the 2033 fiscal year. Officially called Thunderbolt II, the A-10 is widely known by its nickname, "Warthog." The bill would also reverse recent Air Force moves to eliminate training and maintenance resources.

Rep. Abe Hamadeh, R-Ariz., a former Army intelligence officer, introduced House Resolution 9780 on July 20. It's officially called the "Bolstering Recognition, Resurgence, Retention, and Remembrance of the Thunderbolt" Act.

But it is known as the "BRRRRRT Act," which plays off the distinctive sound of the A-10's GAU-8 30 mm Avenger 7-barrel autocannon that can fire 3,900 rounds per minute.

The Air Force has argued the A-10 is siphoning money and manpower away from its preferred programs, such as the F-35A Lightning II fighter, the B-21 Raider stealth bomber and the planning for the next generation FX-47 fighter.

The service has said that rather than having one aircraft to perform the A-10's close air support, search-and-rescue and tank-busting roles, the work will be handled by units flying different aircraft such as the F-35, F-15E Strike Eagle and F-16 Fighting Falcon.

Hamadeh said in a statement that the action was needed to stop the Air Force from dismissing a proven ground-support aircraft at a time when the Pentagon has no single aircraft tapped as a replacement.



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.

"The A-10 has repeatedly proven itself on the battlefield, saving American lives and delivering unmatched close air support when our troops need it most," Hamadeh said in a statement announcing the bill. "The BRRRRRT Act ensures we do not retire a proven weapons system before a certified replacement exists."

The bill is supported by Rep. Don Davis, D-N.C.

Hamadeh and Davis sit on the House Armed Services Committee Tactical Air and Land Forces subcommittee. Four additional Republicans have signed on as cosponsors, including representatives of the two bases in Georgia and Missouri where A-10s are based.

As of October, the Air Force had 162 A-10s in its inventory and said in defense budget plans that it wanted to retire them all. Congress countered with a plan to maintain 103 of the Warthogs.

The plane has a reputation of being able to

fly low and slow to strike enemy targets on the ground, absorbing punishment from anti-aircraft fire while staying in the air.

During attempts in early April to locate a downed F-15E crew member, an A-10 was reportedly hit by Iranian anti-aircraft fire. The pilot was able to fly the plane out of Iranian controlled airspace and safely eject.

The Air Force announced this year that it would extend the service of three squadrons flying the A-10 at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and Moody Air Force Base in Georgia, accounting for about 54 A-10s.

If the BRRRRRT Act passes, the secretary of defense would have to certify that a replacement aircraft with the primary mission of close ground support had been designated and was operational. The standard would not be met by designating an aircraft that has ground support as a secondary role. The certification would require getting the secretary of the Army, commandant of the Marine Corps and

the commanding officer of U.S. Special Operations Command to sign off on the certification.

To field the 126 aircraft backed by the resolution, the Air Force would need to retrieve and restore some A-10s that have been sent to the aircraft boneyard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, outside of Tucson, Ariz.

If enacted, the bill requires the Air Force to explain within 90 days how it will restore depot work on the planes, and restart pilot training, sustainment and flight testing.

The A-10 began production in 1975, and 713 were built for the Air Force before production ended in 1984. Those still flying have an average age of more than 43 years old and require increased maintenance, according to the Air Force.

The A-10 saw action in Grenada, Operation Desert Storm, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. It has also flown missions in Operation Epic Fury, the ongoing conflict with Iran.



## MILITARY

# Helicopter pilot takes controls at NSA Naples

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — A Navy helicopter pilot who has logged thousands of flight hours and deployed repeatedly to the Middle East during a career of 20-plus years recently took command of the Navy's flagship base in Europe.

Capt. Benjamin Foster relieved Capt. John Randazzo of command of Naval Support Activity Naples on July 23 during a ceremony at the base's Capodichino site attended by family members, Navy personnel and Italian military and civilian officials.

Foster now oversees one of the service's most important bases in the Eurasian area. NSA Naples is home to about 8,500 personnel, and among its 55 commands is U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet.

The base's mission of serving the fleet and military families will not change, Foster said, but personnel will be challenged to follow three core tenets: learn, perform and care.

He asked sailors and civilians working at the base to adopt a learning mindset to help the organization grow and evolve while at the same time striving to improve their performance every day.

Personnel also need to prioritize caring for themselves, their families and their community, he said.

"We will constantly balance the demands of the mission with the needs of our team," Foster said. "There will undoubtedly be times when the mission must come first, but make no mistake, our people are our true asymmetric advantage."

A Florida native and U.S. Naval Academy graduate, Foster was assigned to Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron 6 at Naval Air Station North Island in California in 2004, deploying twice on the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz in support of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, according to his official bio.

He also has served in Afghanistan and Bahrain, among operational deployments.

Randazzo's tenure was highlighted by numerous quality-of-life and safety initiatives he spearheaded, including \$500,000 in fitness center upgrades, the addition of new fire trucks and \$5.5 million in facility improvements.

A fellow helicopter pilot, Randazzo had served as commander of NSA Naples since



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

**Capt. Andrew Olsen, commander of Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command, Europe, Africa, Central, left, Capt. Benjamin Foster, commander of Naval Support Activity Naples, and Capt. John Randazzo, outgoing commander of NSA Naples, speak with one another following a change of command ceremony at the base's Capodichino site July 23.**

July 2023.

"I leave this command with a tremendous amount of pride in what we've accomplished, and even greater gratitude for the people who

made it possible," he said.

Randazzo won't be going far for his next assignment, which is at Navy Region Europe, Africa, Central, based at NSA Naples.

## Navy expands requirement for annual influenza shots

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy is once again requiring some active-duty, reserve and civilian personnel to be vaccinated annually against the flu, a move that could affect thousands.

The requirement not only includes enlisted sailors in boot camp but also extends to those in Officer Candidate School, the Naval Academy, the academy preparatory school and other training programs, according to a message to the force published July 24.

The policy further applies to staff and personnel involved in those programs and covers additional Navy sailors and civilian employees, including those working in health care, child care and youth service programs, according to the message.

Deployed service members must also be vaccinated before entering any theater or country that has an active influenza vaccination requirement, the Navy said.

"The influenza vaccine is highly encouraged to prevent outbreaks that can degrade

unit readiness, disrupt training schedules, and deployment execution, which adversely impacts mission," the Navy said.

Medical department representatives should monitor for "influenza-like illness and report and respond to local or command-wide outbreaks and hospitalizations," it said.

In June, 275 trainees were sickened during an influenza outbreak at Air Force basic training in Texas. The outbreak came weeks after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth rescinded a long-standing flu vaccine mandate for all active-duty personnel, reservists and Defense Department civilians.

