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Fight night

Post revives
Army boxing
tradition **Page 2**

Capt. Tyler Thompson, left, and Pvt. Royal Pierson trade punches during their Fight Night bout on Sept. 12 at Abrams Physical Fitness Center at Fort Hood, Texas.
Scott Darling/U.S. Army

Attack
drone
launched
from ship
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IG: Army, Navy
taking too many
substandard
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Hegseth aims
to revamp
chaplain
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COVER STORY

Army post's Fight Night becomes big hit

Fort revives tradition for pugilistic excellence

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Pfc. Sativa James entered her first boxing gym at 7 years old, tagging along as her brothers tried the sport. She begged her dad to let her try it, too.

With a small lie to make James a year older, she got into the gym and discovered where her height and long limbs were meant to be.

"I fell in love with it," said James, 21, who entered the Army after success on the youth boxing circuit. She won the USA Boxing Youth National Championships in 2019 and 2020 at 154 and 165 pounds, respectively.

Now a unit supply specialist with 1st Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, her arrival to Fort Hood, Texas, lined up with the post's revival of boxing — an old Army tradition that disappeared from most bases when the Army centralized its soldier-boxers into the World Class Athlete Program and the post-9/11 wars increased the operational tempo of the force.

Fort Hood had its third fight night of the year Dec. 12, and James faced 1st Lt. Ijeoma Akubueze, from 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment. James won.

"I don't get nervous anymore," James said before the fight. "It's exciting. Everyone's here to have a good time and see the skills of boxing."

The event grew from a soldier's comment to Fort Hood's commander, Lt. Gen. Kevin Admiral, that he'd like to see more boxing equipment on post. The fights were an instant success, with soldiers boxing in front of "sold-out" crowds with thousands more watching online.

Tickets are free, but people lined up hours before the doors opened for the June and September events, maxing out the 2,600-person capacity of Abrams Physical Fitness Center, according to Fort Hood. December's event also aired on television with commentators thanks to local TV station KWTX.

"We're always on the lookout for bold, exciting ways to bring the Fort Hood community together and in true American fashion, sports remain one of the best ways to do that," said Amber Pafford, chief of marketing and advertising at Fort Hood Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation. "For 250 years, boxing has pulsed through Army history as a motivating way to keep soldiers sharp and mission ready. Fort Hood Fight Night takes that legacy to the next level. It doesn't just unite our community; it puts our soldiers' grit and unstoppable talent on display."

The card featured seven bouts, contested in amateur weight classes. Each fighter is a soldier representing their unit.

"It's something different," said Capt. Yamil Acevedo, active-duty liaison officer for the fight nights and assistant coach. "It's not like a Best Squad competition. It's not like a Best Ranger, Best Sappers. It's individuals going in the ring and being competitive."

Acevedo fought in the June event



PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Capt. Tyler Thompson watches as Capt. Yamil Acevedo, assistant coach for the boxing group at Fort Hood, Texas, demonstrates a workout drill at No Day Off boxing gym in Austin, Texas, in November.



Pfc. Sativa James trains at No Day Off boxing gym. She defeated her opponent on Dec. 12.

and has since coached and trained alongside the roughly 20 soldiers selected through tryouts as part of the "family" of fighters. Outside the gym, he's the operations and training officer for 15th Brigade Support Battalion.

"You'll see some of our majors and battalion commanders talking smack to each other in the stands," Acevedo said. "That's what we want. We want them to because we want the units to come out and support."

For decades, the Army employed some of America's top boxers with each post hosting its own teams and competing with each other to hone their skills and showcase talent, said Charles Leverette, boxing coach for the Army's World Class Athlete Program at Fort Carson, Colo.

"I was on the last team that they had at Fort Hood," Leverette said. "With war and deployments, we got away from other units and posts participating. ... We are in the Army, so we're soldiers first."

Leverette credits the Army for launching his boxing career. While assigned to Fort Polk, La., he saw an ad at the gym for an upcoming boxing

event and decided to compete. He won a four-day pass to visit home and discovered his life's work.

He was a member of the World Beaters boxing team at Fort Hood in the late 1990s, until the Army merged all its boxers into the World Class Athlete Program. Leverette served as assistant coach of the Army's team and for the 2012 U.S. Olympic team. He came home from the London Games to take over as head coach for the Army and retired from active duty three years later.

The Army's modern boxing tradition dates to the lead-up to World War I, when President Theodore Roosevelt worked with his friend Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, future chief of staff of the Army, to incorporate one of the president's favorite sports into military training, said Mickey Phillips, retired naval officer and a sports and military historian.

Phillips found the military's first official reference to boxing in the Army's 1914 Manual for Physical Training. Senior leaders believed boxing and wrestling helped to instill physical aggression in troops, his research found.



Capt. Yamil Acevedo, assistant coach for the boxing group at Fort Hood, Texas, watches soldiers in the ring at No Day Off boxing gym in Austin.

The physical hits also prepared for the feeling of an explosion during war. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., soon began to incorporate boxing into future officer education and still does today.

"The concussion of bombs exploding, people weren't ready for that," Phillips said. "I was blown off my feet in Afghanistan and Iraq. I played nine years of football and it's the only time I was hit as hard."

Roosevelt's influence persisted in the military long after "the war to end all wars." Up until 2012, the military hosted the Armed Forces Boxing Championship, an Olympic qualifying event featuring service members from all the branches. It ended when international boxing officials decided to remove protective headgear from amateur fights, Leverette said.

Army boxing reached a peak at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, where the service was represented on Team USA by the head coach, the assistant coach and three fighters. Active-duty soldiers Andrew Maynard (light heavyweight) and Ray Mercer (heavyweight) won gold medals, as did former soldier Kennedy McKinney (bantamweight).

Leverette welcomed the return of boxing to Fort Hood, not just for the

nostalgia of his own time there, but as the Army's head coach. He gets to see what athletes can do in a real fight before they make the team.

"Just like you're taking a chance with regular recruiting, you don't know what you're getting until they get here," he said. "Anybody can put on a good show, but do you really have it?"

James said she wants to leverage her fighting at Fort Hood into a tryout for the Army team. She enlisted with that exact goal in mind — and a chance at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, she said.

But the event also offered newcomers to the sport a chance to see if they have what it takes. The card included Capt. Tyler Thompson, a battery commander in 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery Regiment. He picked up boxing three years ago at age 27.

Juggling command time and training has taken some creativity, he said.

"The sport is so demanding, and the job is so demanding," Thompson said.

He won his September bout and was eager for this second opportunity.

"It was exciting, it was phenomenal, scary, all of the above," Thompson said. "When the lights were really blinding, I looked at the front row, and I could always see my mom. That kind of helped me out, helped the nerves, helped calm me. ... She's always been my biggest critic and my biggest coach."

Since Fort Hood's first fight night in June, Leverette said he's fielded interest from other installations looking to join the boxing revival. He's making plans to host a boxing camp next year and see the talent that is growing organically across the service.

"It's bigger than just the kids participating. Their battle buddies might be downrange or stationed somewhere else, and they go pick up the Stars and Stripes or the local paper and they go, 'Man, this is my battle buddy. We went to basic training together.' So it goes a long way," Leverette said. "It's not just that one kid or particular soldier at that post. It's Army-wide."

