

STARS AND STRIPES®



Volume 01 Edition 06

©SS 2025

ITALY EDITION

stripes.com

DECEMBER 11, 2025

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NATO training on drone-killer tested in battle **Page 3**



A U.S. soldier preps the Merops counter-drone system for testing at a Polish military training area in Nowa Dęba on Nov. 18.
Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes

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COVER STORY



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

A soldier launches the Merops counter-drone system from the bed of a truck during testing and training on Nov. 18, at a Polish military training area in Nowa Deba.

New system delivers low-budget lethality

After breaches by drones, NATO turns to Merops for eastern flank

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

NOWA DEBA, Poland — U.S. soldiers are training alongside Polish and Romanian forces on a counter-drone system rushed to NATO's eastern flank after a recent spate of unmanned aerial incursions across Europe.

U.S. and NATO officials, drawing lessons from the war in Ukraine, have long argued that the alliance needs cheaper ways to counter drones, since firing traditional air-defense systems at them is too expensive and often impractical. That urgency grew after about 20 unmanned aircraft crossed into Polish airspace in September, followed days later by an incursion into Romania.

NATO blamed Russia for those violations, which proved to be the final push for Poland and Romania to purchase the U.S.-made Merops counter-drone system. The system has been battle-tested in Ukraine, where local forces have used it to shoot down Russian-made Shahed drones and other incoming threats, according to U.S. military officials.

Poland and Romania received their first Merops systems in November, and training alongside U.S. soldiers began here at one of Poland's largest military training areas soon afterward.

"It's very lethal, very effective, but the key piece here is that it's cost effective," said Brig. Gen. Curtis King, head of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command.

During a demonstration on Nov. 18, the Merops system sat in the back of a midsize pickup truck. Once launched, its interceptor shot through the air at speeds officials said exceeded 150 mph, identifying drones and passing within feet of them in flight.

Officials said that in a real-life scenario, the interceptor would carry explosives and detonate to destroy its target. Each interceptor costs about \$15,000, and the system overall is roughly one-tenth the price of the Shahed drones Moscow



A soldier prepares to launch the Merops counter-drone system from the bed of a truck during testing and training on Nov. 18, at a Polish military training area in Nowa Deba.

builds and employs, they said.

That matters because, until now, responding to incursions often meant scrambling NATO fighter jets, which cost tens of thousands of dollars per flight. And in a conflict like the one playing out in Ukraine, large numbers of interceptors would be needed to counter repeated drone swarms.

Another advantage of Merops, made by the company Project Eagle, is its ability to use artificial intelligence to navigate even when satellite and electronic communications are jammed, according to the company.

"This is one of many capabilities that NATO nations are going to have to look to employ to defeat the drones," King said, adding that the war in Ukraine shows how quickly modern warfare evolves and how weapons development must keep pace.

U.S. Army Europe and Africa says Merops is the first system fielded since the announcement of the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line, a concept unveiled earlier this year by commander Gen. Christopher Donahue. The plan envisions a mix

of manned and robotic forces linked by a shared data network to repel any attack on NATO territory.

Under the concept, low-cost, easily replaceable hardware and software feed live targeting data to front-line robotic platforms, which can strike enemy drones and ground forces while absorbing the first wave of an assault. The goal is to deter an attack or blunt one long enough for NATO's manned units to regain the initiative and launch a counteroffensive.

Army officials say the approach is meant to be scalable and repeatable across the eastern flank, using rapidly deployable technologies that can overwhelm an adversary and deny key terrain.

It's one of several efforts being pushed in Europe to counter future drone attacks, as the U.S. and its allies scramble to find effective, affordable solutions.

Speaking on the sidelines of the training, Lt. Gen. Stanislaw Czosnek, deputy chief of the general staff of the Polish armed forces, said Poland plans eventually to field its own domestically built counter-drone systems but needed a quick solu-



Brig. Gen. Curtis King, head of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command and Brig. Chris Gent, deputy chief of staff of Transformation and Integration at NATO LANDCOM, speak to reporters at a Merops counter-drone system demonstration in Nowa Deba.

tion to fill an immediate capability gap.

"The airspace violation we witnessed recently forced us to accelerate," Czosnek said. "We want to be safer than we are now. This is a gap filler."

Merops' success on the battlefield in Ukraine was a major reason why Poland selected the platform, Czosnek said.

According to King, Merops has been responsible for up to 40% of the Shahed drones shot down by Ukrainian forces. He added that other counter-drone systems are being developed across the alliance that rely on similar radar, with the goal of allowing partners to operate different systems interchangeably.

Sgt. 1st Class Corey Myers, a platoon sergeant with Germany-based 1st Battalion, 57th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, said he and his soldiers found the system intuitive.

"It's a simple system to understand," Myers said. "If you're good with an Xbox controller, you're good."

The U.S. military does not currently field Merops, but U.S. Army Europe and Africa sent troops to the roughly two-week training event in Poland so they can help train partner forces who adopt it in the future.

Denmark, which also reported drone sightings in September, is planning to purchase Merops technology. The Associated Press reported this month.

"It feels extremely important being here," said Sgt. Riley Hiner, another member of 1-57. "With all the Shaheds Russia is flying, I think this is the way forward."

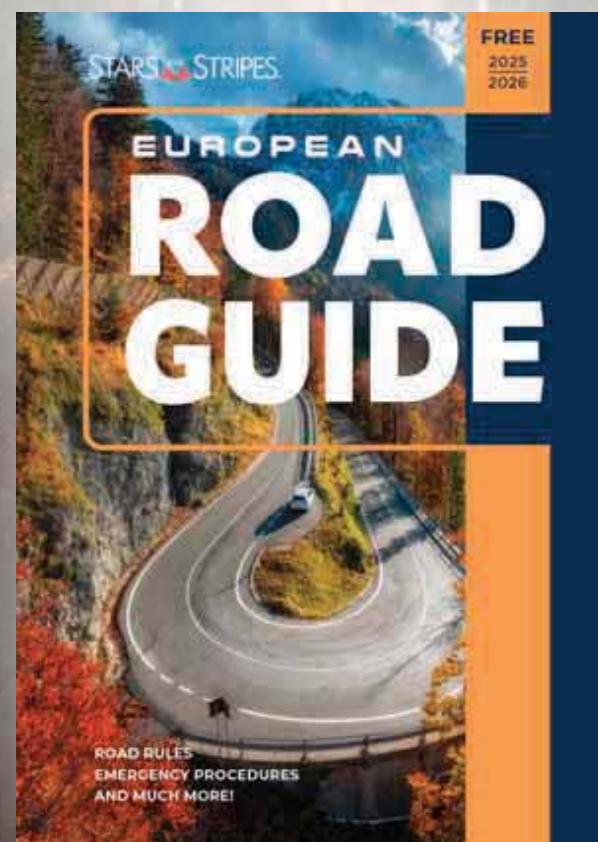
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MILITARY

Wikoff takes helm of Navy in Europe, Africa

Admiral previously led naval forces at CENTCOM

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A hard-charging fighter pilot who led the Navy in the Middle East took the helm of the service's top job in Europe and Africa this week from a submariner credited with helping to reshape the way the U.S. military fights wars.

Adm. George Wikoff took command of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Joint Force Command Naples from Adm. Stuart Munsch on Nov. 19 during a ceremony at the NATO installation in Naples.

Wikoff most recently led U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, coming into the role in February 2024 as tensions soared in the Middle East and Navy forces in the Red Sea came under fire from Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen.

Gen. Alexus Grynkevich, the head of U.S. European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and Gen. Dagvin Anderson, commander of U.S. Africa Command, presided over the ceremony, which was attended by NATO allies, Italian and other European officials and U.S. service members.

With war raging in Ukraine, Russian threats in the High North and China's increasing activity in the Arctic, Wikoff assumes command of Naval Forces Europe at a time when U.S. and NATO adversaries are working together in ways unimaginable just a few years ago, Grynkevich said during the ceremony.