The Pentagon later granted the Army, Air Force and Navy, the National Security Agency and the Defense Health Agency exceptions to that policy, allowing them to once again require flu vaccinations for certain personnel.

In his April announcement rescinding the flu vaccine mandate, Hegseth said individuals should be allowed to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be immunized.

"The notion that a flu vaccine must be man-



REBECCA HARIMA/U.S. Air Force

**Influenza vaccines are laid out for administration during a flu shot drive at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. The Army, Navy and Air Force have reinstated mandatory flu shots for basic trainees after an outbreak at Lackland Air Force Base's training hub sickened hundreds of recruits.**

datory for every service member, everywhere in every circumstance at all times, is just overly broad and not rational," Hegseth said at the time.

In granting the exceptions, the Pentagon said the services were responsible for implementing the directive. The services resumed the flu vaccine requirement for basic trainees

in June, ABC News reported.

The Navy message set a Jan. 15 deadline for required personnel to receive the 2026-27 flu vaccine.

The message also noted that some service members and civilians could be granted medical or administrative exceptions in certain circumstances.

## Navy tightens transfer rules for those accused of sexual assault

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

Transfers of sailors under criminal investigation for sexual assault must be coordinated with law enforcement and approved by the receiving commander under a Navy policy change prompted by the killing of a sailor.

In a message to the force published July 23, Navy officials said the temporary transfer of a sailor accused of sexual assault or certain other crimes must include coordination with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service or relevant law enforcement agencies, sexual assault and response coordinators and appropriate commanding officers.

Transfers should be to ashore locations rather than ships except in cases of urgent operational need, the Navy said.

"This revision was taken as a result of reviews by the Navy in the wake of the murder of Petty Officer 3rd Class Angelina Resendiz by a fellow sailor," William Speaks, a spokesman for the chief of naval personnel, said in a statement July 28.

**"I think there should be more people in jail. Yes, he took the life, but the conditions were created by the leadership."**

Esmeralda Castle  
mother of victim

The update clarifies existing Navy policies that give commanding officers the authority to temporarily transfer sailors when circumstances disrupt cohesion, safety or good order and discipline within their commands, Speaks said.

He noted the revision adds restrictions on where sailors may be transferred when the investigation concerns an allegation of sexual assault or stalking.

In June, Seaman Apprentice Jeremiah Copeland admitted to strangling Resendiz in his barracks room at Naval Station Norfolk in

Virginia in May 2025. He concealed her body in a suitcase before dumping it in a nearby wooded area.

He was sentenced by a military judge to 44 years in prison as part of a plea bargain that included guilty pleas to four other charges, including aggravated assault by strangulation and indecent recording.

Copeland, a culinary specialist, had faced other criminal charges. They included the alleged rape of another fellow sailor in November 2024, after his assignment to the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman in December 2023.

He was transferred to the destroyer USS James E. Williams, homeported in Norfolk, in January 2025 where Resendiz also worked as a culinary specialist.

The new Navy guidance also says such transfers should not be punitive.

When ongoing conduct poses a threat to others or a sailor is suspected of continued violations of military law, commanders should consult with a senior military lawyer about appropriate options, it said.

"In all cases, commanders will ensure continued safety of alleged victims, respect for the accused sailor's due process rights, and the integrity of ongoing investigations," the Navy said in the message.

Resendiz's mother, Esmeralda Castle, has strongly criticized the Navy's response to her daughter's disappearance and death. She says the service could have prevented her death.

Copeland had a history of sexual assault allegations even from before his enlistment in the Navy in 2023.

Castle has said Copeland should not have been recruited and that his previous commands should have intervened after allegations of sexual and violent offenses against other women.

"I think there should be more people in jail," she told reporters in June following Copeland's sentencing. "Yes, he took the life, but the conditions were created by the leadership."

The Navy has denied wrongdoing in connection with its response to Resendiz's disappearance and death.



MILITARY

# ‘Game changer’

## AI sped up US forces’ airfield plan after Spain refused to aid in Iran war

By CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

When Spain blocked its airspace and bases to U.S. aircraft supporting attacks on Iran this spring, planners turned to artificial intelligence to seek alternate airfields.

That on-the-fly approach to finding a contingency plan in the heat of battle represented an early use of technological tools that officials say are transforming military logistics.

AI helps them do in a matter of minutes what might have previously taken days, U.S. Transportation Command officials said.

In turn, that assist accelerates TRANSCOM’s decision-making. Contested access is one of the most important factors the command plans for, officials said.

Missile and drone strikes on U.S. military facilities throughout the Middle East over the past several months have killed several U.S. troops and forced evacuations.

They offer a glimpse of the sort of conflict that has spurred wholesale transformation of waging war across the Defense Department.

The command’s first operational use of the AI agents came shortly after Spain’s decision March 2 to block access three days into the U.S.-Israel campaign against Iran, known as Operation Epic Fury, Air & Space Forces Magazine reported.

The move led to over a dozen KC-135

tankers departing military airfields in the country’s south, Naval Air Station Rota and Moron Air Base, which are jointly run with the U.S. and serve as key logistics hubs.

“Within a very short time period of hearing that, we here at TRANSCOM got into our AI toolset and said, ‘If I had to move tankers to these various locations, how much capacity do I have,’” said Ryan Samuelson, the chief data and AI officer for the joint command at Scott Air Force Base, Ill.

TRANSCOM officials declined to discuss the specific options or rankings the planners got back, but some media outlets reported that tankers were tracked heading to Ramstein Air Base in Germany and elsewhere.

The wherewithal to rapidly change course could prove vital in conflicts in which adversaries have greater capabilities to deny access than did the insurgents and militants that U.S. forces have battled for much of the past two decades.

For years, the military services have been revamping for potential large-scale combat operations requiring a lighter footprint, dispersed forces and greater agility.

The Marine Corps shed its heavy tanks and the Air Force is bringing mothballed World War II airfields back to life.

But the U.S. has also had to navigate access constraints among allies during the Iran war. Spain isn’t the only NATO member country that balked at helping the



NASH TRUITT/U.S. Air Force

**Air Force personnel conduct pre-flight checks on a KC-135 at RAF Mildenhall, England, on July 17. Over a dozen of the aircraft needed to relocate from bases in southern Spain after the government restricted U.S. access to its airspace.**

American war effort in Iran.

In late March, Italy denied the use of NAS Sigonella in Sicily as a stopover for warplanes taking part in the conflict, saying the use fell outside existing U.S.-Italy agreements and the Americans had not sought permission until the planes were airborne.