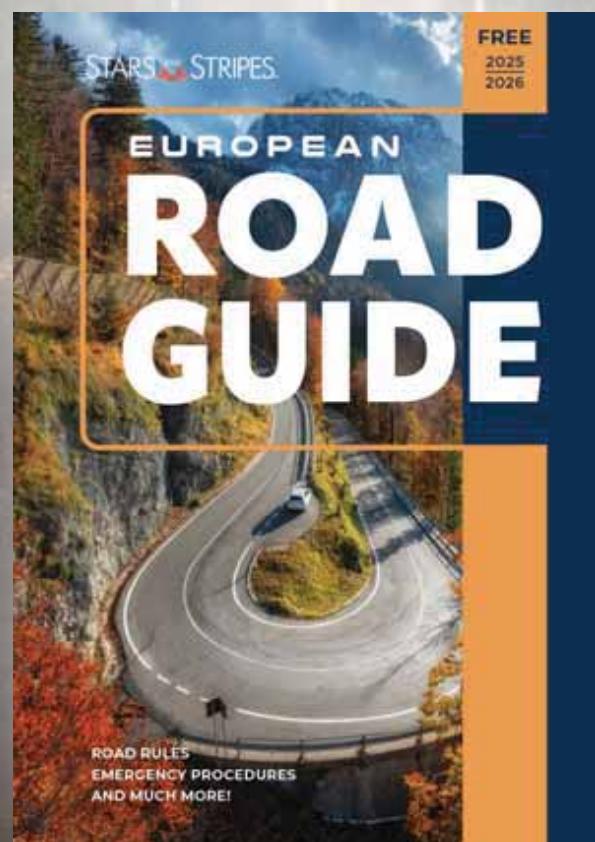
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MILITARY

Defense secretary orders religious reboot

Overhaul would toss 'unacceptable and unserious' spiritual fitness guidelines

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered sweeping changes to the U.S. military's chaplain corps, with a plan to simplify a system that he said has become too focused on "new age" concepts.

"Our chaplains are chaplains, not emotional support officers, and we're going to treat them as such," Hegseth said in a video statement to the force on Dec. 17.

"Faith and virtue were traded for self-help and self-care," Hegseth said, adding that chaplains had been "minimized" and were "viewed by many as therapists, instead of ministers."

He took special aim at the Army, saying its current spiritual fitness guide is pushing secular humanism, and he ordered the service to cease using the program immediately.

"It mentions God one time. That's it," Hegseth said. "It mentions feelings 11 times. It even mentions playfulness, whatever that is, nine times. ... In short, it's unacceptable and unserious. So we're tossing it."

Hegseth said the Pentagon is working on a new program, which could curtail what qualifies as a faith or belief recognized in the military.

"More reforms will be coming in the days and weeks ahead, he said. "There will be a top-down cultural shift putting spiritual well-being on the same footing as mental and physical health."

In 2017, the Defense Department updated what qualifies as a recognized religious denomination or belief system, with a list of 221 groups that ranged from the mainstream to obscure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

Hegseth blamed such changes on "political correctness" and an "ongoing war on warriors." The department will create a new list of religious



MATTHEW GARNIER/U.S. Northern Command

A n Army chaplain provides spiritual support during an exercise at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., on Feb. 18.

affiliation codes, he said without specifying what religions or belief systems are in and which ones are out

"We're going to streamline it ... so that our

chaplains can actually use it to minister better to the flock," Hegseth said.

IG: Army, Navy skirted law when bolstering ranks

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Both the Army and Navy incorrectly classified recruits who received low marks on military entry exams, a move that gave both services more underachieving enlistees than Congress allows, Defense Department inspector general said.

To get around a legal cap, the Navy used off-the-books academic and physical fitness development programs to help underperforming sailors improve their Armed Forces Qualification Test scores, the inspector general said in a report released Dec. 11.

The qualification test score is primarily used to determine enlistment eligibility and is derived from four subtests of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, a standardized test that helps predict military success by measuring aptitude in assorted subjects.

According to federal law, the number of applicants whose Armed Forces Qualification Test scores fell between the 10th and 30th percentiles can't surpass 4% of the total enlistees in a given fiscal year. Such scores are designated as Category IV enlistments.

The Army also exceeded the 4% threshold, though the report did not contain further details.

"By incorrectly calculating the number of Category IV enlistments, the Army and the Navy circumvented the requirement to obtain Secretary of Defense approval to exceed the statutory limit of Category IV enlistments," the IG wrote on its website.



RAQUEL BIRK/U.S. Army

Sgt. 1st Class Johnathon Huitt briefs Future Soldier Preparatory Course trainees at Fort Jackson, S.C. in 2024. The Army and Navy circumvented the law by accepting too many recruits with low test scores, the Defense Department Inspector General said in a new report.

The law also requires that a service whose Category IV enlistments exceed 10% of its active-duty accessions to establish a preparatory course, the report said.

The review looked at the Army's Future Sol-

dier Preparatory Course and Navy's Future Sailor Preparatory Course. It took place between April 2024 and August 2025.

Statutorily mandated courses require congressional oversight and have stringent reporting

requirements, the report said.

The Navy launched two congressionally unregulated courses, a Fitness Skills Development program in 2023 and Academic Skills Development program a year later to "address recruiting challenges and increase the number of potential applicants for naval service," the IG said.

The service then failed to report the original underperforming scores, according to the report. In fiscal 2025, the service had 11.3% Category IV enlistments, or 2,763 of 24,388, as of March 31, when counting the precourse qualification test scores.

Permission to go beyond the limits can be granted by the secretary of defense, who must inform the congressional armed services committees within 30 days.

The Pentagon pushed back against the findings, saying the law does not prohibit the improved scores from being used, William Fitzhugh, acting assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs, wrote in an undated rebuttal.

The Army and the Navy had been instructed to use the updated scores in memorandums in May 2024 and February 2025, the report said.

The IG recommended that the Defense Department issue clarifying guidance directing the services to use the updated scores only if the development programs have proper oversight and meet legal requirements.

They inspector general gave Fitzhugh 30 days to comment on the actions he plans to take toward meeting the recommendations.

MILITARY

Delays hamper care at DOD health facilities

IG: Problems at OCONUS clinics, hospitals can put patients in danger

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The average wait for urgent medical appointments at U.S. military bases outside the continental United States was as long as three weeks in some locations and even longer for routine appointments in 2024, a Pentagon watchdog said in a new report.

Treatment delays that service members and their families face while stationed outside the U.S. increased the risk for negative outcomes and preventable complications and decreased patient satisfaction, according to a Defense Department Office of Inspector General audit.

The report also found that personnel working in military medical clinics and hospitals overseas experienced burnout and low morale and were at risk of decreased readiness.

The agency reviewed 15 out of 79 military treatment facilities in overseas locations as well as Hawaii and Alaska, looking at 2024 data and conducting employee interviews.

The evaluation sought to assess how effectively the Defense Health Agency was managing care for its overseas patients, following the agency's transition in 2022 to assuming full control of the Pentagon's health care system.

Auditors highlighted several shortcomings, including wait times for medical appointments that exceed the federal and Defense Department guidelines, the IG said.

Between February and July 2024, service members and their families faced delays in access to care ranging on average from 1.2 days to 21.1 days for urgent appointments and from 7.2 days to 36.8 days for future routine appointments, the report said.

Federal and DOD guidance requires the military health care system to see patients within 24 hours for urgent appointments and seven days for routine care, according to the inspector general report.

While the guidelines allow for patients to be referred to a Tricare-approved civilian provider within the



DANIEL TAYLOR/U.S. NAVY

Personnel at U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka in Japan train on a simulated patient during a mass casualty drill.

allotted time frame, finding care outside the military network overseas can be challenging due to language barriers, cultural differences and denial of U.S. health insurance claims, the report said.

DHA's management of staffing at overseas locations is one area that needs to be improved to reduce appointment delays, the audit team determined.

Medical personnel told the team that clinics were not always fully staffed, particularly with nurses, who receive and prioritize messages that patients send to providers. They also said that they had difficulty managing the volume of messages received from the online patient portal and that sometimes messages could be missed, putting patient safety at risk.

At one clinic, for example, providers did not see a prescription refill message and the patient did not follow up with another request. As a result, the patient did not take prescribed antidepressant medication for two to three weeks, according to the report.

At another military treatment facility, personnel said shortages in medical technicians led to canceled ultrasound appointments, delaying follow-on medical care and leading to an increased risk of preventable complications, according to the report.

Staffing data also showed shortages in personnel, according to the report. In September 2024, for example, one facility had only 27 of the 36 civilian personnel and 27 of the 37 contractors that it was authorized.