"You have my full trust and confidence as well as that of all the military units from across the 32 nations of our alliance," he said, addressing Wikoff.

Anderson also delivered remarks at the ceremony, telling all of Wikoff's shipmates to "strap in."

"Your new commander will move fast and has little tolerance for inaction," Anderson said.

Wikoff's Navy career spans more than three decades, including stints in fighter squadrons VF-102 and VF-154 aboard the aircraft carriers USS America and USS Kitty Hawk, respectively, according to his service biography.

He also served on the joint staff as deputy director for operations and as vice director, among numerous leadership roles.

His predecessor, Munsch, addressed the changing character of war by helping to shape a



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

Adm. Stuart Munsch, outgoing commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Joint Force Command Naples, center, stands with his successor, Adm. George Wikoff, and Gen. Alexus Grynkevich, head of U.S. European Command and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, during a ceremony Nov. 19, in Naples, Italy.

U.S. military strategy that came to fruition during his leadership in Europe and Africa, Anderson said.

"As you brought these insights here, innovating, experimenting, you quickly reorganized the headquarters and met the changing challenges of war," Anderson said to Munsch, who took command in June 2022 and has served in the Navy for 40 years.

Anderson noted that Munsch's push for innovation and experimentation included the establishment of a task force focused on integrating robotic and autonomous systems into fleet operations.

Grynkevich said Munsch brought sensibility, intellect and a keen understanding of adversaries to his role.

He referred to Munsch as "someone who

thought deeply about the future of warfare, the human side of conflict and understood the geopolitical undertones of the world we (are) facing today."

"Seldom have I met a more capable, humble officer," Grynkevich added.

During the ceremony, Munsch was awarded the NATO Meritorious Medal, the U.S. Legion of Merit and Italian Meritorious Medal.

USW Navy commissions last Independence-class LCS USS Pierre

Stars and Stripes

The newest ship in the Navy, the USS Pierre, was commissioned Nov. 15 in Panama City, Fla. "Welcome to the fleet," said Navy Secretary John Phelan, who gave the keynote address.

Pierre is the 19th and final Independence-variant littoral combat ship. The ship bears the name of the capital city of South Dakota.

"This is a moment of pride, not only for her crew, but for the shipbuilders of Austal USA, for the city of Pierre, S.D., and for all who will serve aboard her in the years ahead," Phelan said. "This is not just a milestone, but a critical step forward in strengthening our Navy and ensuring America's global maritime dominance."

The commissioning of the Pierre marks the end of an era.

Littoral combat ships were designed to be fast, nimble vessels prized for their abilities in coastal areas and the open ocean.

In the early 2000s, shipbuilders developed two variants, Independence and Freedom, each capable of surface warfare and mine hunting. The ships have different hulls and are designed and built by separate shipbuilders.

At one point, the Navy planned to have the ships make up about one-sixth of the service's oceangoing fleet.

But the Independence variant suffered costly setbacks and delays, including cracked hulls and

propulsion issues.

About 17 Independence-class vessels are active.

The Freedom variant also was plagued by propulsion problems and other costly issues. As a result, the Navy in 2022 proposed mothballing nine Freedom-class ships well ahead of their end-of-service dates. Ultimately, five of the ships were saved.

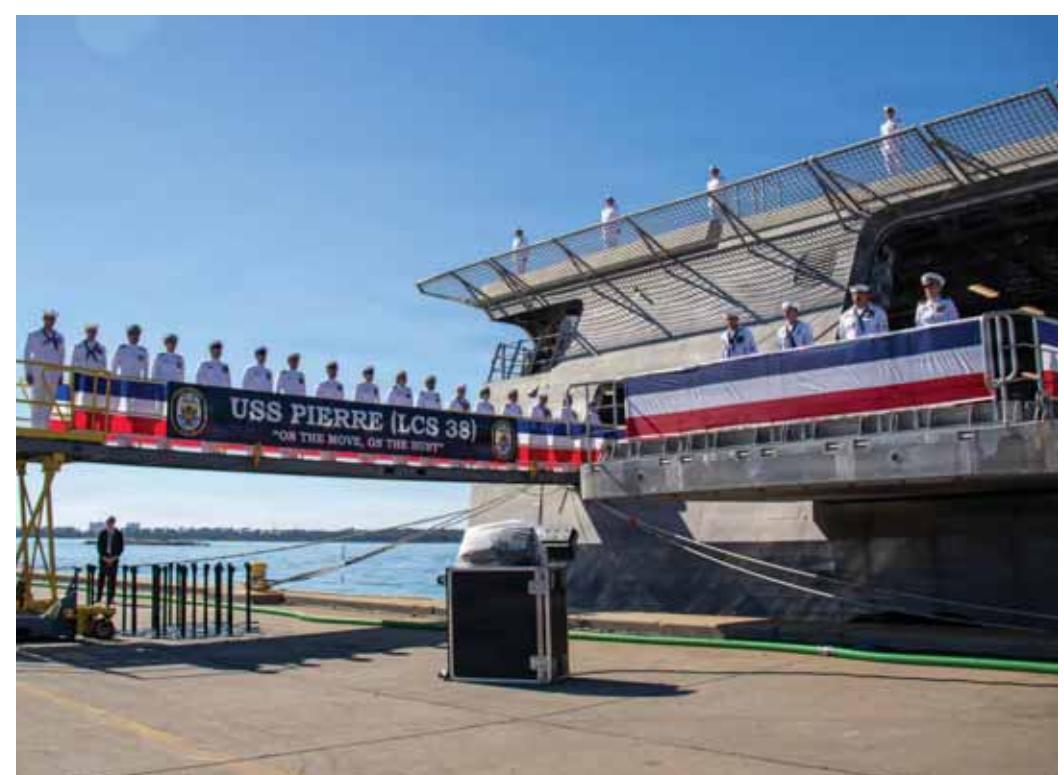
About 10 Freedom-class ships remain in service, according to the Navy's website. The variant's final vessel, USS Cleveland, is planned to be commissioned this fall, according to usscleveland.org.

The service is now prioritizing production of the Constellation-class frigate, which it says delivers a more powerful punch.

But with the aging Avenger-class mine-sweepers nearing retirement, the Navy recently designated at least three Independence-class ships — USS Canberra, USS Tulsa and USS Santa Barbara — to be homeported in Bahrain.

The USS Pierre — led by Cmdr. Justin Guernsey — will have a crew of 112 and depart Panama City next week, making several stops before arriving at its homeport of San Diego in December.

In the week leading up to the commissioning ceremony, the Pierre crew spent time around Panama City, hosted tours onboard for local organizations and built ties with the city hosting their ship's commissioning ceremony.



KASSANDRA ALANIS/U.S. Navy

The crew aboard the Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Pierre brings the ship to life during the commissioning ceremony on Nov. 15 in Panama City, Fla.

MILITARY

Survey: Mold, bad air quality widespread in housing



ALEXANDER GAGO/U.S. Army

Jamie Lisane, a housing manager with the Directorate of Public Works at Fort Benning, Ga., inspects a residential ventilation system in April 2023.

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

A survey last month of service members living in military housing drew nearly 3,400 respondents who cited at least one significant or dangerous issue in their homes.

The online survey by the nonprofit Change the Air Foundation attracted respondents from all four military branches and the Coast Guard from 57 installations across 30 states and the District of Columbia. It sought answers to an online questionnaire rather than through random sampling.

About three-quarters of respondents said the health of family members had been negatively affected by housing issues.

Change the Air Foundation advocates for improved indoor air quality.

The findings echo the conclusions of federal watchdogs in recent reports.

In a 2023 report, the Government Accountability Office detailed squalid living conditions in military housing, such as overflowing raw sewage, mold and rodent infestation.

An audit earlier this year by the Defense Department Office of Inspector General that looked at seven installations managed by a private entity found that lax inspection protocols led to families moving into homes that had unresolved health and safety hazards.

The new survey report contains several dozen excerpts of comments made by respondents concerning their experiences.

An active-duty service member in Texas, not identified by name, said his family's housing experience "financially leveled us."