As part of the military’s evolution toward greater maneuverability, the command has been exploring how it can leverage its resources and AI tools to position and sustain combat forces.

It’s using the Defense Department’s War Data Platform and Palantir’s Maven Smart System, which helped planners collect and combine data to predict the Air Force and other services’ battlefield needs during Epic Fury, sometimes weeks ahead of time.

That would allow planning and positioning of the materiel to take place before a request came in, which Samuelson told the magazine is a fundamental change from how the command operated just a few years ago.

Before, planners did “a whole lot of work, making phone calls and waiting for a request to come in, which would then have to be validated,” said Samuelson, a retired

Air Force brigadier general.

The command has also developed a dashboard for its air component, Air Mobility Command, that alerts leaders when aircraft mission-capable rates drop by more than 5%. AI can also help planners predict aircraft maintenance needs three weeks out.

“The tools that we have brought online in the last two years, particularly in AI machine learning, both predictive and prescriptive analytic models that we’re using, are game changers for the Air Force that I grew up in for 28 years,” Samuelson said.

While AI tools are being used daily for exercises and real-world operations, the command told Stars and Stripes that “the human element and institutional knowledge remain integral to decision-making.”

TRANSCOM commander Gen. Randall Reed seemed to echo that when speaking with Air & Space Forces Magazine about how artificial intelligence is assisting in its mission.

“In some cases, it provides us options; in some cases, it becomes a little bit predictive,” Reed said “And in other cases, it validates years of experience, modeling, experimentation and exercises.”

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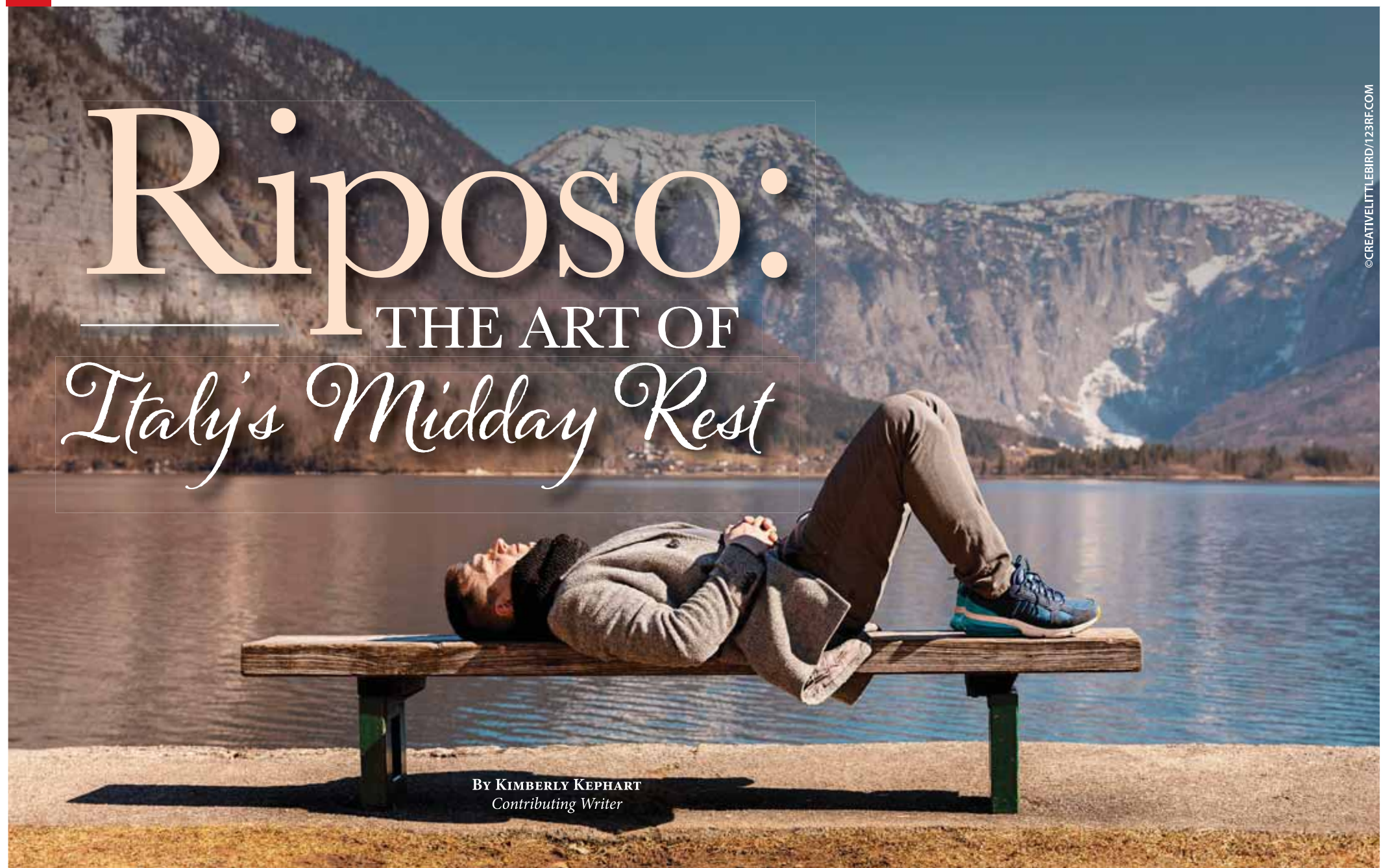
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Welcome dear reader, to the land of pizza, pasta, and... afternoon naps? Yes, you read that right. If you're new to Italy, prepare to be introduced to one of the country's most cherished traditions: riposo. This can be such a hard concept to wrap your head around coming from the United States where it's "go, go, go," but I assure you, it's a concept you will want to take with you when you leave.

Riposo, also known as pennichella in some parts of Italy, is the Italian version of Spain's siesta. It's a time in the afternoon when shops close, streets empty out and Italians retreat indoors to escape the midday heat. But it's not just about catching some zzz's.

Riposo is a sacred ritual of relaxation and rejuvenation. It's the Italian way of saying, "hold on world, I need a break." Fear not, though; chain stores and shops in malls do not close, so if this is the best time of day for you, getting errands accomplished is still possible. My local Ipermarket (a super-market) stays open. This is called orario continuato, meaning that the business stays open throughout the day and will close at 8 p.m.

If you're from a non-stop, hustle-bustle city, the concept of riposo might seem alien. Imagine this: You're out exploring the charming streets of Rome, when suddenly, at around 1 p.m. (or maybe 2 p.m., depending on the business) the city

seems to hit the pause button. Shops close their shutters, restaurants turn away customers and the usually lively piazzas become eerily quiet. It's as if someone whispered riposo and the city obediently went to sleep.

