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Under a watchful eye

Vicenza's Sky Soldiers learn lessons in drone warfare **Page 3**

Soldiers with the 173rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) hold a defensive position during exercise Saber Junction 26 at Joint Multinational Readiness Center's Hohenfels Training Area, in Germany, on Sept. 5.

JORDAN LEROY/U.S. Army

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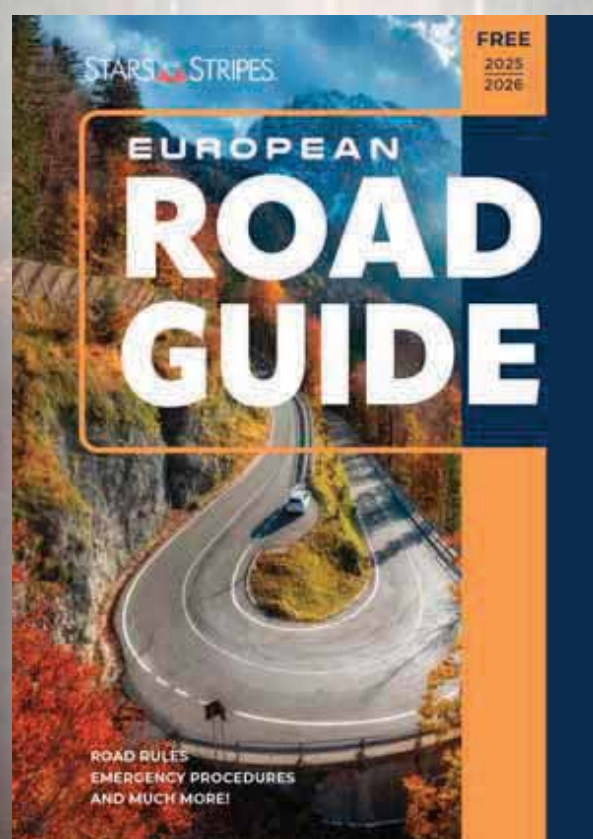
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COVER STORY

Harsh realities of drone warfare driven home

Opposition force had lessons to teach and Vicenza troops proved to be quick learners

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — The scene was more college dorm than contested German battlefield: three U.S. soldiers hunched over a screen with an Xbox controller, Red Bull, granola bars and nicotine within arm's reach.

The bleary-eyed drone operators from 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment called for artillery fire on three enemy vehicles sitting in the open beside a tree line. A puff of smoke on the screen confirmed all three were destroyed, leaving nine dead in the simulated strike.

"We've been watching this group of people," said Spc. Jair Hernandez, a former tank-er. "They have no clue we're there."

It was one of 29 drone-assisted artillery attacks the unit had carried out by 9 a.m. that day during this year's Saber Junction, an annual exercise at the sprawling Hohenfels Training Area in Bavaria.

The site is home to the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, the Army's only combat training hub outside the U.S. The drills pitted the resident opposing force from 1st Battalion against an invading coalition led by the Italy-based 173rd Mobile Brigade (Airborne).

With 1,900 drones and tactics lifted straight from the battlefields of Ukraine, the exercise tested whether the 173rd could adapt to a battlefield where troops and vehicles that remain exposed or stationary can be detected and struck within minutes.

"We are trying as best as we can to mimic what the Ukrainians are putting out there," said Lt. Benjamin Ryan, executive officer of the opposing force's new Eerie Company.

Fielded in January, Eerie specializes in drones, reconnaissance at all elevations and electronic warfare. It was designed to deliver the most realistic and up-to-date training for visiting units. Ukrainian drone experts participating in the exercise observed Eerie and analyzed its performance.

They said "that if we were sent to Ukraine, we'd win some battles, which is pretty nice," Ryan said with a grin.

In just a few short years, Russia's war in Ukraine and the proliferation of drones have transformed the way armies fight. Militaries have been forced to move away from large troop concentrations, slower legacy platforms and static command posts, relying instead on speed, constant movement and camouflage.

The effects of those changes were visible during the Sept. 3 exercise. The Hohenfels Training Area was littered with figuratively destroyed vehicles on both sides, their beacons flashing to indicate their status. The whirl of unseen drones overhead was omnipresent.

Eerie Company had set up its screen-filled tactical operations center in the basement of a hotel, two floors below Hernandez and the drone operators. When the team spotted a target with their mid-range Vector AI drone, they relayed the coordinates downstairs, and the command post launched a fire mission.

"You see what the Ukrainians have done to a force larger than theirs, and ... now we take those lessons that we've learned from them and show training units like, 'Hey, the battlefield has changed,'" said Eerie drone operator Staff Sgt. Jaden Kelly. "The things that we thought worked no longer work, so now it's time to think with new ideas and start changing."

Saber Junction is an annual multinational exercise that tests regional plans in support of NATO's Eastern Flank Deterrence Initiative against a peer adversary designed to mimic the Russian military.

This year's exercise featured over 5,000 U.S. and European troops, including 3,300



DANIL PAK/U.S. Army

Soldiers with the 173rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) react to simulated contact during exercise Saber Junction 26 at Joint Multinational Readiness Center's Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, on Sept. 5.



MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Matthew Munoz, with the opposing force's 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, points out potential targets using a Vector AI drone during exercise Saber Junction.



EMILY EDWARDS/U.S. Army

A soldier with the 173rd conducts casualty care after a firefight during exercise Saber Junction.



TREVIN RUND/U.S. Army

A soldier with the 173rd deploys the communication dish for the Hornet drone system.

soldiers from the 173rd, which is divided between nearby Grafenwoehr and the Italian city of Vicenza.

The 173rd had been hit hard during the first eight days of the simulated fighting. In a single strike Sept. 2, 42 of its soldiers were "killed" after they made the mistake of staging in the open, said Kelly, who called the strike "wicked."