"We left military housing after over a year of being displaced, having been placed in three homes that contained toxicogenic molds, and walked into a rental off post with nothing but a week's worth of clothing," the service member said.

"We ended up having to sell our home in our home state to pay for basic furniture and begin treatments. We have never recovered."

Two-thirds of respondents said they had mold problems in their homes and that they felt "stuck without further options," according to the survey report.

Almost half the respondents reported that housing-related issues had affected their "ability to perform duties and maintain mission readiness," according to the survey report.

Parents answering the survey indicated that housing problems had led to changes of mood or anxiety in their children, specifying respiratory, skin and sinus problems as being most common.

An active-duty service member in Texas told the survey that while living in military housing "my kids were regulars" at the local urgent care with breathing problems and chronic congestion.

"Once we moved everything cleared up," she said. "They haven't had any issues since we left that house."

The findings illustrate a housing system that is failing those it is intended to support, according to the survey's executive summary.

"The widespread prevalence of hazardous conditions — paired with unresolved maintenance requests, declining physical and mental and cognitive health, and the heavy burden placed on families — shows the current model is neither sustainable nor acceptable," the summary states.

The foundation contends that a major step in improving military housing would be to provide service members with reliable housing condition records.

"For years, military families have lived in homes with no clear history of past repairs, unresolved issues, or environmental risks," the survey report states. "Without a transparent, verifiable trail of repairs, families are forced to navigate problems blindly, often discovering hidden hazards only after their health or belongings have already been profoundly affected."

"This absence of documentation also prevents commanders and housing officials from identifying patterns, holding providers accountable, or intervening early when serious issues emerge."

Medical study narrows root cause of Gulf War illness

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A new medical study found that the wide-ranging symptoms of Gulf War illness appear to be caused by a failure of cells to produce adequate energy, bringing experts a step closer to finding the root cause and a treatment.

The study, released in November in the peer-reviewed journal "Scientific Reports," builds on 30 years' worth of research from project lead, Dr. Robert Haley, an epidemiologist at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

"This is an important clue because it narrows things down," Haley said. "Now we're trying to find the sweet spot that we could treat ... and then we have a really good chance of finding a treatment."

Following the Gulf War, which ended in 1991, returning veterans began reporting a wide range of chronic symptoms, including fatigue, fever, night sweats, memory and concentration problems, difficulty finding words, diarrhea, sexual dysfunction and body pain. The illness affects more than 25% of the 700,000 military personnel involved in the war, according to the research report.

Since then, academic researchers and the Department of Veterans Affairs have been looking for the cause among the many toxic exposures that veterans faced, such as burning oil wells, pesticides, nerve gas and anti-nerve gas medication, and depleted uranium.

At one point, it was even believed that it was the stress of war that caused the symptoms, Haley said. However, his own research released in 2022



A military service member, seen from behind, holds a shovel propped on the ground as he stands in a desert above a burning pit, with the glow from the fire silhouetting his form against the setting sun in the distance.

linked the onset of Gulf War illness to some veterans' exposure to sarin, a deadly nerve gas.

Sarin, which the military has confirmed was present during the war, is a toxic, synthetic nerve agent that was first developed as a pesticide. It has been used in chemical warfare, and its production was banned in 1997.

When people are exposed to either the liquid or gas form, sarin enters the body through the

skin or airways and attacks the nervous system. High levels of exposure often result in death, but studies of survivors have revealed that lower-level sarin exposure can lead to long-term impairment of brain function, according to the Texas university's research.

Last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognized Gulf War illness as a legitimate medical condition linked to military

service and created a medical diagnostic code for it. This move enabled doctors and scientists to more effectively track, document and treat patients.

In this latest study, which was funded through the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Army, Haley's team looked at 39 specialized images of the brains of Gulf War veterans with the illness and 16 without it. The brain scans came from members of the Navy Reserve's 24th Naval Mobile Construction (Seabees) Battalion — a group that Haley has followed since 1995.

MRI experts Richard Briggs and Sergey Cheshkov worked on the study to evaluate the scans and collect data, and the team found that those veterans with Gulf War illness had dysfunctional mitochondria, the structures responsible for generating the energy cells need to function. They identified this dysfunction based on increased creatine levels, Haley said.

"These veterans don't have damaged neurons — which would be incurable — but an energy imbalance," he said. "That suggests their symptoms could respond to new treatments."

Haley studied brain scans about 25 years ago, but technology wasn't advanced enough for him to pinpoint — as he has in this study — what exactly was going wrong in the brain cells.

With this information now confirmed, he's focusing on moving upstream from the problem to find a root cause. That is where any future treatment would need to focus.

"That would be the Holy Grail of this 30-year-long quest. If we find that and can find a medication that can restore it to normal functioning, everything might just get better," he said.

MILITARY

Data shows rise in military aviation accidents

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Serious U.S. military aviation mishaps rose significantly between 2020 and 2024, killing 90 people and costing billions in damage, according to new Pentagon data provided to Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

There were a total of 4,820 mishaps from October 2019 to July 2024, including 222 of the most severe “Class A” incidents, which result in damage of at least \$2.5 million, destroy aircraft, or lead to fatalities or permanent full disability.

The rate of such accidents rose from 1.30 mishaps per 100,000 flight hours in 2020 to 2.02 mishaps per 100,000 flight hours in 2024 — an increase of 55%, according to Warren.

Those mishaps killed 90 service members and Defense Department civilian employees, destroyed 89 aircraft and cost the military \$9.4 billion.

There were 25 fatalities, 14 destroyed aircraft and costs of \$1.7 billion in the first half of the 2024 budget year alone, according to the data.

“These data reveal that [the Defense Department] must make additional efforts to improve aviation safety, and that Congress must act,” said Warren in a letter sent Nov. 18 to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

The senator has partnered with Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, both members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, on an amendment included in the Senate’s annual defense policy bill that would require more transparency from the military’s safety investigation boards.

The boards identify root factors and safety issues that contribute to aviation accidents, but their reports are not made public or provided to lawmakers.

If adopted by the House and Senate as part of the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, the



TYLER HARSTAD/U.S. Navy

Navy sailors conduct a crash and salvage training exercise on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt on Sept. 11.

measure would give lawmakers access to summaries of investigations over the past three years and help Congress in its oversight role of preventing accidents, Warren said.

The data provided by the Pentagon shows the Marine Corps had the highest average rates of Class A mishaps out of all the military branches, with a 194% increase from 2020 to 2024. In 2023, the service’s commandant ordered all Marine units to review their approach to safety after two

aircraft crashes within days of each other killed four Marines.

Aviation mishaps continued across all the services this year.

In January, an Army helicopter collided with a commercial passenger plane over Washington, D.C., killing 67 people. The Navy has lost several F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets to mishaps, including incidents this spring where two jets fell off the deck of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft

carrier.

Most recently in October, a Super Hornet jet and a helicopter assigned to the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz crashed into the South China Sea within 30 minutes of each other.

Warren said she is seeking more recent crash data from the Pentagon as well as information on how the military is addressing the rising rate of accidents.

GAO report says Pentagon vulnerable to malicious use of publicly available info

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon’s missions and personnel are increasingly vulnerable to “malicious actors” who can disrupt operations by aggregating digital information from data brokers, websites and other sources, a government watchdog concluded in a report issued Nov. 17.

An 18-month audit by the Government Accountability Office of 10 Defense Department components — all five military services, U.S. Cyber Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, National Security Agency, Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency — found that all but one “did not consistently train personnel on risks of digital information in the public across all relevant security areas,” the report states.

U.S. Special Operations Command provided a digital force protection training course aimed at helping personnel manage their online identities, among other things, the GAO found.

“Eight of ten components did not conduct assessments of threats across the required security areas of force protection, insider threat, mission assurance, and operations security,” the report states. “While the department has taken actions related to a wide field of traditional security areas, its actions to reduce safety, security, privacy, and operational risks posed by the digital profile are limited.”