The best advice for traveling and living in Italy is to plan your day around riposo. This means getting your shopping done at small stores out of the way before riposo begins. I also advise filling your backpack or purse with snacks in the event that you can't find an open restaurant in the midafternoon.

Before you get too excited about this sanctioned nap-time, there are some rules to follow. First, Riposo is typically observed between 1 and 4 p.m., though the exact timing can vary. Second, it's considered impolite to disturb others during this time. So, if you had plans to practice your opera singing or start a parade, you might want to reschedule.

As a newcomer, you might find the concept of riposo frustrating. There you are, ready to explore and shop, but



everything is closed. Fear not, my friend. Instead of fighting the riposo, why not embrace it?

Take this time to relax, read a book or even join in the napping tradition. Who knows? You might find that you emerge from riposo feeling refreshed and ready to take on the rest of your Italian adventure.

Beyond being a delightful excuse for a nap, riposo has some other real benefits. It encourages a slower pace of life, reduces stress and promotes a sense of community. After all, there's something quite bonding about knowing that as you tuck into bed for your afternoon nap, so are millions of others across the country.

As you embark on your Italian journey, pack your appreciation for the art of riposo. And remember, when the shutters close and the streets quiet down, don't panic. It's just Italy's way of saying, "relax, have a pizza, take a nap. La Dolce Vita awaits you after riposo."



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# Unique Neapolitan Ferragosto and San Gennaro Celebrations

BY TAMALA MALERK, *Stars and Stripes*

## Ferragosto | August 15

**F**erragosto dates all the way back to 18 BCE in ancient Rome. It marked the end of hard labor during the agricultural season and honored Emperor Augustus. The name Ferragosto comes from the Latin phrase, *Feriae Augusti*, roughly translating to “August rest.” After the fall of the Roman Empire, the holiday assumed a Christian identity as well, celebrating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (her ascension into Heaven).

Ferragosto is not just celebrated as a single day but instead marks the peak of the Italian summer vacation season. In August, many of your favorite shops, businesses and restaurants will be closed. However, tourist destinations stay open. There will be small local festivities you can attend, though you may choose to join the many Italians that head for the coast or the mountains to soak up summer fun.

On August 15, the official national holiday of Ferragosto, join others for picnics and parties on the beach, take in the religious procession of the Virgin Mary or watch the boat parades. In the evening, the sky will be filled with sparkling firework displays.

In addition to Ferragosto, the summer season is celebrated with the Estate a Napoli program. This is a chance to see a free movie or musical and theatrical performances in the city. This year, the program has been extended well beyond the week of Ferragosto as in years past, with events from July to September. For this year’s event schedule and information on reserving free tickets download the calendar of events from [www.comune.napoli.it/vivere-il-comune/eventi/estate-a-napoli-2026/](http://www.comune.napoli.it/vivere-il-comune/eventi/estate-a-napoli-2026/).



## San Gennaro | September 19

In 305 CE, Saint Januarius (San Gennaro), a bishop of the Catholic Church, was martyred during Diocletian’s reign of the Roman Empire. San Gennaro is the protector and patron saint of Naples who is venerated for saving the city from volcano eruptions and plagues. His blood, it is believed, now sits in the Naples cathedral. The blood has solidified. However, it sometimes liquifies throughout the year.

In December 1631, Mount Vesuvius erupted and the bust

(or sometimes head, depending on the version of the story) of San Gennaro as well as a vial of his blood was brought out of the cathedral for a procession. When the solidified blood liquified as it faced the magma, the magma miraculously stopped moving and San Gennaro was credited with saving the city.

Yearly, on September 19, the day he was executed, San Gennaro’s feast day is celebrated. If the blood liquifies on this day, the church bells will ring, and it is considered a sign

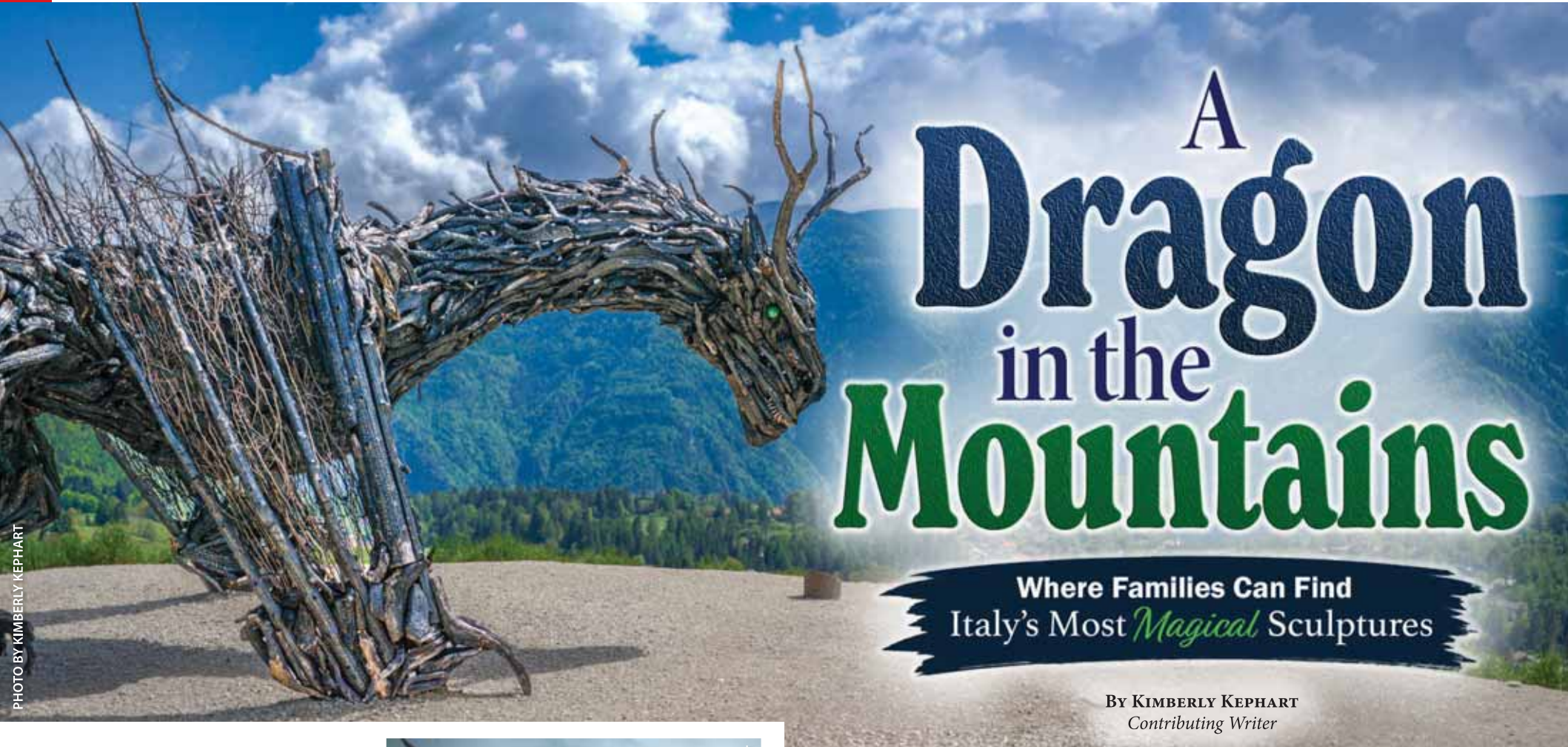
of protection and a good omen for the city of Naples. Traditionally, women in Naples will spend the day and night prior to the feast praying for the blood to liquify, and it is seen as a bad omen if it doesn’t happen. Whether or not the blood runs, Neapolitans still gather to celebrate.