But the Sky Soldiers were learning to adapt. They were increasingly staying under cover and countering with their own drones and



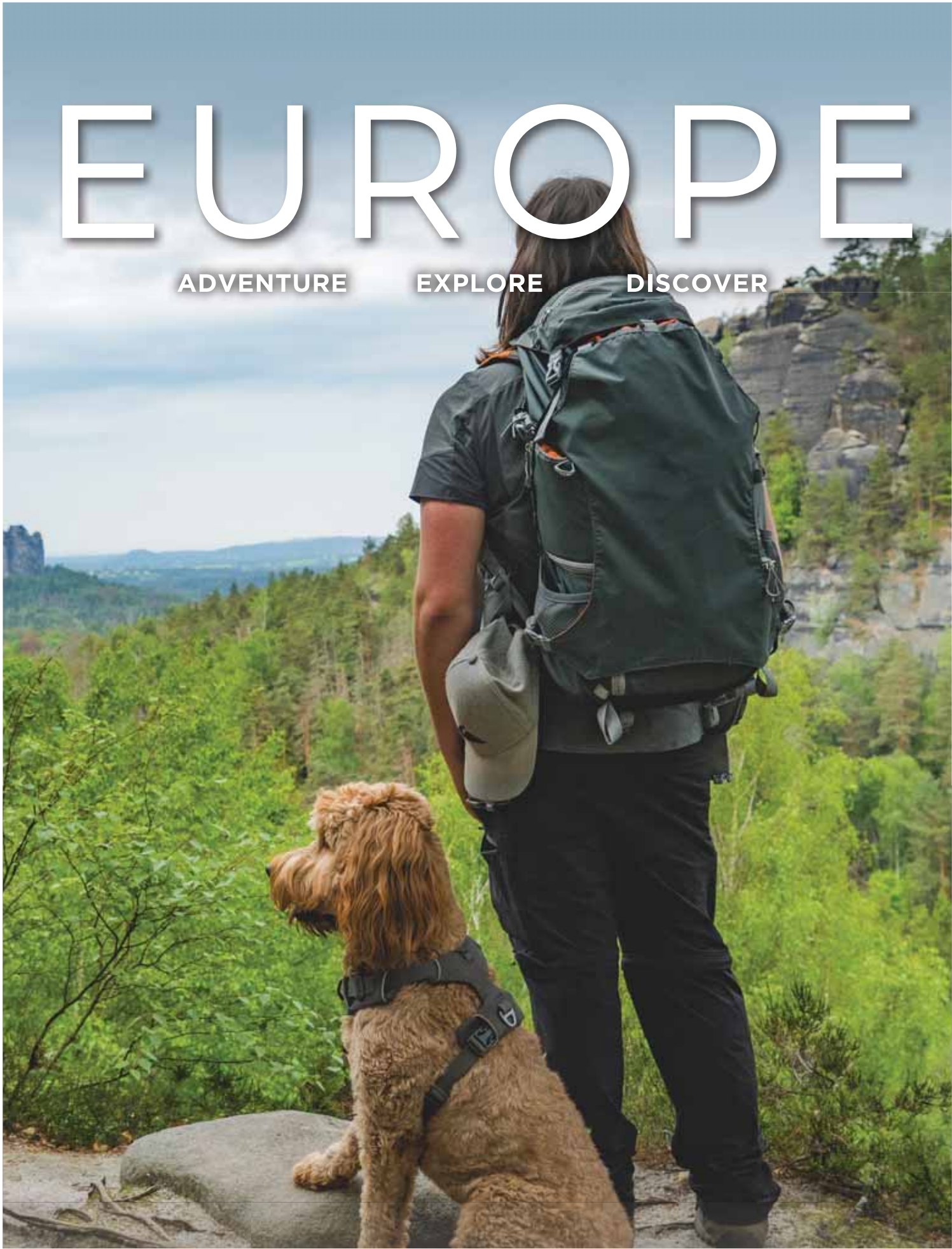
DANIL PAK/U.S. Army

A soldier with the 173rd provides security during exercise Saber Junction 26 on Sept. 2.

electronic warfare equipment, Ryan said. On Sept. 2 they even started targeting drones in the air with conventional weapons.

"They're doing a better job," Ryan said. "It's good to see them try to develop in those ways."

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MILITARY

Special needs support program falls short

For some military families, promised assistance doesn't always materialize

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

One military family arrived at a duty station without the accessible housing they had spent months trying to secure. Another spent entire deployments on waiting lists for specialized medical care for their children.

A third experienced both, arriving at a new assignment only to find that the special needs medical services they had been told would be available were not, and the housing offered did not meet their son's needs.

Those experiences, described in recent interviews with Stars and Stripes, are consistent with problems also documented in federal watchdog reports on the Defense Department's Exceptional Family Member Program, or EFMP.

Launched by the Army in 1979 and standardized across the Defense Department in 2010, the program is meant to help military families with special medical or educational needs.

It aims to consider those needs when making duty assignments and to help families access medical care, schools and other services. But some families say the help they received often fell short of what they needed from the program.

"The concept is great; the way that it's actually being used ... is horrendous," said Army spouse Chelsea Ouimette, whose husband is assigned to Fort Belvoir, Va.

Ouimette's family needs a ground-floor home without stairs because she has a medical condition that can cause her to lose consciousness and fall.

Since such a home is not yet available at the installation, the family has been staying in off-base hotels since arriving about a week before her husband's Aug. 1 report date.

The disruption has been especially hard for the family's 3-year-old son, who has autism and relies on stability and routine, Ouimette said.

The Ouimette family began seeking answers months before the move. After her husband received his orders in February, Ouimette repeatedly called the EFMP office at Fort Belvoir to see whether accessible housing was available and whether the base hospital could support their family's medical needs.

Officials referred her to Tricare, the military's health care program, or other offices, but she was still unable to get the information she needed, she said.

In March, Ouimette filed an inspector general complaint but was told she was on the waiting list for housing, according to the IG's response. A month later, she sought help from the office of Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., which put her in touch with Belvoir's garrison command team.