The security risks posed by malicious actors — criminals, terrorists and adversarial nations — have increased with the proliferation of ubiquitous digital devices, social media and “big data” that can now be combed using artificial intelligence.

“The digital activity of DOD’s service members, contractors, and family members — from

websites visited to emails sent to photos posted on social media — can generate volumes of traceable data that can threaten their privacy and safety, and ultimately our national security,” the GAO report states. “These digital footprints represent a piece of a larger puzzle that, when tied to other sources, can create a digital profile and adversely affect military functions and missions.”

A malicious actor can create a digital footprint for an individual by purchasing personal information from a data broker for just pennies and combining it with online posts and location “pings” from cellular towers from devices such as fitness trackers, the report states.

The report illustrates a hypothetical scenario in which the operations of an aircraft carrier could be disrupted or sabotaged by a malicious actor using Pentagon news releases, media reports, online activity, social media posts and ship coordinates routinely posted by maritime aficionados.

The DOD concurred with 11 of 12 recommendations from GAO and partially concurred with one.

Among the recommendations were that:

The secretaries of the Air Force and Army and the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency conduct required assessments in the security areas of force protection, insider threats and mission assurance.

U.S. Cyber Command, Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency conduct required assessments in the security areas of force protection, insider threats, operational security and mission assurance.

The Navy secretary ensure that the service is conducting required assessments in the security areas of force protection, insider threats, operational security and mission assurance.

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SKIING AT CORTINA D'AMPEZZO IS A WIN



BY KAT NICKOLA
Stars and Stripes

While many ski resort reviews are written by die-hard black diamond skiers, I'm here with the real scoop from an "seasoned amateur."

I ski about once a year on a three- or four-day trip and learned when I was a tween, so I have experience. I also have a semblance of confidence when the weather is good, so I'm not a true beginner. But, still, my teens would agree that I'm not a *good* skier.

My technique, if we can call it that, is basically an amalgamation of wide parallels that quickly revert to my trusty 'snowplow' (or pizza) as needed. I snowplow on steep turns, on icy patches, if I encounter a thick chunk of snow, if the slope feels steeper than expected, or even if I just feel like the skiers around me are going way too fast. By the end of my annual first day out, I remember how to come to a stop without using my snowplow. I never actually know what to do with my poles. I get really "good" on day two, snowplowing less, but only if there is a tidy, groomed slope. In the U.S., I start on green slopes. After a day I can upgrade to blue trails, where I contentedly hang out forever.

In Europe, I have struggled to find a resort with the perfect blend of long-trail blue and green pistes. My family has tried numerous resorts in

the Alps, and most only offer tiny bunny slopes for classes before jumping into the difficult blue category. Only in France and Scandinavia are green slopes even offered. Elsewhere, the level of blue is tough to discern; I have found myself loving a nice, mellow blue trail only to turn a corner to find the route has changed into a steep slope beyond my (lack of) skill.

Going fast and looking like a pro are not my goals, but having fun is! And I finally found a resort that checks the boxes for a seasoned amateur like me: Cortina d'Ampezzo.

This is one of 12 resorts in the massive Dolomiti Superski conglomeration. You can buy tickets for just Cortina, but a full Dolomiti pass is not much more and may be worth the added cost if you think you will get bold on day three and venture to another resort in the region.

With only one day, I lucked into one of the best ski days I've ever had. The sun was bright, and the snow was perfect. My friend and I stayed in the hamlet of Pocol and simply walked to the nearby Hotel Villa Argentina to rent skis. From there, we glided down a quick starter slope down to the nearest lift. The snow was well groomed, the slope was nice and wide so I could remember how to turn and there was a short steepish section at the very end perfect for a quick control check. I was stoked, no surprises and good snow! We bought day tickets at a small kiosk and rode up our first lift: Olimpia.



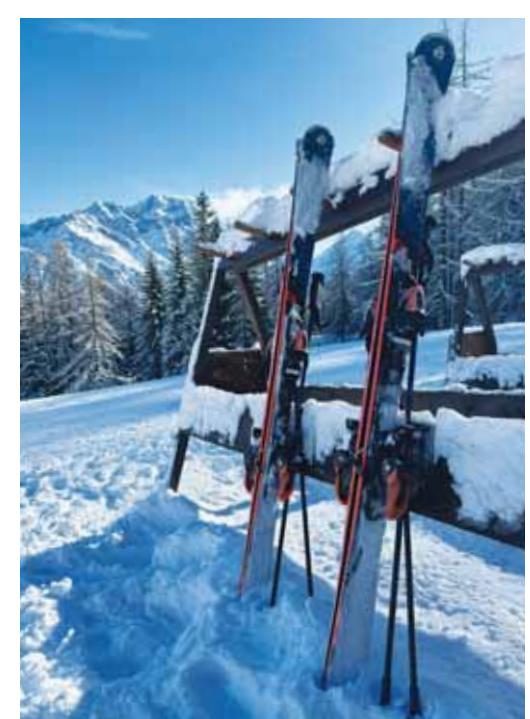
We spent the morning enjoying the just-long-enough easy blue slopes around the Olimpia lift. My friend was more of a beginner and struggled a bit. Without guidance, I'd recommend that true beginners head to the Socrepes area where there is a nice, long bunny slope.

At lunchtime, we took the gondolas high up into the Dolomites peaks, eating with the birds at the restaurant in Ra Valles. We watched as a massive cloud grew and then engulfed the outdoor sun deck where we noshed on panini. Getting down on skis was only for those comfortable on a black slope, so we joined lots of other folks taking the gondola back to the land of blues.

In the afternoon, we ventured further afield. Beyond the Olimpia lift area, the blue slopes included short steep sections that pushed my skills a little, but not beyond comfort. My beginner friend tried but needed to bow out.

I spent the rest of the day skiing solo. Lines were short and the snow was well-groomed with very few spots of ice or slush. The long, trail-like #38 slope became a favorite, with views across the valley to other rugged peaks that define the Dolomites punctuated by calm sections through pine trees. My confidence surged. Never have I felt so "seasoned" and less "amateur" on a first day out on skis.

Sticking to the west side of the valley, I explored as many blue slopes as I could manage. Still, I never hit them all. There is so much for a skier like myself at this one resort, but there were



also plenty of red and black slopes for folks with skills beyond mine. Many were around the scenic double-peak at the Duca D'Aosta lift and on a high plateau on the east side of the valley.

A first for me: I skied until the bitter end, barely making the final lift that would return me to Pocol where I slid right into the rental shop to drop my skis. It was a long, impressive day for this seasoned amateur.



PHOTOS BY KAT NICKOLA/Stars and Stripes

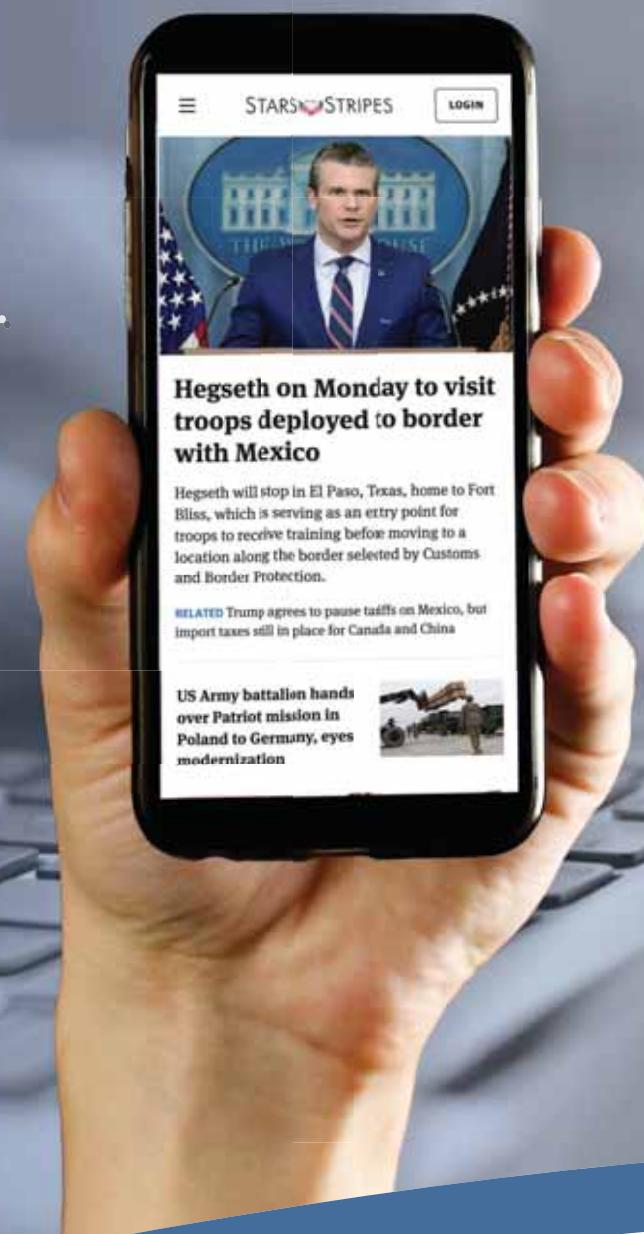
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ONE-MONTH FREE TRIAL