Another facility lost more than half its primary care clinic active-duty doctors between 2019 and 2024 and saw a 20% decrease in active-duty technicians, medics and licensed nurses, while patient workload remained steady, according to the report.

Hiring civilian staff, meanwhile, isn't always an option due to funding and lengthy hiring timelines, personnel told auditors.

In 2024, DHA left some civilian vacancies unfilled because of budgetary constraints, and the average total days to hire in some locations ranged from 155 to 213 days, the report said.

Moreover, the agency did not have a process to identify why some civilian medical personnel left for other employment, auditors said.

To address staffing issues, the inspector general team recommended that the DHA director track data on why personnel are leaving military treatment facilities, review authorized staffing at its overseas locations, track support staff availability and better balance its workforce.

Though DHA agreed with the recommendations, auditors said they were still awaiting specific actions on how the agency plans to make a comprehensive review of staffing at overseas military treatment facilities.

The inspector general issued 11 recommendations in total, including directing DHA to issue finalized guidance to its personnel and better manage data discrepancies reported to the team.

Discharge upgrades possible for COVID vaccine refusal cases

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon plans to review the records of thousands of service members who were forced out of the military solely for refusing to take the COVID-19 vaccine, and it could facilitate discharge upgrades as it sees appropriate.

Approximately 8,700 service members were involuntarily separated for not complying with the now-rescinded vaccine mandate, and more than 3,000 of them did not receive honorable discharges, the Defense Department said in a statement Dec. 15.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is directing the military services to proactively review those cases and consider potential upgrades.

The statement refers to guidance

issued by the Pentagon on Dec. 10. Within 30 days, service secretaries will create and validate lists of individuals who are eligible for review. The former service members do not need to do anything to have their cases reviewed, DOD said.

The military services will then refer eligible cases to discharge review boards, which will issue decisions to every individual within one calendar year of the memorandum.

In a memo to senior leadership outlining the policy, Hegseth called the separations unconscionable and said those former service members were holding true to their personal and religious convictions.

"While many have applied for and received relief from our Military Department review boards, I believe the onus is on us to make this right,"

Hegseth said in the Dec. 6 memo. He was referring to the 3,000-plus former service members who received a general (under honorable conditions) discharge, which is a step down from an honorable discharge.

Former service members who were given a general discharge still have access to veterans benefits.

The military's COVID-19 vaccination mandate for active-duty began in August 2021 and was later extended to members of the National Guard and reservists. Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ended the mandate in 2023 but did not change the status of service members who were separated for refusing the vaccine.

Under President Donald Trump, the Pentagon recently announced that discharged service members can pursue reinstatement up to April 2026.



A soldier receives a COVID-19 vaccination at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in 2021. The Defense Department plans to review the records of thousands who were discharged solely for refusing to take the vaccine and could upgrade their discharge status.

MILITARY

Navy successfully launches one-way attack drone

BY SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

A Navy warship's successful launch of a one-way attack drone was a watershed in the Defense Department push to get hundreds of thousands of the transformational aircraft into the field, according to the service.

The LUCAS drone was deployed Tuesday from the littoral combat ship USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf in what was the first launch of the unmanned system from a ship at sea, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command said in a statement.

U.S. Central Command assigned the drone to Task Force Scorpion Strike, a unit created to develop and deploy one-way attack drones at scale. The task force, based in the Middle East, works to deliver autonomous strike capabilities to deployed forces.

"This achievement demonstrates the power of innovation and joint collaboration in this critical region," Vice Adm. Curt Renshaw, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, said in the statement.

The launch was a "significant milestone," Renshaw added.

Earlier this month, CENTCOM announced the deployment of the military's first operational squadron built around one-way attack drones.

LUCAS is an abbreviation for low-cost unmanned combat attack system. The drones have an extensive range and are designed to operate autonomously,



KAYLA MC GUIRE/U.S. Navy

A LUCAS one-way attack drone is launched from the flight deck of the USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf on Dec. 16, 2025. Naval officials called the event a "significant milestone," saying it was the first time a LUCAS drone was launched from a ship at sea.

CENTCOM said.

They can be launched in various ways, including ship-based means, catapults and platforms mounted on the ground or a vehicle.

The one-way attack drones recently deployed by U.S. forces are meant to act as a foil to an Iranian model known as the Shahed, which has wreaked havoc on the battlefield in Ukraine and has

been employed by Iran-backed militias throughout the region.

Earlier this year, the Air Force asked manufacturers to make a handful of exact replicas of the Shahed to assist

in testing and training.

LUCAS was developed by Arizona-based defense contractor Spektrum Works and is designed for long-range, autonomous missions.

The aircraft is being introduced amid a broader U.S. military initiative to scale up use of low-cost unmanned strike systems. The intent is to increase operational flexibility and reduce production timelines and unit costs, defense officials say.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last month announced a \$1 billion, multiyear drone buy that will require manufacturers to compete against one another in "gauntlet" challenges to procure drone contracts.

DOD published its initial request for solutions outlining the parameters of the first challenge, scheduled for February.

Military operations will run a number of tests on the vendors' UAVs and grade them on their ability to locate targets, according to the RFS.

The launch from Santa Barbara was handled by Task Force 59, a Navy unit focused on integrating drones into fleet operations. The task force has overseen a series of tests and demonstrations involving unmanned platforms in the Middle East.

NAVCENT did not say whether the drone carried a live payload during the launch.

Stars and Stripes reporter Lara Korte contributed to this story.



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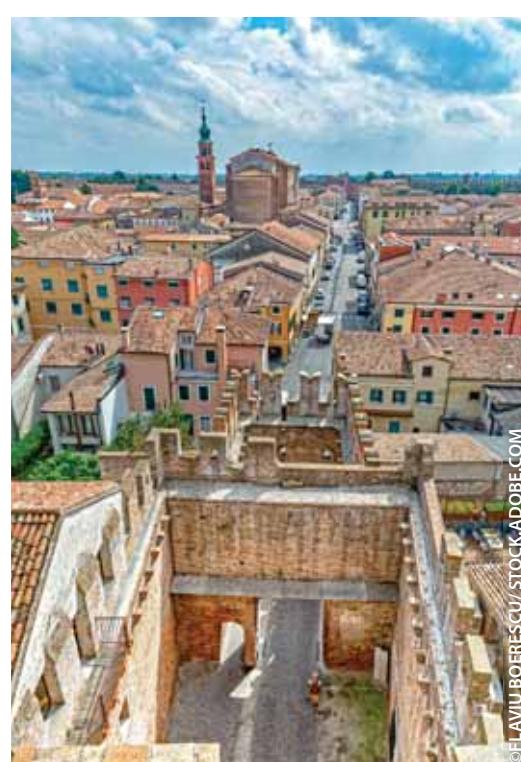
A Day Trip to Cittadella, Italy's WALLED FORTRESS TOWN



By Kimberly Kephart
Contributing Writer

If you have driven between Vicenza and Bassano Del Grappa, you may have passed by a curious ring-shaped town without giving it much thought. But Cittadella, surrounded by its 13th-century walls that are fully walkable, offers a unique day trip in the Veneto region.

Perfect for families, history lovers and anyone looking to swap the crowds of Venice for something slower and more serene, Cittadella is an easy getaway that delivers both charm and an unforgettable perspective.



to laundry flapping on the balconies.

Cittadella's story is not all quaint rooftops and cobbled lanes. During your visit, you will hear about Ezzelino III da Romano, a ruthless military leader aligned with the Holy Roman Empire. Around 1251, he commissioned Torre di Malta, a prison so notorious for torture and executions that it was later referenced by Dante Alighieri in the "Divine Comedy."

Today, the prison is part of the town's Archaeological Museum, a stark yet fascinating reminder of the town's medieval past.

The walls rise approximately 15 meters high and span about 1.5 kilometers around. On clear days, you will even spot the Venetian Prealps in the distance.