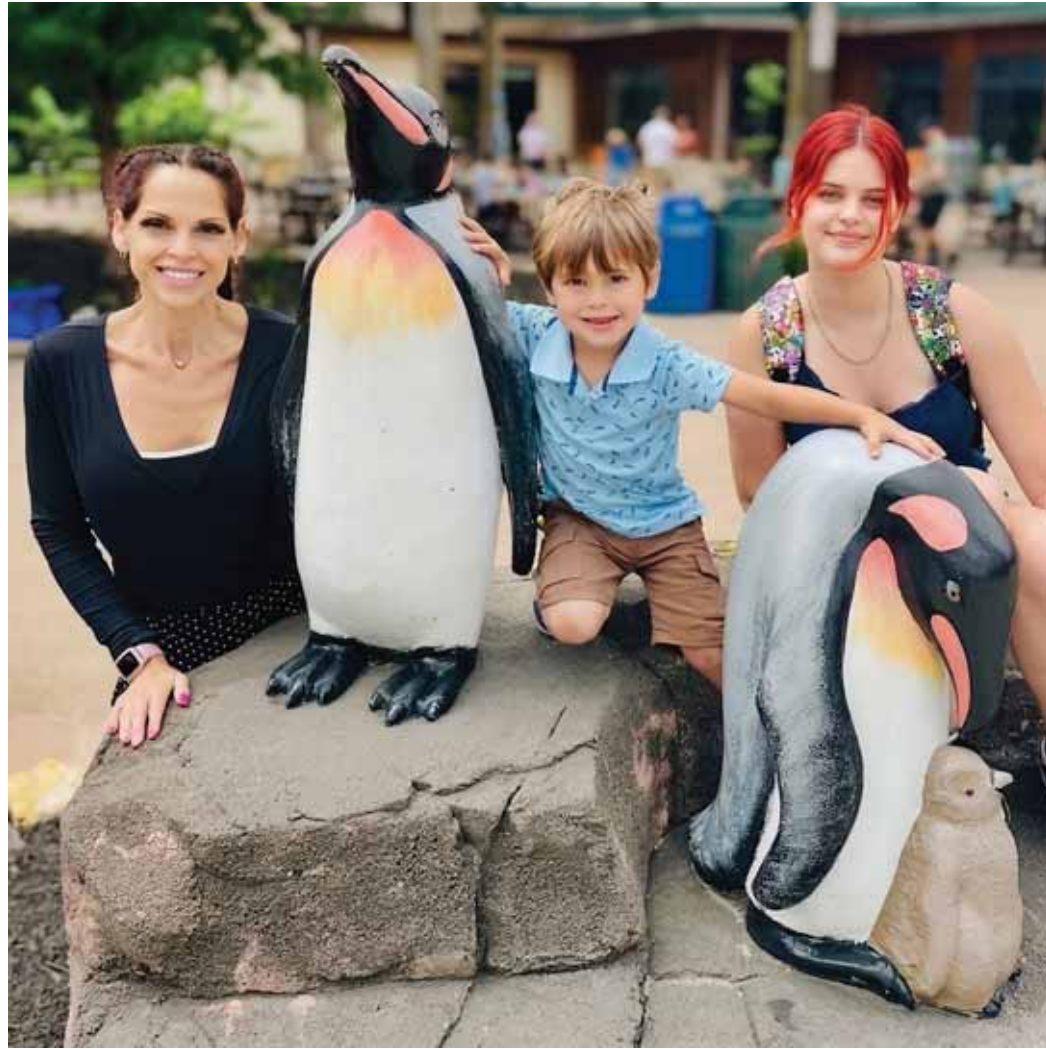
Sgt. Maj. Brandon Creel connected the family with medical officials at the base hospital, Ouimette said. But the family's housing problem remains unresolved.

Garrison spokeswoman Ganesa Robinson said she could not comment on the Ouimette case due to privacy laws.

But, Robinson said, moves are approved based on the availability of specialized medical care and special education services in the area, while on-base housing is managed separately.

"Even a fully validated EFMP requirement does not guarantee a home will be immediately available," Robinson said. "On-post housing is voluntary and highly sought after and wait times can fluctuate."

According to revamped regulations implemented in 2023, family support providers



CHELSEA OUIMETTE

Military spouse Chelsea Ouimette poses with two of her children in an undated photo. Ouimette says the Defense Department's Exceptional Family Member Program failed to secure her family accessible housing at Fort Belvoir, Va., leaving them staying in hotels since her husband's Aug. 1 report date.



CARY VAZQUEZ

Army spouse Cary Vazquez poses with her husband and two children in an undated photo. Vazquez has become an advocate for military families in the Exceptional Family Member Program after her own family struggled to get the medical and housing support they were promised during past moves.

"The concept is great; the way that it's actually being used ... is horrendous."

Chelsea Ouimette

Army spouse at Fort Belvoir, Va.

must assist before, during and after the move, and coordinate services at a new installation. But the regulations do not specify what should happen if suitable housing is unavailable.

Many of the problems reported with EFMP occur during moves.

That was the case for the family of Meg Graves, a Navy spouse whose two sons have autism and need special education services and other support that is not always available in the same form or at the same level at each new duty station.

Graves, a cancer survivor, has also had to overcome geographical and logistical challenges to see specialists. Her husband is currently stationed at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., which is accessible only by a

bridge in the north and ferries.

Her family has spent several deployments on waiting lists for doctors after moving to new duty stations, she said. At Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, they waited more than a year to see a developmental pediatrician. By the time they got an appointment, they were already preparing for their next move to a joint base in Virginia, where they were put on another waiting list.

Her son's special education services have also been delayed after moves. The boy, now 12, was on an individualized education program, or IEP, that was tailored to his needs. At Whidbey Island, he was out of school for four weeks, including two weeks when the district was closed, while his IEP was transferred, Graves said. He has undergone four

time-consuming IEP reevaluations, one at each school.

"The program is trying and it really is headed in the right direction, but ... there's still too many loopholes and too many problems that need to be fixed overall," she said.

Florida-based Army spouse Cary Vazquez said she has often had to advocate for her family after finding that services they expected at new duty stations were unavailable. Her 15-year-old son has a rare genetic disease and autism, and her 17-year-old daughter has scoliosis.

In 2014, a planned move to Fort Hamilton, N.Y., was canceled after Vazquez pointed out that the nearest specialists her family needed were too far away.

Instead, they were sent to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., where they were told a new autism center would help their son. However, the center did not open until 2017, shortly before the family was due to leave again, she said.

"We were never able to access or benefit from the center," she said.

The family has also encountered problems with housing.

In Washington, Vazquez said they were initially offered non-accessible housing but were able to secure a suitable single-story home after threatening to take the issue to base leadership.

After arriving at Naval Air Station Jacksonville in Florida in 2022, the family of four and their two dogs spent two months in a hotel room while waiting for on-base housing before deciding to buy a home. Six months later, she said, the housing office offered them a two-story home that would not have met their son's needs.

"They tell you, 'Yes, we have doctors on the other side; we have housing for you,' but it's just on paper," Vazquez said.

Federal watchdog agencies have raised concerns about program oversight for more than a decade.

In separate reports in 2012, 2018 and 2023, the Government Accountability Office and the Defense Department Inspector General found that the Defense Department lacked appropriately standardized tools for measuring how well it was helping families with moves and other support, making it difficult to determine the program's effectiveness.