Holiday Markets to Ring in 2026

BY KAT NICKOLA AND TAMALA MALERK
Stars and Stripes



While many holiday markets dwindle after Christmas, outside traditional Germanic regions they can last longer. Here are some European markets worth visiting after the winter holidays and into the new year.



Innsbruck, Austria
open until Jan. 6, 2026

Stroll across six different markets featuring 200 stalls to find all of your favorite market items, including those unique mugs at the Innsbruck Mountain Christmas. Get in the winter spirit as you feast and shop with the gorgeous mountain background. The conglomerate of markets is home to Austria's oldest and largest Christmas market at the foot of the Golden Roof.

Enjoy live storytelling and puppet theater, marvel at the 14-meter-tall Christmas tree and pet the animals at the petting zoo. The six different markets have a variety of opening and closing times and dates. Only the Maria-Theresien-Street and Hungerburg markets are open through Jan. 6.



Edinburgh, Scotland
open until Jan. 4, 2026

For something off the charts, book tickets for the wild and crazy New Year's Eve celebration that is Hogmanay in Edinburgh, Scotland. Or visit the calmer, free, and family-friendly Sprogsmanay events on New Year's Day. After that, the Christmas season continues for another week at the sprawling Christmas markets.

The markets are located below Edinburgh's famous castle along the Princes Street Gardens and its adjacent roads in the heart of the historic old town. In addition to shopping at the numerous stalls, eating delicious street food and imbibing a warm beverage, there are other fun activities like an ice-skating rink, a Christmas tree maze and rides.



Warsaw, Poland
open until Jan. 6, 2026

Holiday lights and a local craft fair spill out of the Barbican area next to the old defensive walls, with a Christmas tree that boasts thousands of lights and is known as one of the "most beautiful in Europe." Beginning at the adjacent bright red Royal Castle, the scenic Royal Route

walking trail takes you past festively lit royal gardens, scenic cathedrals and impressive palaces.

You can also shop for woolen sweaters and Polish pottery, or try ice skating, at another colorful market in the Old Town Square. The Soviet-era Palace of Culture and Science also hosts an ice skating rink and small market with a Ferris wheel out front of its 1950s Art Deco tower. Take a ride up to the 30th floor terrace for a panoramic view over wintry Warsaw.



Dolomite Region, Italy
open until Jan. 6, 2026

Christmas in Italy is traditionally celebrated until Epiphany on January 6, and in the mountains of Tirol that means Christmas markets are often open into the New Year. You will find some of the most magical mountain villages in the snowy Dolomite region. Start in the valley city of Bolzano (Bozen), whose market is situated in the central Piazza Walther. The 80 colorful stalls make up the oldest and largest Christmas market in Italy.

Take a drive high into the mountain villages where picturesque local Christmas markets sparkle below magnificent peaks. In Bressanone (Brixon), the market is shadowed by a beautiful cathedral and the nativity scene display is an 800-year-old tradition. The tiny ski towns of Val Gardena and Ortisei host cute markets perfect for an evening après ski. In Brunico (Bruneck), you can wander a few Christmas markets through the old town lanes below the castle.



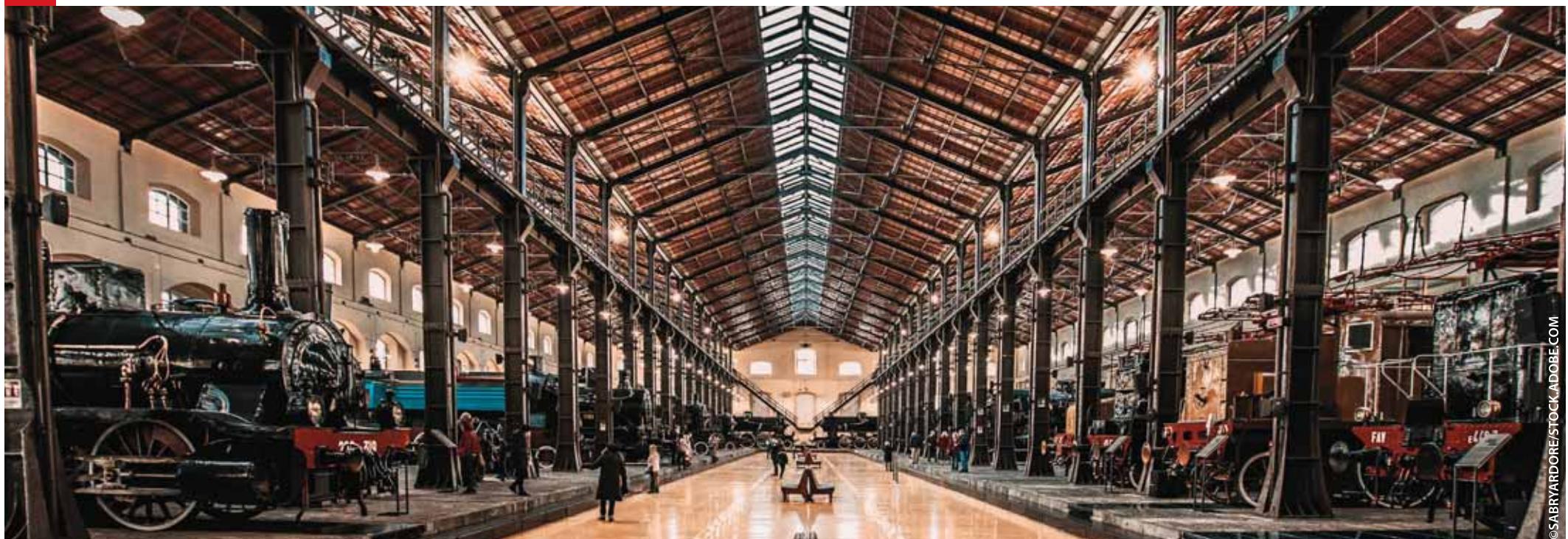
Copenhagen, Denmark
open until Jan. 4, 2026

Denmark prides itself in all things cozy, comfy and relaxation and the Tivoli Gardens' Christmas Market is the perfect place to experience this. The area is illuminated by the lights on the many Christmas trees and performers provide a symphonic soundtrack for your experience. Try not to fall on the skating rink, say "hej" to Santa Claus, shop the many vendors and fill up on the many Danish Christmas treats at your disposal.