The day begins at the Cathedral of Naples, where the blood is presented to the public to witness the liquification. Then, there is a religious procession throughout the oldest quarters of Naples.

For eight days, the blood is on display in the cathedral and festivities occur throughout the streets of the city. Vendors sell toys, food, trinkets and sweets for everyone to enjoy. Biscotti as well as lemon and cinnamon cookies are a must-have at this event every year. While in town for the celebration, visit the Treasure of San Gennaro Museum, adjacent to the cathedral, for a look at the priceless devotional items sent to honor San Gennaro over the centuries.







# A Dragon in the Mountains

Where Families Can Find Italy's Most *Magical* Sculptures

By Kimberly Kephart  
Contributing Writer

If you have ever wished a family hike came with a little extra magic, Northern Italy delivers in a big way. Scattered across the mountains, lakes and forest are towering wooden animals: dragons, lions, bears and dinosaurs hidden just far enough off the path to feel like a discovery. These are not amusement park attractions. They are works of art, created from real trees and rooted deeply in the landscapes they call home.

At the heart of it all is Drago Vaia, a massive wooden dragon looking over the mountains of Trentino. For families stationed in Italy, these sculptures turn an ordinary walk into a story-filled adventure kids won't forget.

In 2018, a powerful sirocco windstorm named Tempesta Vaia tore through northern Italy and the alps, knocking down millions of trees and changing the landscape. Where forests once stood tall, entire mountainsides were flattened.

Rather than seeing only loss, Italian artist Marco Martalar saw possibility. He began collecting fallen trunks or tangled roots and transforming them into giant animals, giving the storm-damaged wood a second life. Each sculpture is a symbol of resilience and renewal, a way to show both kids and adults that even after destruction, something meaningful can grow again.

Located in Lavarone, Trentino, Drago Vaia isn't just the most famous of Martalar's sculptures, it's the most powerful story. Originally built from storm-felled wood, the enormous dragon quickly became a local landmark, drawing families, hikers and curious kids eager to stand beneath its massive wings.



However, in 2023 tragedy struck again when the dragon was destroyed in an act of arson. But the story did not end there. Thanks to community support, Martalar rebuilt the sculpture as a Drago Vaia regeneration, incorporating charred remains from the original burned dragon into its new form.

The hike to Drago Vaia is an easy outing for families to do, giving your kids the chance to meet the guardian of the forest: one that has survived fire and storm. The walk is manageable and you get amazing views of the Trentino mountains.

Once you've met Dragon Vaia, there are plenty of other creatures and figures to meet in the region. You can spend a weekend out of exploring northern Italy and hiking to other sculptures. These forest giants offer something rare: adventure, art and meaning, all wrapped in a family friendly day outdoors. Start with Drago Vaia and let your imagination take you from there!

## OTHER FOREST GIANT SCULPTURES NEAR TRENTINO

Marco Martalar has over 20 sculptures in the landscape across northern Italy. I recommend you start with Drago Vaia and let your imagination take you from there. These six are standout pieces that kids will love on short hikes in the Trentino area.



### La Guàna del Primiero

Parco del Benessere Navoi

Rising seven meters tall in the heart of the Dolomites, this massive sculpture is built from more than 2,000 pieces of storm-felled wood. Guàne were mythical beings linked to water, believed to be protective spirits of streams, springs and alpine lakes. It is located inside a wellness park and an easy and gentle walk for families, surrounded by alpine scenery that feels straight out of a fairy tale.



### Leone Alato

Lago di Lago

The largest wooden lion in the world, this sculpture stretches over 10 meters long. It is made from roots and vineyard wood and is a picturesque area to take in. Stop by the local restaurant just a few hundred yards from the site and walk part of the Cammino Retico, a 170km circular slow travel hiking route through the region.



### Radicosauro

Lago di Santa Giustina

Part dinosaur, part forest spirit, the Radicosauro is a favorite with younger kids. Built from roots found along the lake's shore, it looks like a creature straight out of a storybook. The lakeside setting makes this a relaxed stop with plenty of space to roam. You could easily add this to any Dolomites hiking trip as this location is close to Bolzano and the Brenta Dolomites.



### Orso del Pradel

Pradel area

This towering wooden bear blends seamlessly into the mountain landscape and feels like a guardian of the forest. Easily reached via walking paths in a popular family-friendly area, it is a fantastic addition to a day spent exploring alpine trails. This stop is perfect because you can learn about the re-introduction of bears in the area.



### Aquila Vaia

Near Grigno

For families stationed in Aviano or the Vicenza area, this is the closest Martalar sculpture. Perched in a wide-open mountain setting, this massive eagle represents strength and renewal. Its dramatic wingspan makes it especially striking for kids, and the surrounding plateau offers open space and fresh air ideal for a family outing. If you go during the wintertime, there is a popular ski area nearby.



### Lupa del Lagorai

Levico Terme

This powerful wooden wolf symbolizes balance and resilience in nature. Set along trails in the Lagorai area near Levico Terme, it is a meaningful stop that sparks conversation with kids about wildlife, coexistence and respect for the natural world.

Images courtesy of martalar.it. Find Marco Martalar at [Facebook](#) MarcoMartalar [Instagram](#) martalar\_sculptore



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MILITARY

# Air Force tests pairing of pilots, drones

‘Loyal wingman’ system would allow aviators to control uncrewed aircraft

By GARY WARNER  
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force and defense contractors are touting aircraft and helmet developments that could become components in a “loyal wingman” system allowing pilots to control uncrewed drones paired with crewed warplanes in combat.