A 2025 survey by the advocacy group Partners in PROMISE found that more than half of military-connected respondents with children in special education experienced delays in services after a move. The average delay was more than three months.

Only 30% of respondents indicated they were satisfied with the EFMP program, and 1 in 3 military respondents with children in special education reported that they were considering separating from military service, the survey said.

The Pentagon released its own survey in July 2024 that found 43% of respondents were satisfied with the program, while 33% were dissatisfied.

The Defense Department did not immediately respond to a questions about what steps it is taking to improve the program. In the past, the Pentagon has acknowledged shortcomings identified by watchdogs and agreed to changes aimed at improving oversight and measuring the program's effectiveness.

But a 2023 Inspector General audit found that, despite progress, the department still lacked some of the data and measures necessary to identify shortcomings in services.

Vazquez, the Army spouse, believes more specialized case managers are needed to help families coordinate medical care, housing and other services during moves.

"Assignment coordination should be more seamless, more calming for the family, more personal," she said.

Ouimette, meanwhile, remains in hotels while her family waits for accessible housing at Fort Belvoir.

"The whole time, I've had questions, and never got help," she said. "The program needs an overhaul or oversight."

MILITARY

Navy's top admiral urges more work on lasers

Development could be answer to 'finite' missile stockpiles

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy's Chief of Naval Operations advocated for accelerated development of laser weapons as a partial solution to the depletion of missiles in conflicts such as the current war with Iran.

"For decades, directed energy has been described as a future capability," Adm. Daryl Caudle wrote in a Navy-wide memorandum on Sept. 2. "That future has arrived."

"Directed energy operates at the speed of light, allowing sailors to engage threats rapidly with precision and reduced collateral damage," Caudle wrote.

Caudle's statement comes at a time when the heavy use of U.S. missiles in the conflict with Iran has depleted stockpiles. Experts have also pointed to the heavy use of expensive air defense missiles such as the PAC-3 Patriot and the THAAD system to destroy relatively inexpensive Iranian drones.

In a signed Opinion section piece in The Washington Post published Sept. 2, Caudle said traditional anti-missile defenses are prone to rapid depletion.

"A defender who fires multimillion-dollar interceptors against inexpensive drones may win the immediate engagement while losing the larger campaign of endurance," Caudle wrote in the Post.

"Lasers offer the possibility of shifting part of naval defense away from finite stored munitions toward shipboard electrical power," the admiral said in the opinion piece.

Caudle has advocated laser weapons during hearings before Congress and at defense industry conferences such as SEA West in San Diego last year.

Laser Wars, a website covering energy weapons, reported that Caudle is pushing Containerized Capability Campaign (C³), "a doctrine built around cramming novel capabilities into standardized containers that can be swapped across platforms."

The Navy already uses HELIOS (High Energy Laser with Integrated Optical-dazzler and Surveillance). It is a 60-kilowatt laser that is designed to disable, degrade or potentially destroy drones and smaller sea-surface drones, as well as small manned attack boats.

ODIN (Optical Dazzling Interdictor, Navy) is also in limited service on some Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. It's meant to dazzle,



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Lockheed Martin

An artist's rendering depicts the High Energy Laser with Integrated Optical-dazzler and Surveillance, or HELIOs.

blind and disorient sensors on drones or ships.

"The question is no longer whether these systems work — it is how quickly we can field them across the fleet and place them in the hands of sailors," Caudle wrote. "For too long, we have viewed directed energy as an emerging technology rather than an operational capability. That must change."

Caudle wrote that the U.S. can harness the energy of its ships to convert electrical power into concentrated energy to produce destructive or disorienting "combat effects."

"Electrical power is becoming combat power," Caudle wrote. "How we generate it, store it, distribute it, protect it and employ it will increasingly determine our combat effectiveness."

Sailors should understand that directed energy will be increasingly important to the future fight.

"The future fight will reward the fleet that sees first, decides first, delivers effects first, and sustains combat power longer than its adversary," Caudle said. "The fleet that can generate electrical power, convert it into combat effects and adapt faster than its opponent will hold the advantage at sea. Directed energy is a critical step toward building that future fleet."



JOHN F. WILLIAMS/U.S. Navy

Several years ago, the Afloat Forward Staging Base (Interim) USS Ponce conducted an operational demonstration of the Office of Naval Research-sponsored Laser Weapon System. Adm. Daryl Caudle is pushing for accelerated development of laser weapons, saying directed energy will be increasingly important to the future fight.

Navy seeks new drones to fly alongside manned aircraft

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy is gauging industry interest in supplying new carrier-based autonomous drones known as Combat Collaborative Aircraft.

The unmanned platforms would fly in collaboration with existing and future Navy attack aircraft such as the F-35C Lightning II and the future F/A-XX, which is to replace the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and EA-18G Growler.

The request for information issued Aug. 31 on the government contracting website SAM.gov calls for an aircraft that would cost a maximum of \$30 million and have the ability to carry "four weapons up to 2,500 pounds each externally."

The Navy seeks ideas for "an affordable, highly capable, risk tolerant, carrier-capable, weaponized, extended range, autonomous unmanned air vehicle that can seamlessly deploy from and recover to Gerald R. Ford-class and Nimitz-class Nuclear Aircraft Carriers," the RFI states.

The RFI does not specify a range or combat radius for the drone but says it should be able to fly 30 minutes "on station" and retain enough fuel to return to the carrier.

The Navy seeks "extended range and payload capacity," while the drone would be small enough to minimize the amount of space it occupies on carrier decks. The drone should be able to operate in Sea State 5 conditions — which are classified as "rough," with wave heights of 8 to 12 feet.

Technical requirements include the ability to operate "safe, repeatable, and reliable catapult takeoffs and arrested landings on Gerald R. Ford-class and Nimitz-class" carriers. The new drone must be able to integrate with existing shipboard combat systems and achieve carrier compatibility certification.

The Navy Collaborative Combat Aircraft program is working to provide carriers with "lethal, survivable and persistent, versatile platforms capable of operating directly from the sea."

The Navy said that as threats grow increasingly complete, it must adapt combat strate-



U.S. Navy illustration

An artist's rendering depicts a F-35 Lightning II operating with Collaborative Combat Aircraft.

gies by focusing on collaborative manned-unmanned operations, modular open standards, and rapid, cost-effective prototyping,

the RFI said.