Whether you are pushing a stroller or just



looking for a laid-back afternoon, Cittadella is manageable, mellow and absolutely worth a few hours. The wall walk has safety railings and plenty of stopping points, though comfortable shoes are recommended. You will find restrooms and shaded benches inside the town gates, making it easy to enjoy without over-planning.

Aside from the walls, Cittadella's old town is compact, making it easy for you to get around on foot. Do not miss Palazzo Pretorio, a 14th-century palace that occasionally hosts art exhibits. The Duomo di Cittadella is also worth stopping into. This neoclassical cathedral has a peaceful interior and artwork by Jacopo da Ponte and a museum that is full of history.

WHY GO?

What sets Cittadella apart is its completely intact circular wall system, one of the few in Europe that you can still walk all the way around. Originally built by the Carrarese family of Padua in the early 1200s, these fortified walls stretch one mile, offering panoramic views of the town's rooftops, piazzas and the countryside beyond.

Cittadella was built as a defensive outpost in the never-ending power struggles between rival city-states like Treviso, Verona and Vicenza. Its location along key trade and military routes made it an ideal stronghold.

You will start your walk from the Casa del Capitano, the main gate and museum, where you can purchase your ticket and learn about Cittadella's defensive history. As you ascend the restored stone steps, the town unfolds beneath you like a storybook, each turn in the wall revealing something new from the bell towers



WHERE TO EAT

Cittadella has a wonderful food scene. For a scenic lunch, try Bar Borsa Café and Bistrot right on Piazza Pierobon. It is here that you can enjoy a nice lunch or have a drink with a view of the church. Alternatively, you can walk a few blocks down to Patrick's Winery Enoteca & Gineria. It is a cozy atmosphere and on a hot summer day, it is a wonderful place to unwind.

LOGISTICS

Cittadella is a great day trip, and there is both free and metered parking just outside the city walls.

- 35 minutes by car from Vicenza
- 1 hour 20 minutes by car from Aviano
- 1 hour 41 minutes by train from Venice, with a 10-minute walk into town from the station.

Grab the *Cittadella Card*, it is good for a year, and you can get stamps at each location like: Palazzo Pretorio, Teatro Sociale, Museo del Duomo di Cittadella and La Cinta Muraria. One final pro tip: walk the walls clockwise in the morning for the best light for photos.

Cittadella may be small, but paired with Bassano Del Grappa, these two make such a great outing for discovering more of the Veneto region. Its perfectly preserved walls, laid-back charm, and easy access make it a standout in the region.

Whether you live nearby or are just visiting, it reminds you that living in Italy is special—you never know what historic site you might find around the corner.

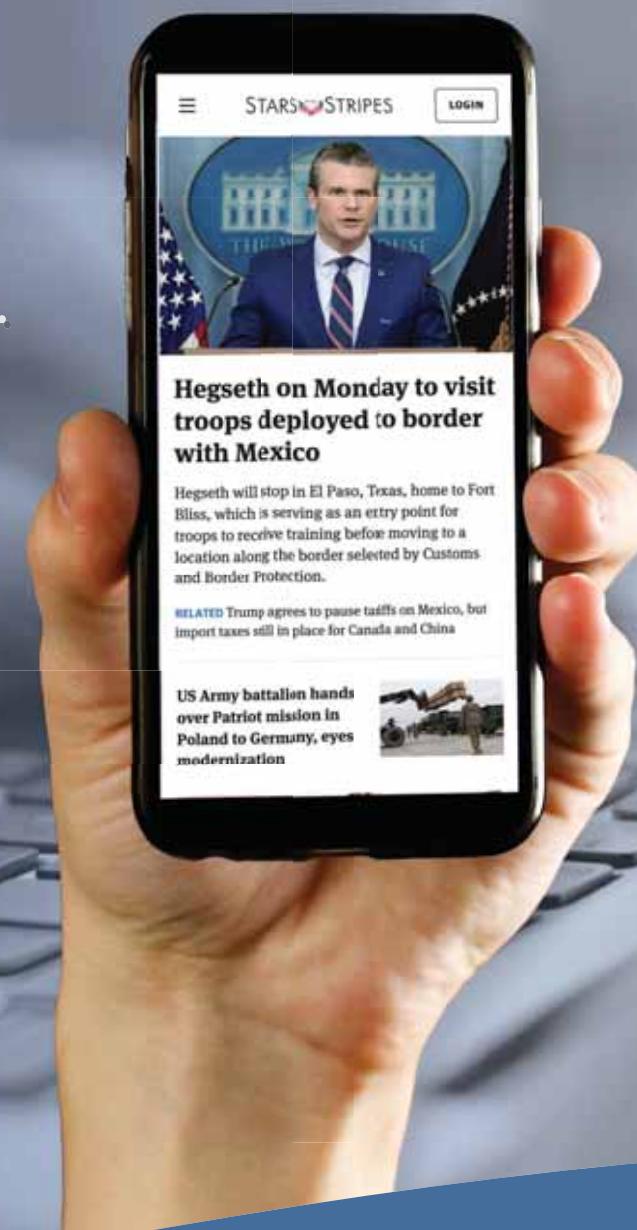


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ONE-MONTH FREE TRIAL

ICE CLIMBING IN EUROPE



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By Kat Nickola
Stars and Stripes

For all those rock climbers or winter hikers out there ready to stretch their skills, Europe is a great place to start ice climbing.

Your goal is simple enough: climb up a cliff made of ice. But, in this winter sport the conditions can vary year-to-year and even day-to-day. That is because the ice that you are climbing is formed seasonally.

Often, an ice fall will develop in places where water slowly trickles from cracks in a cliff. Over the season, it will change as more water emerges from the ground to trickle down, solidify and build the ice flow. Sometimes entire waterfalls freeze and can be climbed, while in other places you can climb the edges of glaciers. In many popular ice climbing locations, the ice is farmed by purposefully spraying water overnight when it can freeze.

The sport of ice climbing is comparable to rock climbing, in that you will use a harness, rope and helmet for safety. Beyond that, the gear is a bit different. You need two small, specially designed ice axes – one for each hand – to grip the ice and stabilize yourself while climbing upward. It is also necessary to wear rigid mountaineering boots with C3 crampons. These are very stiff and have multi-directional spikes to help grasp the ice, including forward-facing spikes at the toe to help you get a foothold for moving up. Lastly, you will need appropriate cold-weather clothes. Dress in layers and use an outer shell jacket and side-zip pants that can handle some abrasion against the ice.

Newbies looking for lessons can find outfitters and guides at the major ice climbing hubs across Europe. These hotspots are also perfect for seasoned ice climbers.



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Ötztal, Austria

There are so many places to ice climb in Austria that it makes for an easy day trip to add to any winter skiing holiday. Almost every ski resort or hotel can connect you with a tour or mountain guide ready to take you on the ice. For the most options and an ice-focused trip, head to the Ötztal (Ötztal Valley) west of Innsbruck. Between the villages of Längenfeld and Sölden there are dozens of frozen waterfalls just waiting to be climbed.



© FRANÇOIS ROUX/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Les Ecrins, France

Europe's highest concentration of ice climbing is in the mountains of the **Parc National des Écrins**. This section of the French Alps is full of canyons and valleys where the waterfalls consistently freeze every year. There is also a big annual ice festival at the end of January in the **Freissinières Valley** with exhibitions, competitions and plenty of workshops. Festivals are a great way to learn about the sport, try out some gear and take a class to help you learn ice climbing skills.



© UWE/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Dolomites, Italy

It seems like the Dolomites are a hotspot for every mountain sport, and ice climbing is no exception. The tall spires and high alpine waterfalls make perfect ice falls ready for climbers once the freezing season begins. The **Val Gardena** area is surrounded by ice climbing options. There are high, exposed routes on rock faces, but also deep, intimate spaces in hidden valleys.



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Saas-Fee, Switzerland

There is a reason the Ice Climbing World Cup is held in this spot every year. In the town's parking garage is a huge ice climbing park called the **Saas-Fee Ice Climbing Dome** where ice is farmed to manufacture stable, massive ice walls for tournaments. It is open to the public, for a fee, outside of competitions.