The Air Force reported it had successfully test-fired an AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile from a wingman drone.

The YFQ-44A Collaborative Combat Aircraft locked on and fired the missile at a digital target “in secluded airspace over the Mojave Desert,” the service said in a July 15 news release. The date of the test was not revealed.

“We’re one step closer to delivering capabilities to the warfighter,” Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach said in the statement.

The YFQ-44A, built by Anduril Industries, looks like a fighter jet but has no cockpit. It’s meant to fly and fight alongside piloted aircraft such as the F-22 Raptor, F-35 Lightning II, F-15EX Eagle and the proposed “sixth generation” F-47. The YFQ-44A has a service ceiling of 50,000 feet and a top speed of just under Mach 1 (the speed of sound).

“Loyal wingman” drones are being touted as a force multiplier for squadrons in combat by increasing the number of platforms that can be involved in an attack while reducing the exposure of human pilots to the most dangerous portions of a mission. The Air Force said in April 2025 that “human-machine pairing” is a top goal in developing future tactics for air combat and support missions.

Anduril said the production line at its Arsenal-1 facility in Ohio is capable of delivering up to 150 YFQ-44As per year.

Anduril on July 20 unveiled Thunder, an autonomous attack rotorcraft that can operate in traditional or vertical takeoff mode and has a tiltrotor mode for faster horizontal flight. It’s rated as a Group 5 aircraft, the largest



JENNIFER HEALY/U.S. Air Force

An Anduril YFQ-44A Collaborative Combat Aircraft fires an AIM-120 missile during a test flight over the Mojave Desert.



BAE Systems

A mock-up of the Project Intuity helmet, which would allow pilots to coordinate action with unmanned wingmen in combat situations.

sized drones with takeoff weights over 1,320 pounds.

Thunder could operate as an uncrewed wingman alongside crewed rotary aircraft. Its first flight is expected next year, Anduril said in a statement.

“It’s specifically designed to multiply the combat power of current and next-generation crewed attack and assault aircraft,” the company said.

Anduril said Thunder’s tiltrotor configuration combines vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) with efficient horizontal cruise, enabling “runway-independent operations from austere locations without the range constraints of traditional rotorcraft.”

Anduril said Thunder could be used for



Anduril Industries

An illustration of Thunder tiltrotor drone that could be used as a wingman by crewed aircraft. A possible commercial version that could be used as an uncrewed cargo aircraft or air taxi is also under development.

long-range attacks, surveillance and reconnaissance, maritime and anti-submarine patrol, search-and-rescue and moving cargo into contested zones on battlefields.

Thunder was unveiled at the Farnborough Air Show in Britain, where another potential step in the development of the “loyal wingman” concept also had a showing.

BAE Systems presented a developmental model of its planned Project Intuity pilot flight helmet. The company said it would help pilots integrate the performance and mission of multiple platforms that could be under

their control at the same time.

“As allies move towards aircraft that act as combat command centers, future operations will demand that pilots process more information from more sources than ever before,” said Andrew Macklin-Smith, a BAE spokesman. “We’re addressing that challenge by integrating the technologies to allow pilots to command fleets of drones in the skies.

“This system will achieve that by filtering and presenting the most important information clearly and within the pilot’s natural field of view.”

## Lockheed Martin planning to build half-price Patriot

By GARY WARNER  
Stars and Stripes

Lockheed Martin has unveiled a cheaper Patriot missile that would help the U.S. and Ukraine combat supply shortages and unsustainable costs.

The air defense interceptor would cost less than half of the nearly \$5 million for the current model, the company said.

The Patriot Advanced Capability Effector, or PAC-3 ACE, was unveiled at the Farnborough International Airshow, a major international defense and aerospace industry showcase held in Britain.

The price of the new missile was not listed, but the current Patriot Advanced Capacity Missile Segment Enhancement, or PAC-3 MSE, costs \$4 million to \$5 million each.

“It significantly lowers the cost-per-kill against a wide range of threats, with the reliability PAC-3 is known for, while providing magazine depth the current global climate necessitates,” Lockheed Martin said in a statement.

The savings would provide needed relief

for the U.S. and Ukraine.

Stockpiles of Patriot missiles have been depleted in the Iran and Ukraine conflicts, leading some American political leaders and military experts to express concern about whether the U.S. has enough missiles in other possible future conflict zones, such as Taiwan.

Demand for the missiles is expected to rise as the Navy places Patriots into the advanced radar Aegis Combat System aboard ships such as Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers.

Marc Cancian, a retired U.S. Marine Corps colonel now a senior adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said a simplified Patriot missile would help accelerate refilling the low inventory of air defense missiles.

“The issue with Patriots is that it’s difficult for us and the other 17 countries that operate Patriot to build adequate inventories at the current level of complexity and price,” Cancian said.

The heavy reliance on Patriot and other expensive missiles has underscored a “cost-



Lockheed Martin

The Patriot Advanced Capability Effector, or PAC-3ACE, is a lower-cost version of the air defense missile.

exchange deficit” in which American interceptors costing millions of dollars or more are used to shoot down Iranian ballistic missiles costing about \$1 million and Shahed-136 drones that cost about \$35,000 to build.

“We and our coalition partners did use some expensive air-to-air missiles against drones, like AIM-9X (about \$500,000) and AIM-120 (about \$1 million),” Cancian said. “Although not efficient from a munitions perspective, it was far better than allowing the drone to hit a target.”

Lockheed Martin said the new PAC-3 ACE is designed to intercept Iranian short-range

ballistic missiles and drones, which require oxygen intake at lower altitudes to sustain engine propulsion toward targets.

The Patriot will use a “kinetic kill” system — slamming into enemy missiles at high speed and using the resulting impact to destroy the target without an additional warhead explosive blast.

Lockheed said additional savings will come from using the same launcher vehicles and systems and Integrated Battle Command System already in use. The new missiles will mesh with legacy launch systems and communications.



## MILITARY

# Brain injuries can outlast return to duty

More than 600 troops have been wounded in the Iran war, with a majority suffering TBI

By LARA KORTE  
Stars and Stripes

Iran's one-way attack drones, used extensively to target U.S. forces across the Middle East over the last five months, could put troops at greater risk of traumatic brain injury and psychological harm, according to medical experts and veterans groups.

More than 600 service members have been wounded in action during the five-month war with Iran, with a majority suffering traumatic brain injuries, according to statements from the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command.

The Pentagon has released few details about how the injuries occurred, making it unclear how many were caused by drone attacks. But Iran's heavy reliance on one-way attack drones has exposed U.S. troops to threats that medical professionals are still working to understand.