The deadline to respond to the RFI is Sept. 18.

MILITARY



Hanwha Defense USA

The 155 mm K9 howitzer built by Hanwha Group of Korea. An American subsidiary has been chosen to make a prototype for a new U.S. Army Mobile Tactical Cannon based on the design.

Army selects Korean-designed howitzer

Mobile Tactical Cannon chosen as mobile cannon prototype, seen as critical priority

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army has chosen Hanwha Defense USA to develop a prototype for a Mobile Tactical Cannon that the service says is a “critical priority” for modernization.

Hanwha Defense USA is an Arlington, Va.-based subsidiary of Hanwha Group of Korea.

Its proposed design is based on its 155 mm K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzer.

The company said more than 2,500 variants of the system are used by South Korea and other countries, including Australia, Turkey, Egypt, Poland and Finland.

The agreement calls for up to 18 prototypes for the U.S. Army. Hanwha would receive an initial \$100.3 million.

If all options are exercised, the contract would be worth \$262.9 million.

The Army plans for the new Mobile Tactical Cannon to replace the self-propelled M109A7 howitzer, the latest variant of a design in Army service for more

than 50 years.

It could also replace some towed M777 howitzers.

Soldiers will use the prototypes in a series of operational experiments to assess performance, reliability and supportability in realistic combat conditions, according to the Army.

“This soldier-centric, experiment-driven approach reflects the Army’s continuous transformation initiative to rapidly deliver lethal capabilities, incorporate immediate soldier feedback and adapt the force to pace emerging

threats in multidomain operations,” the Army said in a statement.

The first prototype is scheduled to be delivered to the Army before the end of the year, with five additional prototypes to be delivered by mid-2027.

The Army has options on another 12 prototypes.

Hanwha would ship parts for the cannons from South Korea, but final assembly of components would be at a new Hanwha Defense USA facility in Opelika, Ala.

Army to replace WWII-era ammunition boxes with new lightweight design

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Army is replacing its decades-old wooden ammunition boxes with a lighter polymer design, marking the first major change to rifle ammunition packaging since World War II, according to a recent service statement.

The new SixPAC, a container to transport rifle ammunition, is being developed for the Army’s 6.8 mm rounds, which are used by the new M7 rifle and M250 automatic rifle, the Development Command Armaments Center said in an Aug. 26 statement.

The existing packaging system places steel ammunition containers inside wooden outer boxes that require manual assembly and are heavier as well as susceptible to mold, according to the statement.

Preserving the wooden boxes also requires chemical treatments, which can have various environmental impacts and contribute to supply disruptions.

The new carrier is meant to eliminate those drawbacks while also allowing soldiers to carry more ammunition in each container at a lower overall weight.

The Army did not immediately respond to questions about the weight and ammunition capacity of the new containers.

Testing of the new containers by soldiers began in 2024 and 2025, and troops have responded positively to their increased am-



Eric Kowa/U.S. Army

The Army’s new SixPAC ammunition container is shown in this photo.

munition capacity, the statement said.

The SixPAC will use a steel outer layer with a lightweight polymer interior compartment, according to the statement.

“Polymers are unique,” said Edward Lucas, a mechanical engineer who helped design the new containers.

“You can modify them, include additives that improve impact performance, stiffness or dimensional stability.”

The inner compartment’s polymer design is still “undergoing refinement,” though the Army plans to continue investing in the development of polymer packaging designs, according to the statement.

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The Fascination with Italian Leather

By **STACY ROMAN**
Stars and Stripes



Peruse the narrow alleyways in almost any Italian city and you're bound to smell it first — the subtle, yet indelible musky scent of leather. Brightly colored handbags hang precariously from market stalls, belts are neatly hung on racks against the walls, wallets and coin purses lined up on shelves, all waiting to be purchased as the perfect souvenir.

Italian leather is synonymous with high-quality and luxury. With secret processes dating back thousands of years, it's no wonder there's a slight obsession with these fascinating goods.

The art of making leather is handed down from generation to generation. With the industry beginning its boon during the Renaissance and Middle Ages, leatherworkers and tanners found their niche in the lush countryside of Tuscany. Intricate handiwork and practices were so closely guarded, many laborers formed special guilds and associations for their trade. Currently, more than 15% of global, and two-thirds of all European, leather production originates in Italy.

Most Italian leather is processed using vegetable tanning. Derived from the bark of oak and other trees, as well as various native plants, tannins are drawn out and mixed with an acidic solution to preserve and protect the leather. Tannins are also responsible for the varying and distinctive hues. Leather is made from various animal hides, but primarily cows from the surrounding area. The tanning process can take anywhere from 20 to 30 months to complete before the material is ready for cutting, stitching, embroidering, cobbling and more.

When shopping for leather, there are two main types to look for: top grain and full grain. Top grain is a thinner variety where the outermost layer of hide is removed. Because the leather is thinner than full grain, it is easier to work with. This type of material isn't as expensive, yet it is much more stain-resistant and yielding — making it appealing and practical to the masses. Full grain leather is the highest quality leather you can get. Once tanned, you still have the rough spots, rawness and toughness of the animal.

Many Italian fashion houses have humble beginnings tracing back to the leather trade, though they are more famous for over-the-top designs, killer sky-high stilettos and stunning haute couture. One of the oldest icons, Prada, was founded in 1913 in Milan. Brothers Mario and Martino Prada opened "Fratelli Prada," a store supplying luxury leather bags, steamer trunks and other travels goods to the local upper-crust society. Similarly, in 1921, Guccio Gucci began selling luggage and custom-made equestrian equipment in Florence. Gucci expanded his vision and has become known for exquisite fashion and merchandise.

One of the first Italian leather workers to expand into the U.S. was Salvatore Ferragamo. Starting as a novice apprentice in a cobbler's shop, Ferragamo opened a small business repairing and creating made-to-measure leather shoes and boots. His designs proved so popular, he moved to the States and quickly became favored with the Hollywood elite. Starlets such as Marilyn Monroe and Greta Garbo gave his creations an air of glamour.

Another recent designer more known for his sand-blasted jeans also began his career working with leather. Showing artistic talent from a young age, Roberto Cavalli was destined for fashion greatness. He had a knack for working with intricate designs on various types of textiles. He pioneered and patented a unique way of printing designs on the supple material. He also came up with a trademark patchwork pattern created from different types of fabrics, including leather. He quickly expanded his business to include high-end fashion. Although many of his flagship stores in the States have closed, he still maintains a strong presence in his native Italy.