More impressive, however, is the nearby unique experience of climbing along the edge of the **Feeletscher** (Fee Glacier), with guided routes for beginners and advanced climbers spanning this long icy cliff. Nearby, in the hamlet of Saas-Grund and behind the gondola, is another publicly-accessible (for a seasonal fee) climbing area called the **Chalchofen** that is lit at night.



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Rjukan, Norway

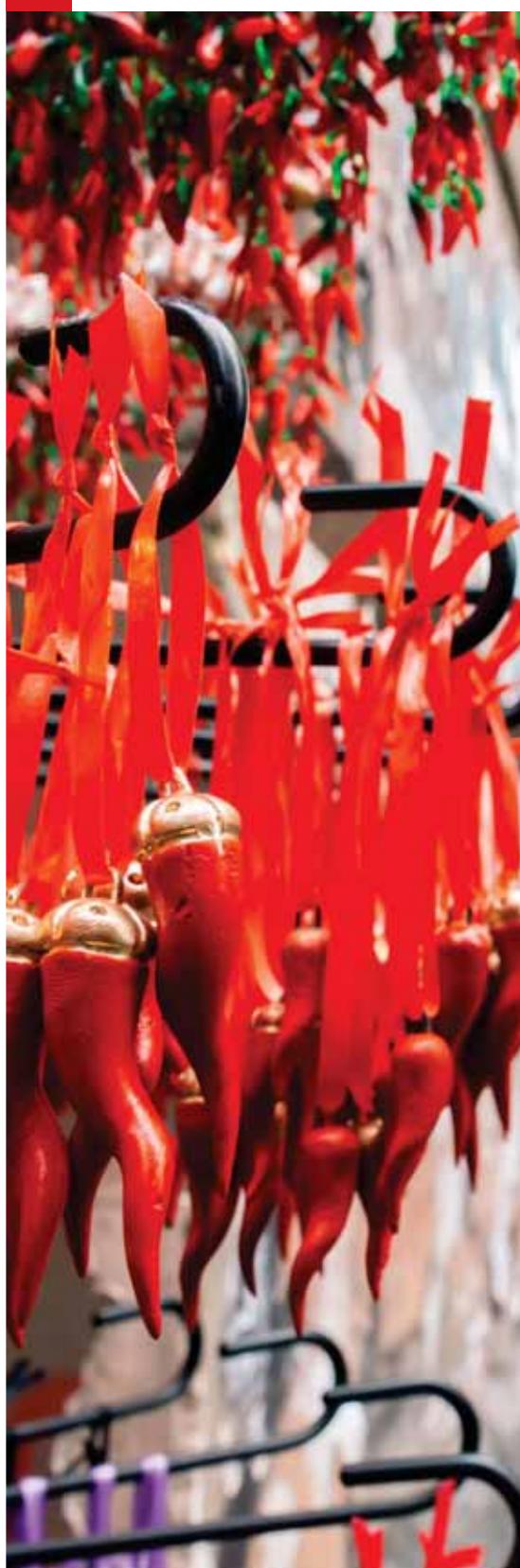
For guaranteed ice and frozen temperatures, Norway is your destination. **Rjukan** is one of the most popular ice climbing destinations in the world. This small village is nestled at the bottom of a steep valley, meaning it doesn't get direct sunlight for months in the winter. Because of this, the ice climbing season lasts significantly longer, from November to March, than at ice walls in the Alps. There are over 190 frozen waterfalls that line the sides of the valley, meaning you can get to climbs quickly, spend a cold (short) day on the ice and be back in town in no time.

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The Cornicello: Symbol of Naples

BY KAREN BRADBURY
Contributing Writer

Italy's third-largest city is undeniably a bit tatty around its edges. With its chaotic traffic and untidy streets peopled with rough-looking characters, it's the kind of place one feels the need to constantly keep one's guard up. Perhaps this is why the souvenir purchased by many visitors to Naples feels a bit weightier and hard-won.

On a walk through the cavern-like historical core of one of Europe's most ancient cities, shopkeepers and street vendors sell all the magnets, T-shirts and soccer team gear one would expect to see anywhere. Carved wooden figurines, cameo brooches and bottles of limoncello liqueur appear within their mix as slightly more inspired and Italy-specific choices. But it soon becomes apparent that one item in particular is the *purchase di rigore*, the must-have souvenir from any trip to Bella Napoli.

Bright red, elongated, twisted and conical, the hornlike object known as a cornicello in Italian or *curnicello* in the local dialect is ubiquitous. This immediately recognizable talisman is used to channel good fortune and repel the curse of the evil eye. Even people who aren't particularly superstitious have a healthy respect toward its purported efficacy. And it's been working its magic for a long, long time.

Numerous sources trace the origins of Naples' trademark amulet as far back as 3500 BC, when hunters would hang the horns of their prey upon their doors to scare and repel enemies and evil forces. Its red color, symbolic of blood, represents life, strength and good fortune. Its similarity to a hot chili pepper is not coincidental. Believed to work as an aphrodisiac, red peppers symbolize fertility, an idea closely intertwined with survival of the species and perpetuation of the family line.

To be effective, the cornicello's essential attributes are dictated by age-old rules. The horn is optimally hollow inside,

which allows it to be filled with salt, said to increase its powers. It should be crafted by hand, allowing its maker to pass on strength and positive influences to its new owner. A particularly auspicious material from which it can be made is coral, a revered substance believed to endow energy and confidence, as well as offer protection to pregnant women.

The amulet may be worn as a pendant around one's neck, carried in the form of a keychain, hung from a vehicle's rear-view mirror or placed above the entrance to a home or business. No harm is associated with harnessing the power of several horns within a number of different settings.

The most important rule in connection with the cornicello is that it can only be purchased for another, as buying a horn for oneself negates all of its mystical, protective powers. When presenting the gift to its intended, a certain ritual should be followed. The recipient is asked to open the palm of their left hand, which should be pricked with the tip of the horn.

If ever the tip of the horn should break off, one should not panic. The breakage indicates the horn has performed its intended task, accumulating negative energy within its tip until it could hold no more. Reason enough, perhaps, to inspire the recipient of this sacred gift to embark upon a trip to Naples to buy more horns for all those he or she holds dear.

There's no need to search far and wide for the most simplistic examples of the Naples horn. Casual souvenir shoppers will likely make their purchases in and around Via San Gregorio Armeno, a bustling shopping street known for the sale of hand-carved nativity sets. Many other handicraft and jewelry stores throughout the city sell hand-crafted versions of the cornicello, many of which come with certificates of authenticity and instruction manuals.



Modica: Sicily's Chocolate Village

BY MELVINA TAYLOR
Contributing Writer



Strolling through the charming streets of Modica reveals many storefronts announcing **cioccolato di Modica**, or Modica chocolate.

The birthplace of this Italian **indicazione geografica protetta** (IGP) product is located in the south of Sicily. Only a one and a half hour drive away from NAS Sigonella, this location is perfect for a leisurely outing to taste Sicily's specialty chocolate.

Visit this quaint town in the afternoon to witness the golden hour glow across the terracotta houses that line the valley, forming the beautiful backdrop of Modica.

Chocolate history

Modica is a UNESCO Heritage Site in the south of Sicily with a rich chocolate history. Although the exact origins are debated, historians believe the unique process of making Modica chocolate dates back to the 1700s after the Spanish brought cacao from the Americas. The chocolates sold here are made only in Modica using natural ingredients and processed according to traditional methods to ensure the sugar granules maintain their crunchy texture. This results in a texturally interesting and highly aromatic type of chocolate.



Where to go

Start at the **Chocolate Museum** which is located in the middle of town and surrounded by many chocolate shops. Throughout the museum are displays, statues and paintings made from chocolate (including a chocolate topographic map of Italy!). This low-cost activity, at only €3 per person, is a good way to glean some insight into Modica's chocolate heritage.