"This is a different kind of war and warfare that we're having to make a shift around," said Dr. James Kelly, chief medical scientist at the Invisible Wounds Foundation. "I think that this is something we really have to gear up to understand better and deal with."

Kelly, one of the nation's leading experts on brain injuries, was the founding director of the Defense Department's National Intrepid Center of Excellence and spent years evaluating troops for TBIs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unlike roadside bombs that caused many brain injuries during the post-9/11 wars, drones can reach large, established bases far from traditional frontlines, potentially exposing more troops to attack.

And explosions from a drone often come from overhead, Kelly said. That leaves the upper body — especially the brain — more exposed to the blast.

"This is something that comes from above, often blows up in the air, or hits something up in the air," he said. "Anatomically the head is much more vulnerable under those circumstances."

Iranian-backed militants have for years used drones to target U.S. forces in the region, including in the 2024 attack on the Tower 22 outpost in Jordan that killed three Army Reserve soldiers.

But Operation Epic Fury marks the first time U.S. troops have faced sustained drone attacks on this scale, with repeated salvos over an extended period.

According to U.S. estimates, Iran fired more than 2,000 drones during the first few days of the war, striking high-rises in Bahrain, targeting oil fields in Saudi Arabia and killing six U.S. soldiers at an Army outpost in Kuwait.

Iran's Shahed-136 drone measures about 8 by 11 feet and can reach 115 mph carrying a 120-pound warhead. The Pentagon is developing cheaper ways to counter drones but still relies heavily on costly interceptors, including Patriot missiles, to shoot them down.

Some are still getting through. Of the 8,500 missiles and drones Iran has launched, about 100 penetrated air defenses, The Washington Post reported, citing a U.S. official.

Pentagon officials have emphasized that most troops injured in the Iran war quickly returned to duty. But decades of research show that brain injuries can have long-term effects and remain difficult to diagnose and treat.

That was evident after Iran's 2020 ballistic missile attack on Al Asad Air Base in Iraq. No U.S. casualties were initially reported, but continued screening eventually identified 110 service members with traumatic brain injuries.

The prevalence of TBIs in the current war does not necessarily mean troops are suf-



Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Mikayla Bobbing operates a near infrared Traumatic Brain Injury assessment device during an end-user touchpoint hosted by the Operational Medical Systems Program Management Office, Camp Lejeune, N.C., in January.

T.T. PARISH/Defense Health Agency



Army paratroopers prepare an M119 howitzer for a fire mission during a live-fire exercise in the Middle East. Experts say the cumulative effect of repeated blast exposure on troops' brains remains poorly understood, adding urgency to calls for more research funding.

U.S. Army

fering brain injuries at a higher rate than in previous conflicts. Awareness of the injuries has grown significantly during the post-9/11 wars, making comparisons across conflicts difficult.

But the scale of the problem is well-established. The Defense Department reported nearly 500,000 traumatic brain injuries between 2000 and 2025, a number that continues to grow, said Kelly Parker, director of Independence Services at the Wounded Warrior Project.

"Many of them will need care for the rest of their lives, or some type of support for the rest of their lives," Parker said.

There is still limited understanding of how drone attacks differ from more traditional munitions strikes, but the Russia-Ukraine war has given researchers and medical experts some insight into their potential effects.

As drones proliferate in Ukraine, soldiers have shown more upper-body and blast injuries along with signs of intense anxiety and hypervigilance, said Dr. Joseph Bonvie, a retired U.S. Navy operational psychologist and senior director of clinical services for Home Base, a Boston-based nonprofit that treats veterans and service members.

Bonvie traveled to Ukraine last year, where he met with a soldier who described being

caught off guard by a Russian drone attack.

The soldier endured repeated strikes over several hours and lost consciousness while a reconnaissance drone filmed the entire incident. He survived, only to later encounter footage of his own attack circulating on social media.

That combination of battlefield lethality and digital exposure represents a new aspect of modern warfare, Bonvie wrote in a case study, with potential implications for psychological trauma, moral injury — distress over deeply troubling experience — and clinical care that are yet to be fully understood.

"That is a whole new bag of trauma exposure that we haven't seen before," Bonvie told Stars and Stripes.

Meanwhile, advocacy groups are warning about a steep decline in Pentagon funding for brain injury research. Funding for medical research into traumatic brain injuries fell from \$175 million in 2024 to \$40.5 million in 2026 — a drop of more than 75%.

Groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars are lobbying Congress for more funding for brain injury research, better diagnostic tools and long-term treatments for veterans.

"Ongoing conflict in the Middle East is increasingly exposing our nation's service members to these blast injuries with the in-



A Navy hospital corpsman uses a tablet-based Traumatic Brain Injury assessment application at Camp Lejeune.

T.T. PARISH/Defense Health Agency

creasing use of drone and rocket attacks," said Craig Breckheimer, senior vice commander for the VFW's Department of Europe.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of an objective test for brain injuries. Doctors traditionally have relied on questionnaires and clinical observations to make diagnoses.

Army medical leaders recently began fielding a handheld device that uses blood samples to quickly detect biomarkers — proteins released into the bloodstream after a brain injury — that can help determine whether a service member needs further treatment.

The tool is currently being used by the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command, which has units deployed to Jordan and lost two soldiers in a deadly July 17 attack.

Medical professionals say little is also known about the effects of repeated blasts on service members. A 2024 Massachusetts General Hospital study of 30 active-duty U.S. Special Operations Forces personnel found a possible association between greater blast exposure and certain changes in the brain.

Researchers also noted that the effects of repeated blast exposure can be difficult to pinpoint to a single incident, potentially complicating efforts to explain cognitive, physical and psychological symptoms.

The potential for repeated blast exposure from drone attacks has added urgency to efforts to better understand and diagnose TBIs, experts say.

"Military innovation, weaponry innovation, has always been commensurate with medical innovation for all the wrong reasons," Bonvie, at Home Base, said. "And I think that's where we are again."



MILITARY

# Next infantry vehicles could be pickup mods

## Ford, GM part of race to build Army's heavier squad transportation

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Two iconic American automakers are vying to send their heavy-duty trucks to the battlefield.

Ford and General Motors are in a three-way race to build the Army's next tactical vehicle, as the service looks to commercial partners to help it roll out a heavier hybrid-powered version of its lightweight, open-air tactical truck.

Along with off-road vehicle manufacturer BC Customs, the two automakers were awarded contracts to develop prototypes for the Infantry Squad Vehicle Heavy program, The Wall Street Journal first reported July 27.

Each company will provide three ISV-Heavy variants to the service for testing by March 30, 2027. The process will put Chevy and Ford head to head with family-owned BC Customs.