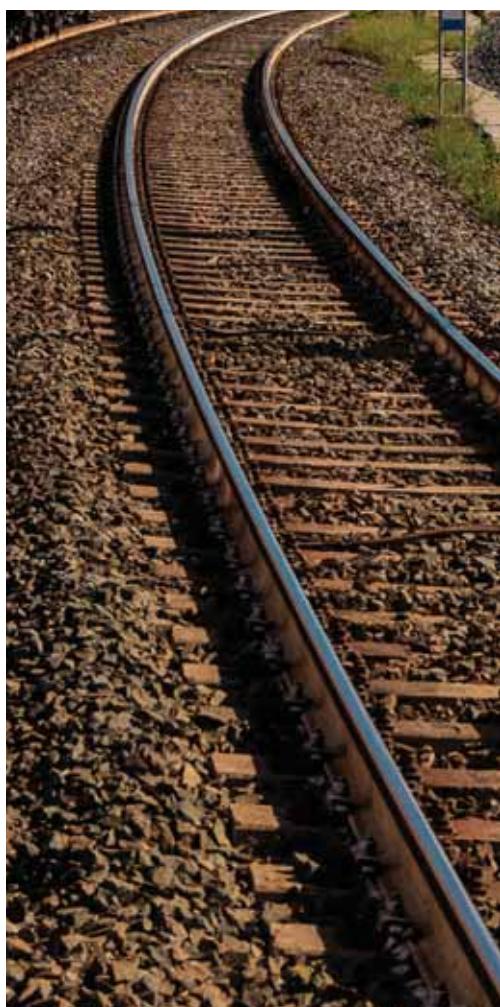
THERE ARE OVER 100 CASTLE CHRISTMAS MARKETS IN EUROPE, AND WE HAVE MAPPED THEM ALL



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CHRISTMAS AT THE NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM IN NAPLES



BY STACY ROMAN AND KAT NICKOLA
Stars and Stripes



Want a fun and unique holiday experience? There are plenty of great options locally in Naples. With pop-up markets around the city center and the centuries-old shops along Via San Gregorio Armeno, there is no shortage of holiday cheer.

If you want a family-friendly festive outing, head to the Mercatini di Natale (Christmas markets) at the National Railway Museum of Pietrarsa.

The museum transforms into a magical winter wonderland from Nov. 29, 2025 through Jan. 6, 2026. Twinkling lights, decorations and wooden huts offering local wares and authentic local cuisine are set among vintage trains and exhibits. Little ones will stay enthralled with the museum's locomotives, plus the Christmas-themed games, activities and maybe even a visit to Santa's house!

There is also plenty of musical entertainment.

The National Railway Museum of Pietrarsa is a large complex in an old 19th century metal factory along the coast of the Gulf of Naples. Inside, there are 55 antique locomotives and train carriages in addition to model railroad displays. Outside of the Christmas market, the museum offers historic railroad trips, and is best reached from downtown Naples by the historic Pietrarsa Express train, bookable on www.trenitalia.com.

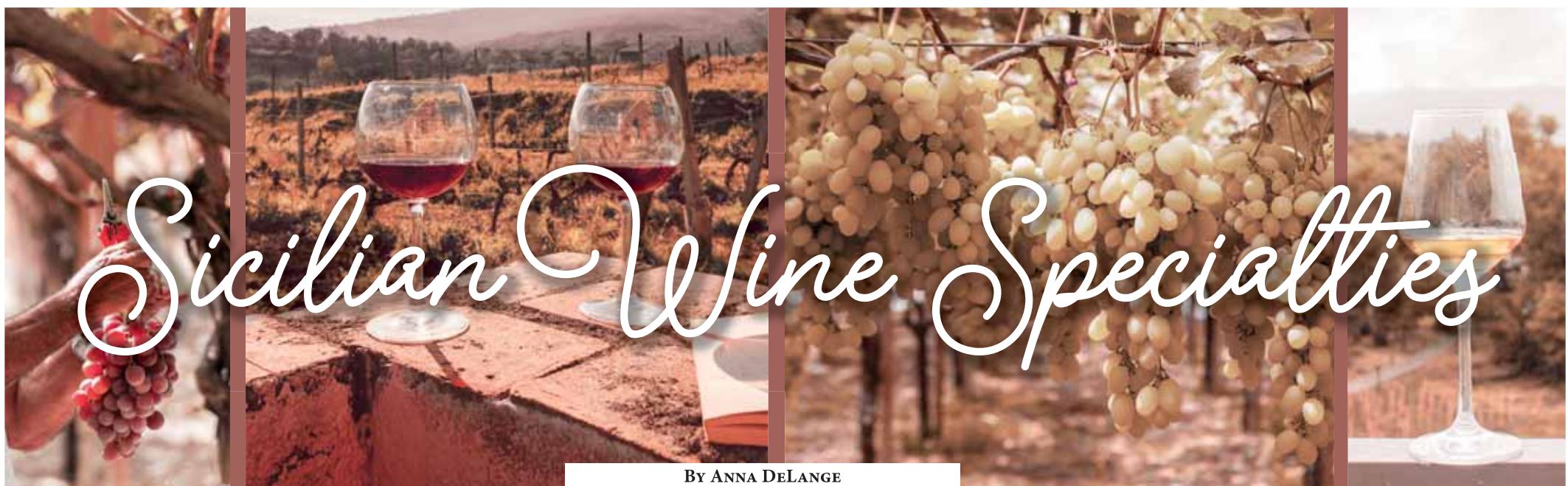
The Mercatini di Natale is open daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., with the last entry at 9 p.m. The market is closed Dec. 1, 9, 15, 24 and 25, 2025. This is a popular event, so purchasing tickets in advance at www.mercatinidinatalenapoli.it is highly recommended.



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BY ANNA DELANGE
Contributing Writer

There are two things that I associate with Italy: pizza and wine. The wonderful Mediterranean island of Sicily is home to some amazing varieties of vino that you should definitely add to your collection.

Maybe you think of Italian wine as being from the Prosecco or Chianti areas, but Sicily is actually one of the highest-producing wine regions. The island epitomizes the Mediterranean climate, with hot summers and mild, rainy winters. Add the hilly, sometimes mountainous, landscape and you have many microclimates that create some amazing wines.

The most common question I get while living here is, "which wine should I try?" and it is one of my favorite questions to decipher with people. I am a fanatic of dry red wines like Chianti and Bordeaux, so I love the Sicilian Nero d'Avola, but I typically bring the slightly milder Etna Rosso to dinner parties as it is often more palatable for larger groups that aren't into a dry wine.

There are a couple of geographic regions on the island that produce more specific varieties as well. Many have been granted the coveted Denominazione di origine controllata (DOC) and Denominazione di origine controllata e garantita (DOCG) labels. A DOCG label is the highest designation of quality and local origin

for wine in Italy. Sicily has just one DOCG variety: The Cerasuolo di Vittoria. To have the precious designation, the wine must come from the region around the commune of Vittoria, Sicily. It must also be made with two Sicilian grape varieties: between 50 and 70 percent Nero d'Avola grape and the remainder made up of the Frappato grape. The regulation also follows strict cropping and aging rules, and the wines must be a minimum of 13 percent alcohol. Cerasuolo di Vittoria also has two quality categories. One is the Rosso aged for eight months while the other is a Classico, aged for at least 18 months.

Sicily is not only known for their reds; they have a beautiful white variety known as Grillo

that is often compared to a Pinot Grigio. The Etna Bianco is another fresh-tasting white wine worth trying.

While enjoying your time on the island of Sicily I definitely recommend trying one of the Sicilian varieties at a restaurant during dinner. If you have the time, make it out to a local winery and enjoy an aperitif or a full meal service. Wine tastings in Sicily, for the most part, have always been a fun time, and you will leave being surprised at the pours you were given. Come prepared, and have an open mind.

Make sure you check off trying at least one Sicilian wine while in Sicily.

MILITARY

New Army unit tests high-tech operations

BY BRADLEY LATHAM

Stars and Stripes

WIESBADEN, Germany — A Germany-based Army unit dubbed a test bed responsible for high-tech battlefield operations is fresh off facing its first big test.

During the recent Avenger Triad and Steadfast Duel exercises, the newly formed 56th Theater Multi-Domain Command took center stage as troops were tasked with coordinating attacks across land, maritime, air, space and cyberspace battlefield domains.

"We try to stay on the cutting edge of innovation, and a lot of that involves working with theorecticals," said Sgt. 1st Class Steve Smitha, an artilleryman who served as a lead operations NCO during Avenger Triad.