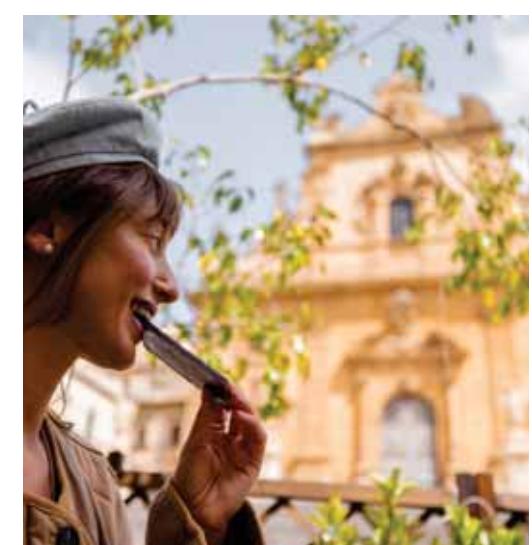
Next up, try **Sabadi**, a chocolatier with locations in Modica and Ortigia. They sell decadent chocolates of all types that are made only in Modica. From individual flavors, like mandarin

or lavender, blends based on regional plants and chocolates with milk to completely raw cacao bars, Sabadi has something for everyone.

This shop is also perfect for people who are gluten-free and vegan, as many of the chocolates are both. The employees will provide explanations for all chocolates and answer any questions you have. And, if you ask, they will accompany you to their chocolate aging cellar. This type of chocolate is flavored from contact with ingredients—imagine smelling a piece of chamomile while eating a slice of chocolate. You can buy aged chocolate even if you do not wish to enter the cellar.

The last recommendation is tucked away in a little alley—**Antica Dolceria Bonajuto**. Self-proclaimed as the oldest chocolate factory in Sicily, this confectionery shop sells chocolate bars as well as pastries. The chocolatier has a large variety of flavors such as a bar made with donkey milk (you can always ask to taste a sample first).

While you are there, you can peruse the display cases containing chocolate memorabilia or peek into the kitchens behind the large glass windows. Tour reservations are available so you can see the "bean to bar" laboratory.



MILITARY

EU seeks to enhance military mobility

Lawmakers call for 'military Schengen area' to curb limits

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

European Union lawmakers want to remove internal barriers to the cross-border movement of troops and military equipment, allowing the forces of partners and allies such as the U.S. to move across the Continent faster in a crisis.

A resolution adopted in the European Parliament seeks creation of a "military Schengen area," a reference to the zone encompassed by European countries that have abolished internal passport and customs controls in their combined territory.

"There are still considerable administrative and financial barriers, as well as infrastructure obstacles, which means that it can sometimes take over a month to move military equipment across the EU," the European Parliament said in a statement.

In the resolution, lawmakers said Russia's war in Ukraine has underscored the "urgent need" for improvements, particularly along NATO's eastern flank in countries such as Poland and the Baltic states.

Reducing existing obstacles to military mobility is "essential for European security and defense," they said.

European countries also must invest more in transportation infrastructure, especially along four military transport corridors previously identified by the EU, according to the resolution. All four corridors include central and Eastern European countries.

The move comes amid ongoing pressure on European NATO members from President Donald Trump to spend more on defense.

In June, NATO leaders meeting in The Hague, Netherlands, pledged to aim toward spending 5% of their gross domestic product annually by 2035 on defense and broader security-related expenditures, including infrastructure and resilience efforts.

The resolution passed by a vote of 493-127, with 38 abstentions. Members of the European Parliament's transport and defense committees are expected to begin legislative work on the Europe-



THOMAS DIXON/U.S. Army

Tanks from the U.S., Denmark, Italy, Slovenia and Switzerland display their national flags during a training exercise near Grafenwoehr, Germany, in February. Europe's lawmaking body is pushing for a "military Schengen area" to speed cross-border movement of allied troops and equipment in a crisis.

an Commission's military mobility package in the coming weeks.

The resolution text points to constraints, noting that tanks have been barred from entering some member states because they exceed national weight limits and that convoys have been halted at bridges not designed to support heavy military loads.

Lawmakers endorsed the European Commission's proposal to raise funding for military mobility to roughly \$20 billion in the EU's next long-term budget, warning member states against cutting the proposal as they did in the 2021-27 budget cycle, when planned funding was reduced by 75%.

Upgrading roughly 500 infrastructure "hot spots," including bridges, tunnels and rail lines not suited for heavy military vehicles, would require upward of \$117 billion, according to the resolution text.

Lawmakers further urged the EU to follow NATO's example and ensure that rapid-reaction troops could cross internal EU borders within three days in peacetime and within 24 hours during a crisis.

NATO has long planned for rapid cross-border troop movements, but EU lawmakers say civilian rules and infrastructure still prevent those timelines from being met.

Lawmakers also called for a military mobility

task force, a European coordinator and a commission-led roadmap to streamline implementation, as well as digital solutions and a one-stop shop to accelerate cross-border movement authorizations.

European Parliament co-rapporteur Roberts Zile said many of the obstacles could be addressed quickly.

Zile represents Latvia, a Baltic NATO member bordering Russia that has been among the most vocal advocates for stronger European responses to the Kremlin.

"Military mobility has become even more urgent in light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine," Zile said. "There is no time to waste."

Lithuania to build new training ground near strategic Suwalki Gap

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Lithuania plans to build a new military training area near the Suwalki Gap, a strip of land separating Russia's Kaliningrad exclave from Kremlin ally Belarus that's widely regarded as one of the most strategically sensitive places in Europe.

In addition to the new site near the town of Kapciamiestis, the country will also double the size of the Taurage training area in western Lithuania, national public broadcaster LRT reported.

U.S. land forces have conducted rotational deployments in Lithuania since spring 2014 as part of NATO deterrence efforts, and sustained rotations of U.S. heavy battalions have been in place since 2019.

More than 1,000 rotational American troops were deployed to Lithuania, where they operate, train and take part in joint NATO exercises, according to the Army.

Western military officials have long assessed that in a conflict, Moscow could attempt to link Kaliningrad with Belarus, severing the Baltic states from NATO's main forces.

"Lithuania is strengthening its national defense with plans for new and expanded military training ranges, boosting NATO's rapid response capabilities and securing the strategically crucial Suwalki Corridor," the Lithuanian defense ministry said in a statement on X.



KEITH ANDERSON/U.S. Army

Lithuanian soldiers take part in an exercise with NATO troops at Pabrade training area in eastern Lithuania. The Baltic country announced Dec. 15, that it plans to build a new training area near the Suwalki Gap and expand an existing one farther west.

The roughly 40-mile stretch of territory along Lithuania's border with Poland is the only overland route connecting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the rest of the alliance.

Amid heightened tensions between NATO and Russia over the war in Ukraine, Deividas Matulionis, chief national security adviser to Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, said the

Suwalki Gap is receiving "special attention" from the alliance.

"The chosen site is the most suitable from both a military and national security perspective," Matulionis said of the Kapciamiestis location, as reported by LRT. "These training areas are vital for ensuring conditions for the largest possible presence of allied forces in Lithuania."

The new training area will be large enough to support brigade-level training involving several thousand troops, LRT said.

In March, four U.S. soldiers died during an exercise at a military training area in eastern Lithuania near the Belarus border. Their M88A2 Hercules armored recovery vehicle became submerged in swampy terrain.

After a nearly weeklong search and recovery operation involving U.S., Lithuanian and allied forces, the soldiers were found dead.

Lithuania has yet to announce when development work at Kapciamiestis will begin or is expected to finish. Initial estimates put the construction time at four years, the Baltic Times reported in September.

The announcement comes as Lithuania works to establish a full army division for the first time in its modern history, driven by growing numbers of conscripts and reservists. Germany has also pledged to deploy a brigade of several thousand troops to the country by 2027.

MILITARY

Future of Air Force pilot training arrives

T-7A Red Hawk will replace T-38C Talon

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Lt. Col. Michael Trott already achieved his childhood dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. Now he's marked a milestone in the Air Force's goal to modernize pilot training.