Not everyone can afford to walk away from their dream Italian vacation with a Prada bag. However, there are plenty of affordable options to choose from. With vendors filling the stalls at local markets, and plenty of shops tucked along cobblestone streets, the opportunity to browse and pick the perfect piece of hand-crafted leather abounds. Most goods are still made the old-fashioned way — by hand. You'll be sure to have an incredibly unique souvenir which may just have been made by a future famous Italian designer.

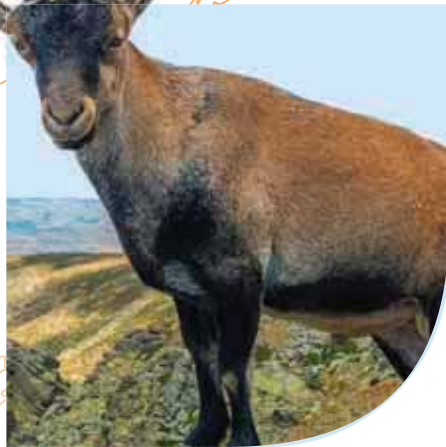




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There is a tiny city on a tiny island in a very big sea, and it is worth visiting. Sardinia's capital, Cagliari, is only 33 square miles, a blip on the radar when compared to major Italian cities like Rome, which is nearly 500 square miles. But Cagliari doesn't care. There is a very different culture here, one you will find nowhere else.



Those lucky to call this beachside city home often joke that they're not 100% Italian thanks to Sardinia's long and interesting history. The island has been under Roman, Pisan, Spanish, Austrian and eventually, in 1861, Italian rule. Over the course of several centuries, Sardinia became a melting pot of European culture. It's also one of the most welcoming places for immigrants. New culture is infused with old. Cagliari is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Italy, with occupation in the area's vast caves dating back to 5000 B.C.

It gives Sardinia and its capital a very different personality. Cagliari still has the richness of Italy with a more laid-back and reserved mentality. Don't mistake this for disinterest or aloofness. The people here want to share their city with the world, they're just not pretentious about it. People tend to move a little slower here, take in the scenery a little more and spend more moments making memories over a good meal and glass of wine. It's a city designed for losing track of time.

Cagliari's history goes back a few millennia and much of it has been preserved. The city's Castello district, a hilltop fortified citadel, is still surrounded by ancient walls and towers. The "old town" still sits high above the rest of the city and is only accessible by two 14th-century gates. Both the Tower of St. Pancrazio and the Elephant Tower offer amazing panoramic views of the city with ocean and mountain backdrops.

The city is also home to a Roman amphitheater built in the 2nd century that could once seat up to 10,000 people. When you walk through the ground level, with the rock and limestone towering above, you will be standing in the exact place gladiators once battled and men fought

wild beasts for entertainment. If you hike to the top, you'll see Cagliari's famous skyline.

The churches show you how architecture not only changed over time, but also who was ruling the area. There are seven churches in the heart of Cagliari. Four are Gothic, two Baroque and one is Pisan-Romanesque. The Pisans built the Cathedral of Santa Maria in the 13th century, and it has been transformed into many styles throughout the centuries. The church is home to the Sanctuary of the Martyrs, a crypt beneath the altar with nearly 200 preserved relics. Also inside, is the "Madonna col Bambino," or "The Virgin and Child," a wooden statue which dates back to the 14th century.

You can't write about any Italian city without mentioning the food! There are the usual Italian dishes like pizza and pasta but it's best to live like a true Sardinian. Swap pasta for "fregula," a toasted couscous very similar to a risotto. Another favorite is "culurgiones," dumplings native to Sardinia. They can be filled with vegetables, spices, meats or cheeses. Since Cagliari is a coastal city, you'll naturally have the freshest and best seafood. Wander the sights and smells of the city's fish markets.

If you're a beach bum at heart, Sardinia's coast will give you everything you need from adventure to serene and relaxing views. A word of caution: do not take any sand or rocks from the beaches. It is illegal and strictly enforced with a fine up to 3,000 euros.

Poetto is Cagliari's main beach and runs nearly five miles. It is also considered one of the most photogenic beaches, making it an Instagram-worthy dream. Poetto is flat and its water is clear and shallow, making it perfect for families with young chil-



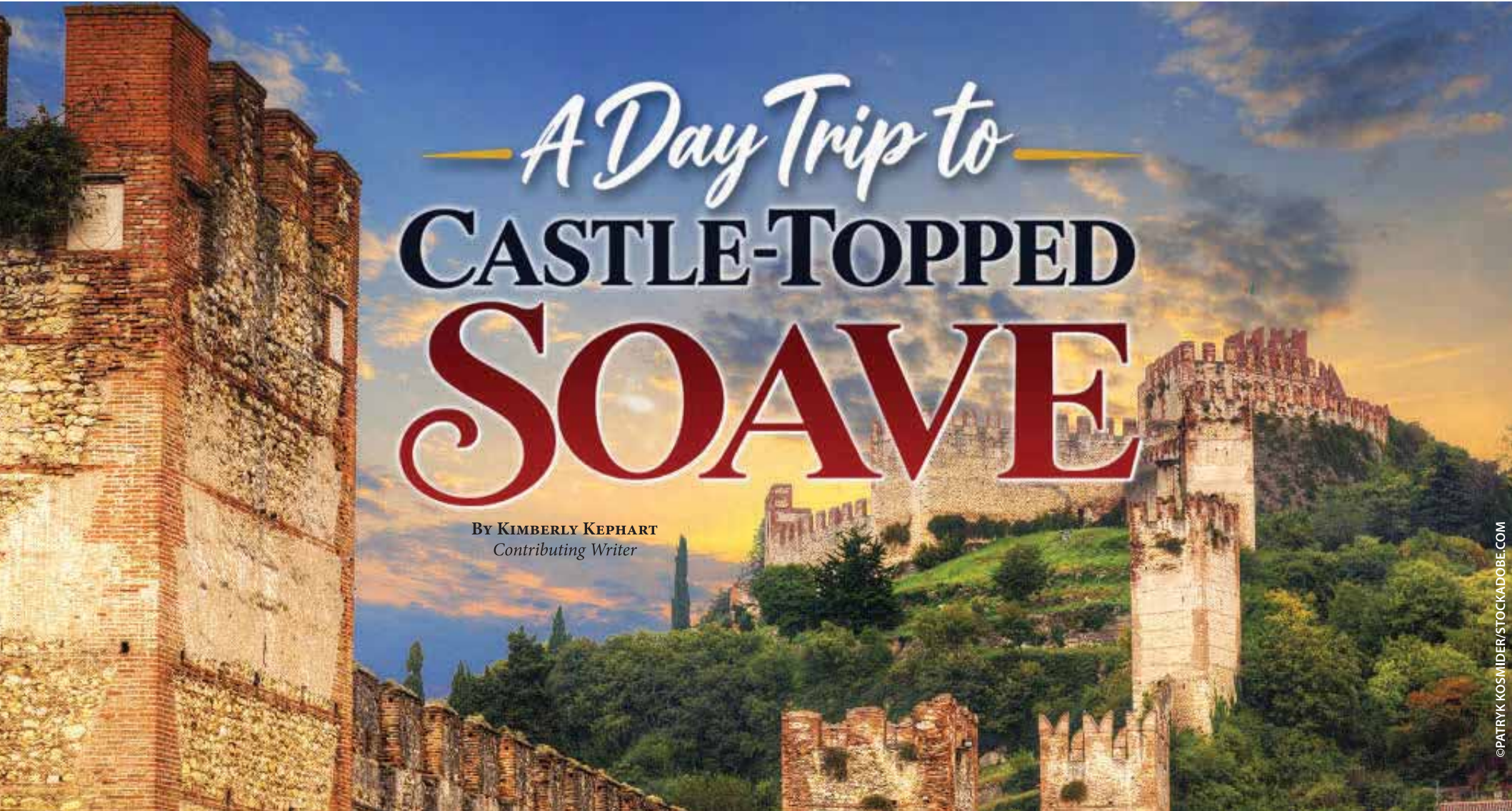
dren. There are also lifeguards on duty and entertainment for kids. Locals come here to exercise, so you'll see plenty of people getting their morning walk or bike ride in. They won't mind if you join them.