"It's an intellectual challenge because it's a lot more conceptual," Smitha said, adding that his job often involves working with emerging and sometimes unfamiliar technology.

The drills marked the first major exercise for the headquarters, which was formed from a merger between the 56th Artillery Command and 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force.

The consolidation was part of the service's larger Army Transformation Initiative announced in May, and Army leaders in Europe have been quick to put the new organization together.

"No change is easy, but by and large we had a lot of cooperative efforts already, so I think that just kind of lent itself to doing this early, getting it right, and then just integrating it and moving forward," said Col. Jeffrey Pickler, commander of the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force.

During Avenger Triad, the command entered the war game scenario about three weeks into a simulated invasion of NATO territory with the goal of reestablishing the borders of the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line through anti-access and area denial and countering mass movement momentum of enemy forces.

Around the time of the 56th Theater Multi-Domain Command's formation, Gen. Christopher Donahue, who leads the Army in Europe and oversees NATO Land Command, said the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad gives the Kremlin's forces arguably the best anti-access and area denial bubble



RAJHEEM DIXON/U.S. Army

Maj. Robert E. Jones, left, and Sgt. 1st Class Steven Smitha of the 56th Theater Multi-Domain Command review a map while planning for exercise Avenger Triad in Mainz-Kastel, Germany. The exercise tested the recently formed command's ability to coordinate fires and nonlethal effects in a simulated European conflict.

in the world.

"They have mass and momentum on you," Donahue said. "You have a very limited space to maneuver, and they have this giant umbrella over top. So how do you destroy that? How do you get to deterrence?"

Exercise leaders said the mission involved complex planning and processes aimed at synchronizing opera-

tions among all 32 NATO allies in a battle that went far beyond traditional artillery fire, including things like cyber information and electronic warfare.

"To create multiple strategic dilemmas for the adversary ... this is unlike what we've done in previous exercises," Pickler said.

The soldiers employed these processes through a principle that partic-

ipants called "convergence in time." It involves synchronizing a series of lethal and nonlethal fires and effects to create opportunities for allied ground forces to gain a battlefield advantage.

"Multidomain effects are taking all those different factors the enemy is using to protect their priority targets and trying to diminish it so it gives our ammunition the best chance at surviving

and attacking what we want," said Capt. Jason Pulido, an intelligence officer.

Avenger Triad was a first step for the new command and a stepping stone to future exercises like Dynamic Front in early 2026, leaders said.

"What we're doing here is transferable into any theater against any enemy," Pickler said. "I think that is the way of the future in terms of fighting."

Army logistics commander now designated 3-star role

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

A three-star general has been nominated to lead the Army's top logistics command, a job that traditionally has gone to those with four stars.

Lt. Gen. Christopher Mohan was selected Nov. 17 for reappointment to the grade of lieutenant general with assignment as commander of U.S. Army Materiel Command at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, a Defense Department statement said.

Mohan, the headquarters' current deputy commanding general, has been acting commander since the 2024 firing of Gen. Charles Hamilton, who lost his job after an Army inspector general investigation into allegations of improper involvement in a subordinate officer's promotion process.

However, the statement made no mention of a corresponding fourth star for Mohan with the promotion. If he's confirmed for the post as a lieutenant general, that would mean the com-

mand has been downgraded to a three-star headquarters.

The Army didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on the matter.

Army Materiel Command, which was established in 1962, manages the global supply chain and sustainment activities across the service. Its informal slogan states: "If a soldier shoots it, drives it, flies it, wears it, eats it or communicates with it, AMC provides it."

The Pentagon has made it a priority to reduce the number of four-star leaders and other generals in the ranks as it looks for efficiencies.

In May, the department announced plans for a 20% reduction of four-star positions across the active component and a similar reduction of all general officers within the National Guard. The directive also called for a 10% cut of all flag and general officer positions.

Some of the changes have already gone into effect. In October, the top U.S. Air Force job in Europe was

reduced from a four-star command to three stars.

There also have been smaller tweaks to command structures. For example, when Maj. Gen. Christopher Norrie took over as deputy commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa in October, the promotion didn't come with the third star previously linked with the position.

The Pentagon hasn't indicated whether it intends to reduce Army and Navy four-star headquarters in Europe to three-stars as it did with the Air Force.

In another leadership move announced Nov. 17, the Pentagon tapped U.S. European Command's Maj. Gen. John Rafferty for a third star.

He has been EUCOM's chief of staff for just a few months.

Rafferty was nominated to serve as the commander of U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/U.S. Army Forces Strategic Command based at Redstone Arsenal.



MARK ORDERS-WOEMPNER/U.S. Army

Lt. Gen. Christopher Mohan, U.S. Army Materiel Command deputy commanding general, has been reappointed to the grade of lieutenant general, with assignment to become the unit's commander, a Pentagon statement said.

MILITARY

Army shuts down foreign training brigade

Policy changes under Trump shift focus away from assistance

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

An Army brigade that specializes in training foreign troops was inactivated in connection with the service's broader transformation plans, which have implications for how it partners with militaries worldwide.

The 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade, which focused primarily on training counterparts in the Middle East and Africa, ended its mission Nov. 26 during a ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., Security Force Assistance Command said in a statement.

Activated in 2018 and most recently under U.S. Africa Command, the unit carried out its first overseas mission in Afghanistan in 2019, the command said.

The unit's end is likely a harbinger of more changes to come for the SFAB command structure. The Army launched the advisory brigade initiative back in 2017.

The program eventually grew to five active component SFABs and one other linked with the Army National Guard.

However, Army budget plans call for supporting just two SFABs in the future, the Congressional Research Office said in a July report, which noted that the service hasn't specified which four units would be cut.

The 2nd appears to be the first such unit to see its mission officially end.

"This brigade has embodied what it means to advise, assist, and strengthen our partners across the globe," Col. Mathew Bunch, leader of Security Force Assistance Command, said in the statement.

Training foreign militaries has long



SOLOMON NAVARRO/U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Luke Jones of the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade coaches Senegalese soldiers on the firing line during marksman training in Dodji, Senegal, in May 5.

been a focus of the Army and was a major aspect of the service's mission during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The mission often forced the Army to pull apart its traditional combat brigades to build small training-and-advising units.

At the time, the Army saw the SFAB structure as a way to enable traditional brigades to remain focused on their main mission, training to fight.

But now it's looking to trim in areas

not directly related to boosting U.S. firepower, as the service seeks to align with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's April directive to prioritize building "lethality."

"This initiative will reexamine all requirements and eliminate unnecessary ones, (as well as) ruthlessly prioritize fighting formations," the Army's top two leaders, Secretary Dan Driscoll and Gen. Randy George, said in a joint letter to the force in May.

Some proponents of the SFAB sys-

tem, however, say there are downsides to eliminating such units.

"SFABs elevate deterrence by making any potential adversary face a more networked and prepared coalition," three Army officers wrote in a July essay for the Modern War Institute at West Point.

"A partner force that trains regularly with American advisors, speaks a common operational language, and can leverage US systems in a crisis is far more resilient — and from an adver-

sary's perspective, more dangerous — than one left to fend for itself," the authors wrote.

A May story by Task & Purpose that cited Army officials said there were also plans to cut the Europe-focused 4th SFAB and the Guard's 54th SFAB to get more of those troops into frontline units.

It wasn't immediately clear Friday whether U.S. Army Europe and Africa still uses the 4th SFAB.

Navy to end problematic Constellation frigate program

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy plans to cancel the bulk of the \$22 billion Constellation-class guided-missile frigate program dogged by delays and cost overruns.

Navy Secretary John Phelan announced the cut Nov. 25 in a short video posted on X.

"From Day 1, I made it clear: I won't spend a dollar if it doesn't strengthen readiness or our ability to win," Phelan said against a backdrop of American, Navy and Marine Corps flags. "To keep that promise, we're reshaping how we build and field the fleet — working with industry to deliver warfighting advantage, beginning with a strategic shift away from the Constellation-class frigate program."