Trott, call sign "Hyde," was the first to fly the service's T-7A Red Hawk training aircraft to San Antonio, where his squadron is in the final sprint to integrating the plane as the primary trainer for Air Force pilots.

"I am completely humbled and honored to be in the position that I am," said Trott, commander of the 99th Flying Training Squadron, which is responsible for training pilot instructors at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph Air Force Base in Texas.

"All of my initial cadre have tens — if not hundreds — of hours already in the simulator," he said. "We are very excited to get the aircraft here and start flying it."

Trott first went to St. Louis — site of a Boeing plant — to train with Boeing pilots before one accompanied him for the flight to Texas.

The new plane bears a distinct red tail, which emphasizes its name honoring the Tuskegee Airmen, the military's first Black pilots and support personnel who served during World War II. American bomber crews nicknamed the planes of the Tuskegee Airmen the "Red Tails" because they had the color painted across the vertical stabilizers of their fighters.

"We intend to continue the legacy of breaking barriers and challenging assumptions by utilizing the advanced capabilities of the T-7 training system," Trott said. "The 99th will rewrite what pilot production looks like and shape the future of pilot training for the next generation of warfighters in America."

Before his flight, Trott spoke with reporters about his own preparations to be the squadron's first pilot to fly the Red Hawk and what the next two years of preparation will look like to get the platform ready to host its first wave of training in



Trott



PHOTOS BY SEAN WORRELL/U.S. Air Force

The T-7A Red Hawk will become the primary trainer for Air Education and Training Command.

fall 2027.

After getting through paperwork and maintenance required to receive a new aircraft, preparations will focus on the support infrastructure needed to get the plane into a flying state, Trott said. Pilots will then begin to fly the Red Hawk locally.

"We've got a game plan and training plan for what that looks like. That'll also include the [simulators] that are here already delivered and set up. There will be a training plan that we do from the aircrew side to get all of the initial cadre qualified on the aircraft," he said.

Meanwhile, the maintenance side of the house will kick off training in January for the first 39 maintainers to work on the Red Hawk.

The course runs through June, said Jillian Watson, a member of the senior executive service and the director of logistics, engineering and force protection.

"We're looking forward to starting them off with the basics of things like crew chief, so that will involve some classroom time for standards, procedures, normal maintenance safety operations, things like that," she said.

"Then we will actually use the aircraft that

will be stationed here as part of the maintenance training curriculum for them as they do familiarization training."

When that is completed, the service will start looking toward other bases that will receive the Red Hawk.

Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi is next in line with a 2027 arrival estimate, followed by Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas in 2032. Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma will get the Red Hawk in 2034, and Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas a year later.

"I have to say, from a maintenance perspective, we're very much looking forward to an airframe of this century," Watson said.

The Red Hawk is replacing the T-38C Talon, which was originally designed in the early 1960s. Over time, it has become less suited to prepare pilots to fly the platforms in use now, and those expected in the future.

"The T-38, it's old enough [that] people's grandparents have worked on that plane. From a maintenance perspective, it's nice to be working with a glass cockpit aircraft with new systems," Watson said.

Eventually, the Air Force will have more than

350 Red Hawks, and the program will grow to replace the service's other training platform, the T-6 Texan, which came into use in 2000.

Randolph will receive a second Red Hawk in January, Watson said.

By August 2027, Randolph should have 14 planes, Trott said. That fall, future instructor pilots will begin training on the Red Hawk.

Those newly minted instructors will then go to the service's undergraduate pilot training bases to begin integrating the Red Hawk into the Air Force's pilot training.

But before the first class of future instructors arrive at Randolph, the 99th squadron will work with the aircraft to learn how it performs and what the syllabus should look like, Trott said.

"An example would be basic fighter maneuvers. We know that is going to be part of our syllabus that we need to execute with the T-7," he said.

"How does the T-7 handle? What speed do we want to be when we do our break turn? What tactics, techniques and procedures do we want to codify in our manuals."

This work, he said, will build out the next three to four decades of pilot training.



TIA DUFOUR/U.S. Marine Corps
A Marine staff sergeant, center, is seen wearing a boat cloak at the Marine Corps birthday ball in Arlington, Va.

Rock the boat cloak: Showy Marine dress item to become unisex, allowed for women

BY LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

An eye-catching Marine Corps uniform accessory that was long reserved for male officers and senior enlisted leaders at the service's birthday ball and formal evening dinners is no longer exclusively menswear.

The boat cloak, a niche evening dress accessory, is now authorized for eligible female Marines following a recent update to the service's uniform regulations.

An administrative message announced the results of a uniform board process that began nearly two years ago.

The change was originally proposed in an early 2024 survey, which explored expanding authorization of the men's boat cloak to female officers and senior enlisted Marines.

The special-order item, which can cost upward of \$1,000, differs from the current women's evening dress cape, which is also reserved for formal evening events.

The difference in format was a vestige of the

fashion of the mid-20th century, military historian Charles W. McFarlane told Business Insider last month.

Shorter evening capes designed to show off the wearer's gown were popular among civilian women at the time, and the military based the design of its dress capes on that model, McFarlane said.

He noted that the Army and Navy have had some version of the boat cloak in their history as well.

The flamboyance of the garment has also proved alluring on social media.

For example, a Marine master gunnery sergeant with the TikTok handle POG_ACTUAL_1169 has at least two videos highlighting the accessory.

The boat cloak was not the only Marine uniform item proposed for change in the initial survey.

An alternative pair of dress pumps with black smooth or synthetic leather for formal events also was authorized for women, according to the

message.

Previously, black suede and cloth were their only options, a limitation that didn't apply to male Marines.

The survey had also recommended standardizing the women's neck tab color for all khaki uniforms to match how men use only a single tie, but that proposal was not addressed and no changes were made.

In addition, all Marines will see a change regarding the gray tanker jacket, a cold-weather overgarment authorized with certain service and dress uniforms.

It is now an optional seabag item that will be issued upon entry, so members of the service won't have to pay for it out of pocket.

For recruiters, the update goes a step further, approving a cash allowance for the purchase of a tanker jacket as part of their uniform allowance, according to the message.

Marines on funeral support details will also be given a supplemental clothing allowance for similar uniform item purchases, it said.

MILITARY

Mattresses, repairs part of barracks update

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

All Marines living in barracks can expect a new mattress and furniture, while sailors will see housing improvements at 50 Navy bases as the services invest \$615 million to improve housing for junior enlisted troops.

"Quality of service is inseparable from readiness," said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, said in a news release. "Providing safe, comfortable, and clean housing is not optional. It is a responsibility we owe to every sailor who volunteers to serve."