Poetto can get a bit crowded and windy in the summer. If you're an introvert like me, head to Cala Fighera. While the beach has more pebbles than sand, this small inlet is much more secluded and quiet. Its turquoise waters splash alongside sandstone cliffs providing a peaceful view. This is also where daredevils will leap from the cliffs and into the water, though you should be careful. Cala Fighera is considered "nudist-friendly" so keep that in mind.



If you're wanting a more authentic "stranded-on-a-beautiful-desert-island" feel, head to Cala Regina. This is about a 40-minute drive southeast of the city, but worth it. Cala Regina is another pebble beach; because it's located within a small cove, it's protected from the strong winds that blow over many beaches. An old Spanish watchtower perched on a hilltop gives you a view of the ocean you will never forget. Since the water is so clear here, it's a fantastic place to snorkel and experience life under the sea.

Whether you are in Sardinia for the beaches, the food, the history or to simply wind down, Cagliari is a small city full of unique culture and a laid-back vibe.



Tucked between the rolling hills of Veneto and the wine country just east of Verona lies Soave, a medieval walled town that feels like it was plucked from the pages of an Italian Renaissance painting.

Famous for its crisp white wine and its perfectly preserved castle, Soave is easy to reach from Vicenza and hard to forget. Whether you're in search of a romantic day trip, a slow-paced solo adventure or an outing that combines culture and countryside, Soave checks all the boxes. You don't really need more than one day here, but what a day it can be!

Soave is under an hour from Vicenza or Verona by car and you can also reach it via bus from San Bonifacio, which is on the regional train line. As you approach, the first thing you'll notice are the medieval walls that wind their way up the hill like a crown. The town's name is synonymous with wine, but the vibe is elegant and calm, a place where locals linger at cafes and vines grow up the sides of historic buildings.

Perfect for a slow visit away from tourist masses, start your day with a stroll through the old town. Walk under the Porta Verona gate and into a network of cobblestone streets filled with family-owned shops and enotecas (wine bars). Grab a cappuccino and a brioche at one of the local bakeries or sit down for a leisurely espresso in the main piazza, Piazza Antenna.

The heart of your Soave experience begins at Cantina Del Castello, located just beneath the

imposing medieval castle walls. I've had great experiences here, particularly one rowdy outing with a few girlfriends. I highly recommend making reservations for its ambiance, history and the profile of the wines made here.

You'll get a guided explanation of the Soave DOC and DOCG wines. For reference: DOC stands for "Denominazione di Origine Controllata," meaning the wine comes from a specific region and meets strict production standards. DOCG, or "Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita," is the next level up—indicating even higher quality control and a government guarantee of origin.

The tastings typically feature three to five wines and will include their celebrated Soave Classico, a refreshing white wine made from the Garganega grape, grown in volcanic soil that gives it a unique minerality. My favorite is Pressoni Soave Classico with its beautiful floral notes of chamomile and acacia, you'll love this too.

What's particularly wonderful about Cantina Del Castello is that it's more than just a tasting room: They offer bike rentals, making it easy to wander aimlessly through the vine-covered hills that surround the town. If you're up for a bit of ad



venture, you can cycle past olive groves and stop by scenic viewpoints.

After your tasting, it's time to earn those sips with a gentle walk up to Castello di Soave, the town's fortress that dates back to the 10th century. The climb is short but steep and the views from the top are more than worth it. You'll be able to see the full sweep of the Soave countryside with rolling green hills and orderly rows of vines. On a good day, the Alps are visible.

The castle is remarkably well preserved, with battlements and towers that you can climb. Inside, you'll find a modest museum and rooms staged with medieval furnishings. The experience feels quiet and if you have kids with you, they'll love the sense of exploration it offers.

Before heading home, have dinner at L'Osteria di Via Roma. This is a cozy and refined restaurant just steps from Soave's main piazza. It's the perfect setting for reflecting on your day of tastings, castle walks and countryside views.

If you are lucky enough to visit on a festival weekend, the town comes alive with tastings, live music and food stalls. However, even on a quiet Tuesday, Soave gives you that rare combination of cultural richness, wine country beauty and just enough to do without feeling like you are checking things off a list.

Know Before You Go

You can always start your day at the castle and then head to the vineyard if you have time before your wine tasting. My one-day itinerary is a suggestion, and you can improvise based on your needs.