The American unit of Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri S.p.A. won a 2020 competition to build frigates for the Navy. The ships were to be built at Fincantieri Marinette Marine shipyard on Lake Michigan near Green Bay, Wis.

The first two ships, the USS Constitution and USS Congress, will be completed. Phelan said an additional four ships planned in the early phase of the class will be cut.

Phelan said the move would free up money and shipyard space for other projects.

Fincantieri said in a statement released Tuesday that it "expects" the Navy to continue supporting its shipyards with orders for as-yet-un-



U.S. Navy

Graphic rendering depicts the USS Lafayette, named in honor of Marquis de Lafayette and his service during the American Revolutionary War. Lafayette was scheduled to be the fourth of the Constellation-class frigates.

determined new vessels to replace the lost frigate work.

Phelan's action was backed by Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who called it a "tough, but

vital call," in a post on X.

The original Pentagon plan called for building a version of a "European multipurpose frigate" already in service with France and Italy. The original contract called for the French shipbuilder

Naval Group to build some later ships of the class.

The Constellation and the Congress are projected to have a top speed of 26 knots and carry a crew of 200 sailors and officers. The ships will have the capability to fire anti-aircraft, anti-ship and ship-to-shore missiles.

Modifications to the design ordered by the Pentagon have delayed the construction and delivery timeline. The first ship, the Constitution, will be delivered no earlier than the end of 2029.

The move comes as the Pentagon wrestles with delays and cost overruns across several major Navy programs, including the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, the Virginia-class fast-attack submarine and the Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers.

Amid the many delays, there have been calls from some in the Pentagon and Congress to shift shipbuilding to new priorities, such as polar icebreakers, uncrewed vessels and designs better suited to potential future combat with China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Under a Trump Administration working plan dubbed "The Golden Fleet," the Navy could grow from its current 287 ships to as many as 300 crewed vessels.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order in April allowing the Department of Defense to ax programs that are delayed or over budget by 15%.

MILITARY

Aviano debuts place for dorm airmen to talk

New app to provide scheduling and more info to be available next month

BY KENT HARRIS
Stars and Stripes

AVIANO AIR BASE, Italy — More than 700 airmen assigned to the 31st Fighter Wing call the seven dormitories on the flightline home.

Many of them, enlisted in rank from airman basic to staff sergeant, don't have their own cars. So if they feel the need to get some one-on-one time with a chaplain or other care provider, it takes some effort.

At least it did before the base unveiled the Wyvern Wellness Room on Nov. 27.

The space — two small rooms on the ground floor of the dorms in Building 1428 — is the first of its kind on base. It's designed to be a place where the 748 airmen assigned to the dorms can grab a cup of coffee, a snack or spend time talking with someone who will listen to whatever problems they might be having.

"We're going to bring our services

to them," said Chaplain (Capt.) Chris Cannon, the lead chaplain assigned to the dormitories at Aviano.

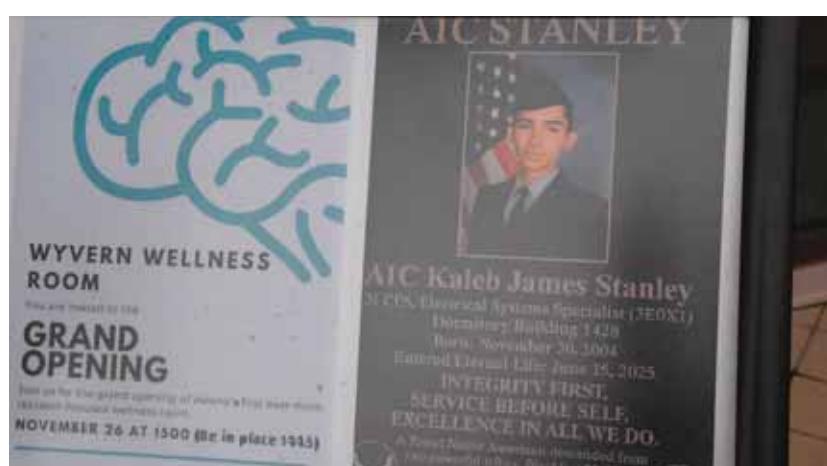
Cannon already has been meeting with airmen in the dormitories, but the new space will give him and others a place to spend regular hours. One of the rooms is designed for one-on-one talks and the other is for airmen to gather informally.

Combined with an app expected to be launched in January, the project will give airmen a chance to schedule meetings, find out about services available to them, and serve as a place for organizations to showcase events.

Organizations involved include the American Red Cross, Military & Family Life counselors and True North.

Col. Beau Diers, the wing commander, was one of the speakers at a short dedication ceremony.

"I'm really proud of all of you for coming up with this idea and bringing it to fruition," he said.



Airman 1st Class Kaleb James Stanley's death in the dormitories at Aviano Air Base, Italy, in June spurred efforts to establish the Wyvern Wellness Room, a space dedicated to those who need to discuss personal issues with a chaplain or other service provider.

PHOTOS BY KENT HARRIS/STARS AND STRIPES

Col. Matt Borawsky, commander of the 31st Mission Support Group, checks out the Wyvern Wellness Room after a dedication ceremony on Wednesday, Nov. 26, 2025, at Aviano Air Base, Italy.

Court: Ex-admiral must stay in prison while appealing bribery conviction

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A retired four-star admiral who once was the Navy's No. 2-ranking officer will remain in prison while appealing his conviction for bribery, conspiracy and other charges, an appeals court has ordered.

Robert Burke did not show that the appeal of his May conviction presented a substantial question of law or fact likely to result in reversal or an order for a new trial, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled on Nov. 13.

Burke was sentenced in Septem-

ber to six years in prison following his conviction in May for his role in a scheme to direct lucrative contracts to a New York-based training company in exchange for a \$500,000-a-year job, stock options and other benefits.

Burke, who was vice chief of naval operations from June 2019 to June 2020, also hadn't shown that his appeal would result in a sentence with either no prison time or a term less than the total of the time already served plus the expected duration of the appeal process, the court ruled.

In October, a federal judge cited similar reasoning in refusing Burke's

request to delay his sentence, which he is serving at a federal prison in West Virginia.

Burke's attorneys had argued that his appeal would raise substantial questions of law and fact that were likely to result in reversal or an order for a new trial, according to court documents.

His trial "involved significant legal errors," Burke's attorneys said in an Oct. 17 emergency motion for release pending appeal.

He reported to the Hazelton federal penitentiary in Bruceton Mills, W.Va., on Oct. 21, the Bureau of Prisons said in a statement on Monday.

Burke, who led U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa as a four-star admiral from 2020 until his retirement in 2022, had faced as much as 30 years in prison.

During his trial, prosecutors said he conspired with Yongchul "Charlie" Kim and Meghan Messenger, co-CEOs of Next Jump, to direct a \$355,135 contract to the company for training programs in Rota, Spain, and Naples, Italy, as part of a three-phase plan to garner more work with the Navy.

Burke went to work for Next Jump a few months after his retirement before resigning in January 2023, court records show. The company offers training and leadership development programs, according to its website.

Kim and Messenger are set for retrial in April on charges of bribery and conspiracy to commit bribery, according to court records.

A jury could not reach a decision in their September trial. They each face up to 20 years in prison if convicted, according to the Justice Department.

Burke's appeal brief is due Dec. 22.

He is only the second Navy admiral ever convicted of a federal crime committed on active duty.

The first was Adm. Robert Gilbeau, who was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2017 after admitting that he lied in telling federal officials he had



U.S. NAVY

Retired Adm. Robert Burke will remain in prison while appealing his conviction for bribery, conspiracy and other charges, an appellate court ruled.

never received any gifts from a Malaysian businessman Leonard Francis.

Known as "Fat Leonard," he was at the center of a massive bribery scandal involving Navy officers over a period of years.

Correction

A headline in the Nov. 27 edition on a story about the Navy issuing a warning over products containing hemp that were found at a Navy Exchange incorrectly stated the location where the items were found. They were not available at NEX stores in Italy.

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