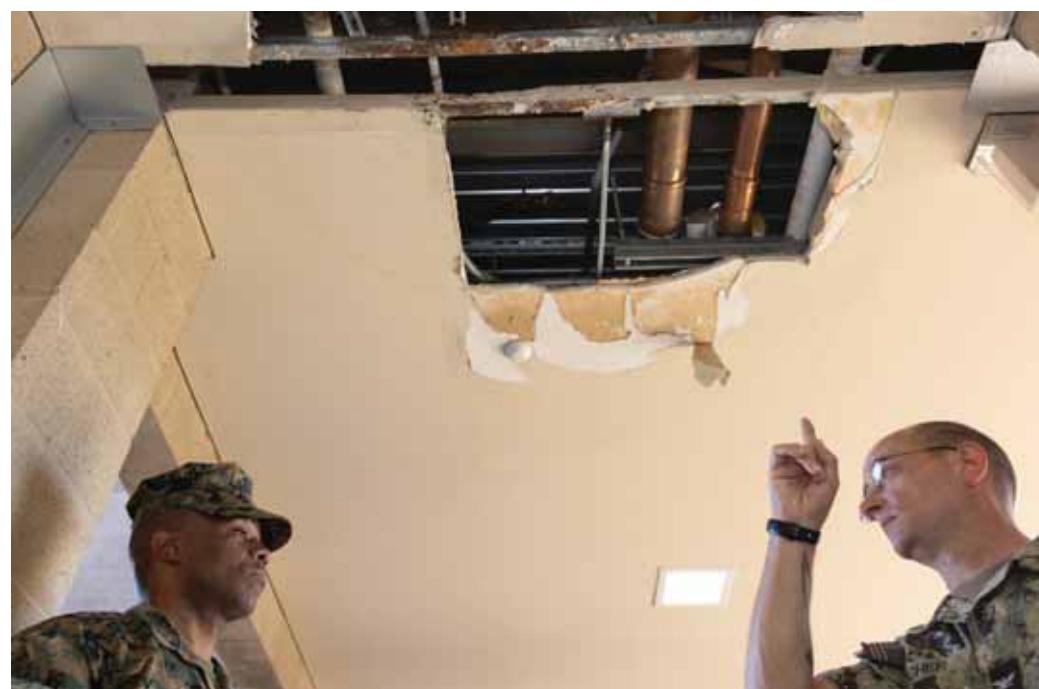
The new funding stemmed from a Defense Department-wide barracks task force stood up in October to overhaul the military's aging housing for junior enlisted and unaccompanied service members. Government reports and the military's own assessments have found substandard conditions including mold, non-working appliances and air conditioning, plumbing issues and broken locks and windows.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced \$1.2 billion for barracks renovations across all service branches provided through the massive spending package signed into law earlier this year commonly referred to as the "One Big Beautiful Bill."

The Navy will invest \$375 million into safety, comfort and cleanliness projects across the shore enterprise. About \$75 million of that amount will support 95 prioritized projects across 50 installations and will meet the specific needs at each base. This money will go toward kitchen updates, heating and cooling systems, new floors and new furniture, the Navy said.

The remaining \$300 million is flagged for major work at six bases:

Naval Support Facility Indian Head in Maryland: \$22 million toward the Marine Corps barracks for the Joint Chemical-Biological Incident Response Force will modernize barracks with structural, mechanical, electrical and fire



JESLIANNE TORRES/U.S. MARINE CORPS

U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Nick I. Brown and U.S. Navy Capt. Jeffrey Richer address barracks discrepancies during Operation Clean Sweep at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., Oct. 21, 2024.

suppression upgrades.

Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia: \$91.8 million toward the Center for Naval Aviation Technical Training Student Housing for a comprehensive renovation with roof replacement, HVAC, plumbing, electrical, fire system updates, mold remediation, cabinetry replacement, new flooring, closet upgrades and painting.

Oceana Dam Neck Annex: \$78.3 million toward Marine Corps Intelligence School Mardet Student Housing for a full restoration and modernization of HVAC, plumbing, electrical system replacement, new flooring, closets, paint, updated bathrooms, new furniture and in-room refrigerators and microwaves.

Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam: \$30.3 million toward Building 1489 for repairs to plumbing, exterior, roofing, interior finishes, HVAC and electrical. Interior renovations include upgrading kitchens, lounges, flooring, windows and shower areas.

Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story in Virginia: \$13.5 million for Shields Hall will support major HVAC system work, dropped ceiling replacement and the installation of lockable access doors.

Naval Base Kitsap in Washington: \$12.1 million to Keppler Hall to repair damage from an August fire and sprinkler flooding, upgrade fire alarm system and interior restoration of flooring,

new ceilings, updated bathrooms and electrical updates.

"This is not a one-time fix, but a sustained commitment," Gray said in the release. "We are dedicated to continuous improvement and ensuring our sailors have the quality housing they deserve throughout their careers."

The Marine Corps said it will spend \$22 million across all installations to fund "self-help programs" and other minor repairs. Officials said this will empower commanders to act on local improvements.

Another \$55 million will purchase new barracks furniture and mattresses across all installations, and \$10 million will buy new door locks and a standardized barracks access control system.

The Marine Corps also designated \$218 million for improvements and renovations of 16 barracks across six installations: Camp Lejeune, N.C., Camp Pendleton, Calif., Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., 29 Palms, Calif., Quantico, Va., and Camp Fuji in Japan.

Those renovations will cover HVAC repairs, mechanical repairs and work on major building systems.

The barracks task force also covers the Army and Air Force, though neither provided a granular breakdown of the work to be done.

The Army will push \$50 million to local commanders for barracks improvements and another \$65 million to soldier self-help programs, the service said. Another \$405 million will fund major renovations. Officials said they are still inspecting all barracks to find what work needs to be prioritized.

The Air Force will put \$41.5 million toward immediate dormitory fixes of door locks, sinks, exhaust fans, lights, toilets, HVAC components, mold remediation, roof, flooring and window repairs. Another \$89 million will support larger projects.

Navy will build new frigate based on cutter

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Less than a month after killing the bulk of the Constellation-class frigate program, the Navy announced plans to build a replacement "FF(X) frigate" based on a Coast Guard cutter already in service.

"I have directed the acquisition of a new frigate class based on HII's Legend-class national security cutter design, a proven American built ship," Navy Secretary John Phelan said in a video announcement on X on Dec. 18.

The Navy said in a statement, "The FF(X) will be a smaller, more agile surface combatant designed to complement the fleet's larger, multi-mission warships and enhance operational flexibility around the globe."

Phelan said President Donald

Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have already "signed off" on the "smart, quick, affordable" build. His announcement did not include information on the number of ships to be purchased or the dollar amounts of the initial and long-term contracts.

The FF(X) will be built at HII shipbuilders Ingalls Shipbuilding 800-acre plant in Pascagoula, Miss., Phelan said.

Using the Coast Guard cutter design for the new Navy frigates would fast-track getting hulls into the water by 2028, Phelan said.

While HII would be the lead builder on the cutters-turned-frigates, Phelan said an open competition would likely be held to build in other American shipyards.

Phelan did not specifically say if Wisconsin-based Fincantieri Marquette Marine would be involved. The

company won the 2020 competition to build the Constellation-class frigates. Originally based on a slightly modified version of a frigate already in service with France and Italy, the program has been plagued by cost overruns, delays, worker shortages and dozens of design changes. A Navy report last year said the project was 36 months behind schedule on its \$22 billion contract.

In canceling the program, the Navy said it would accept the first two ships already under construction, USS Constellation and USS Congress. But the program would be terminated for any additional ships. The Constellation is projected to be delivered in 2029.

At the time of the program cancellation, Fincantieri said it was counting on new work from the Navy to keep its Wisconsin plant open and its workforce in place. Phelan did not mention



ANDERSON W. BRANCH/U.S. NAVY
Coast Guard Cutter Calhoun sails on the Hudson River during New York Fleet Week in May. The cutters will be the basis of the new FF(X) frigate announced by the Navy on Dec. 18.

Fincantieri in the video.

"Shipyards will be measured across one outcome — delivering combat power to the fleet as fast as possible," Phelan said.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, Chief of Naval Operations, said in the same video that the program would follow what he said was the successful development and construction of the Arleigh Burke-class of destroyers.

"Building it smart from the start, then upgrading it in steps over time as the threats and technology evolve," Caudle said.

Caudle said the frigate program was an attempt to build ships that were smaller than modern destroyers, which have increasingly taken on the role formerly played by cruisers in the "high-end fight" of naval warfare.

"The FF(X) is a highly adaptable vessel," the Navy said. "While its primary mission will be surface warfare,"

it has the "ability to carry modular payloads and command unmanned systems."

Phelan said the new ships would fit into the overall Navy strategy for the "Golden Fleet," a Trump administration initiative under development that would include larger ships, including a possible new generation of battleships, along with larger numbers of smaller surface ships. The ships would be augmented by uncrewed ships that would support the defense of the major warships.

Caudle said lessons learned in the Red Sea and in operations in the Caribbean showed an "undeniable" need to restructure Navy shipbuilding to faster, smaller, and more reliable models.

"Our small surface combatant inventory is a third of what we need," Caudle said. "We need more capable blue water small combatants to close the gap."

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