GM already supplies the Army with its infantry squad vehicles. The lightweight truck, built to rapidly move up to nine soldiers and their equipment across rugged



A Infantry Squad Vehicle Troop Carrier from General Motors Co. gets attention at this year's Detroit Auto Show.

SUMMER BALLENTINE/TNS

terrain, is a modified Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 that incorporates a high percentage of components that are not military grade, according to congressional documents.

Ford's prototype will be based on the F-Series Super Duty pickups, the Detroit Free Press reported July 27, citing company executives.

GM Defense, the military product subsidiary of General Motors, will modify the Chevrolet Silverado 3500 HD truck for the competition, according to Breaking Defense.

Partnering with private industry and integrating commercial technology into its programs allows the Army to speed up product development and acquisition, the service has said.

In March, the Army solicited proposals for a heavier infantry truck. Documents posted on the federal government's contracting website said the Army wants a vehicle with soft-soil mobility that can cover 250 miles on three-quarters of a tank of fuel, among other features.

It also wants the vehicle to be equipped with rechargeable power that can provide electricity to expeditionary command posts and other systems.

Jesse Tolleson, a member of the Army's acquisition office, told lawmakers in June that the ISV-Heavy program was a top priority for the Army, with a target "just north of 600 vehicles."

The Army hopes the program will fill a "critical capability gap" by providing mobile electrical power, he said.

Army officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the prototype contracts.

## Army tightens performance rules for civilian employees

By LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A workforce policy directive that the Army recently implemented will make it easier to terminate underperforming civilian employees, attorneys that reviewed the memo said.

The changes reinforce deadlines for supervisors managing the termination process and bar "any flexibility" in the seven-day time frame that employees are allotted to defend their work, according to the memo released July 7.

"Commanders are directed to ensure supervisors expeditiously separate civilian employees with unacceptable performance from their positions using the most efficient means available, consistent with the requirements of the employee's personnel management system," the memo said.

The new policy is an "expedited approach to addressing alleged unacceptable performance," according to Tully Rinckey, a Washington, D.C., law firm that represents federal employees.

Timeframes are tightened for initiating a removal action within days of a poor performance determination, said Michael Fallings, an attorney and managing partner at Tully Rinckey.

The changes, effective immediately, apply to civilians working for the Army, Army Reserve and Army National Guard.

"Many Army civilian employees may not realize how quickly these cases can now move," Fallings said. "When an employee receives notice of a proposed removal or

other adverse action, every day matters."

Titled "Modern Civilian Workforce Management," the eight-page memo updates job performance rules involving disciplinary actions, leave policies and awards for top performance, among other areas.

The new directive expands the Army's use of voluntary separation incentives, early retirement authorities and deferred resignation programs in certain circumstances, Fallings said.

The July 7 directive outlines the discipline and termination process for appropriated-fund and non-appropriated-fund workers.

For appropriated-fund workers, a supervisor will have seven days from identifying poor performance to ask the personnel office to initiate the termination process and formally notify the worker.

The personnel office, working with the legal office, has 10 days to review the notice and supporting documentation before informing the employee that his or her job performance is unacceptable.

Upon notification, the employee has seven days to respond orally or in writing.

A higher-level official has 30 days from the written notice to make a final decision on whether to penalize or fire the worker, according to the memo.

For non-appropriated fund employees, the termination process will take 40 days.

Personnel offices will have 10 calendar days to review the evidence after a supervisor requests a termination. An official then has 30 calendar days to make a decision.

## Officer admits using travel card to support secret second wife

By CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

An Army National Guard officer is awaiting punishment for using his government travel card to pay thousands of dollars in expenses for a Mongolian woman he married and brought to the U.S. while still being married to another woman.

Maj. Collin L. Welch, 40, of Arlington, Va., pleaded guilty July 28 in federal court in the District of Columbia to theft of government money and unlawfully inducing aliens to enter and remain in the United States, the Justice Department said in a statement the same day.

He agreed to forfeit \$54,000 as part of the plea. U.S. District Judge Amir Ali scheduled his sentencing for Dec. 3.

Currently a member of the D.C. National Guard, Welch previously served with its Alaska counterpart and deployed to Afghanistan and Djibouti.

He began a relationship with the woman in 2019 while on assignment at the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, prosecutors said. He was still married to the mother of his children at the time, court records said.

His wife, who had moved with him and their family to Mongolia, returned to Alaska for medical reasons that year, according to court filings.

The romance with the Mongolian woman and Welch's pattern of deception continued for years, even after his embassy assignment had ended, prosecutors said.

After Welch returned to Alaska in 2021, the Mongolian woman visited him, and he used a fabricated divorce decree to convince her that he was no longer married. He traveled to Mongolia and married her the following year, according to the Justice Department.

Welch and his original family transferred to the D.C. area in 2023, but he made video calls to the Mongolian woman from hotel rooms, often paid for with unauthorized charges to his government travel card, to hide that he was still married and living with his family, the court records said.

Welch was serving with the D.C. National



Welch

Guard's State Partnership Program, which coordinates military-to-military engagements with foreign forces and often requires members to travel for official purposes.

But prosecutors said he also lied to get permission for unofficial trips and used a government computer to create fake receipts to justify unauthorized charges on his government travel card.

He used that card to pay for the woman and her daughter to fly to the U.S. in 2024 before marrying the woman again in Virginia. When their tourist visas expired, he continued to house and support them, providing fake documents to convince them that they had been granted permanent residency and issued Social Security numbers.

Later that year, the undocumented dependents were evicted from an apartment that Welch had leased for them, after they failed to pay rent and he tried to pay with forged checks. He continued to support them through March 2026.

Welch's plea agreement says he will likely face 10 to 16 months in prison and a fine of up to \$55,000. He could qualify for a lower sentence because he has no prior criminal record.

Welch's attorney, Gregory P. Rosen, did not dispute the details in the court filing — called a statement of offense — but said the full picture would include the strains that two deployments away from family put on his client.

"None of that changes the fact that Maj. Welch accepts full responsibility for his actions," Rosen said. "That alone speaks louder about his character than any statement of offense, standing alone, ever could."

A former senior federal prosecutor, Rosen said he found the immigration charge unusual, even if it technically applied, and questioned whether financially supporting someone after they overstay their visa fell within the spirit of what Congress intended to criminalize.

"Respectfully, calling this an 'immigration fraud scheme,' as the government did in a press release issued just minutes after the plea, mislabels what happened and ignores its context entirely," he said, adding that he and his client looked forward to providing fuller context to the court at an appropriate time ahead of sentencing.

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