- ▶ **Getting There:** Soave is about 40 minutes by car from Vicenza, 30 minutes from Verona. Train and bus combinations are possible via San Bonifacio.
- ▶ **Cantina del Castello:** Book wine tastings and e-bike rentals in advance via their official website, www.cantinacastello.it
- ▶ **Accessibility:** Some parts of the castle and hilltop are uneven or steep; comfortable shoes are a must.
- ▶ **Castle Entry:** Entry to the castle costs a few euros, cash is recommended.

It is open most days except Monday. The last admission is 45 minutes before closing time.



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MILITARY

Air Force fighter fleet too small, too old

Congressional report: Number of jets fell below set minimum

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force's fighter jet fleet is too small and too old, with new aircraft deliveries caught in industrial bottlenecks. Meanwhile, Congress has mandated that the service keeps planes it says it no longer needs or wants, according to an annual congressional review.

The report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, released Sept. 4, says the Air Force has failed to meet a mandate for a minimum number of fighter planes.

Air Force Secretary Troy Meink notified Congress on May 5 that the service had 1,098 fighters in its inventory, below the statutory requirement of 1,145 aircraft.

The report notes that, by some analysts' counts, U.S. fighters could be outnumbered by modern aircraft in China, with that country producing up to 1,000 new Chengdu J-20 Weilong ("Mighty Dragon") sixth-generation fighters by 2030.

The Air Force plans to accelerate aircraft purchases to reach a goal of 1,558 manned fighters by 2035.

"Potential considerations for Congress regarding the Air Force's fighter force structure plans may include whether to support, oppose or modify the service's goal," the report said.

"The Department of the Air Force remains committed to transparency and close collaboration with Congress to attain the required fighter force structure and capabilities needed to execute the National Defense Strategy," the Air Force said in a statement about the CRS report. "We look forward to continuing this constructive dialogue with Capitol Hill to ensure our Airmen have the right mix of capabilities, both crewed and uncrewed, to meet future challenges."

The Air Force "operates a heavily used and aging fleet, with an average aircraft age of 27.4 years," the report said. In 1994, the overall Air Force fleet averaged 17.2 years old.

Older planes mean more maintenance. In 1995, the fighter availability rate was 72.9%. In 2024, availability dropped to 53.9%.

The Air Force is trying to get a younger fleet by working at both ends of the timeline.



Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons and F-35 Lightning IIs fly in support of Operation Tundra Merlin at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, on Aug. 6. The F-16, a "legacy" design, emphasizes speed and maneuverability. The F-35, a "fifth-generation" fighter, includes stealth capabilities.

It wants to buy 100 more F-35A Lightning II aircraft by 2030, the latest "fifth generation" fighter, which includes stealth characteristics not found on older jets like the F-16 Fighting Falcon, which rely on speed and maneuverability.

The service also wants to buy up to 24 Boeing F-15EX Eagle II fighters by the end of 2027.

Between those purchases and the development of the F-47 Next Generation Air Dominance Fighter, the Air Force says it can hit its goal of 1,558 fighters by 2035.

The F-47 would be augmented with "loyal wingman" drones — officially called Collaborative Combat Aircraft. These unmanned aircraft would work in conjunction with manned planes.

According to fiscal year 2027 budget documents, the Air Force is seeking \$1.4 billion in research and development funds for the CCA program.

The Air Force and Congress do not count uncrewed aircraft when totaling the future Air Force fighter fleet.

"Uncrewed collaborative combat aircraft enhance operation of, but not replace, manned fighter aircraft," the report said.

The report said the F-47 is a central enabler for future high-end conflict. Still, details on future quantities, timelines and other specifics are in classified reports that can't be

publicly analyzed yet.

"According to FY2027 budget documents, the Air Force has requested \$5 billion in research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E) funding for the F-47 program," the report said.

The report also noted that Congress should closely monitor the costs of the F-47.

"Advanced fighter aircraft development programs — such as the F-35 and the F-22 — ran behind schedule and over budget," the report said. "How reliable are development timelines for the F-47? Is the Air Force incorporating any lessons learned from the F-35 and F-22 programs into the F-47 program? If so, which lessons?"

Challenges facing the Air Force include delays in delivering new aircraft, particularly the F-35A, caused in part by bottlenecks in production supply chains and spare-parts availability.

The Air Force also faces "readiness issues" such as a shortage of pilots and ground crew trained to work on aircraft.

Gen. James C. Slife stated in 2024 that the Air Force was 1,900 pilots short of the 19,136 the service said it needed for global requirements. The Air Force aims to produce about 1,500 pilots annually through the Undergraduate Pilot Training program.

The report suggests Congress ask for a full accounting of how many pilots would be

needed if the Air Force's request for 1,558 manned fighters by 2035 is approved.

The Air Force told researchers that another factor impacting the age and readiness of aircraft was congressional mandates to keep set numbers of specific aircraft flying — even if the service had called for cuts or complete phase-out of some types.

A statute prohibits the Air Force from retiring F-22 Raptor aircraft or decreasing the inventory below 184 aircraft through Sept. 30, 2027, the report said. As of August, the Air Force had 185 F-22s.

Congress has also prohibited the Air Force from retiring more than 51 F-15E Eagle aircraft and states that no F-15E aircraft may be retired in fiscal year 2026. Limits are set through fiscal 2028.

The Air Force has also been slowed by Congress in efforts to phase out the A-10 Thunderbolt II, a ground-attack aircraft flown by some National Guard units. The Air Force has stopped training new A-10 pilots and closed its main domestic maintenance hub.

The report cites a July 2026 Congressional Budget Office report that the size and age issue should begin to reverse as new aircraft arrive at squadrons and older aircraft are phased out.

The average age of the Air Force fleet has "crested and will decline until the early 2030s."

Navy tests new uniforms for women to improve sizing and fit

By JULIE MASSON
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is testing new uniform prototypes for women as part of its push to modernize sizing and fit, with nearly 80 sailors participating in a five-day evaluation in Virginia last month.

Scientists, designers, engineers and textile experts from the Navy Clothing and Textile Research Facility conducted a prototype uniform fit evaluation at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story and the Navy Exchange in Norfolk from Aug. 17 to 21, according to a recent news release from Navy Exchange Service Command.

The researchers collected measurements and evaluated prototype slacks, shirts and jumper tops for fit, functionality and sizing accuracy.

The Navy said the modernization efforts aim to replace an "outdated" and "restrictive sizing system" while giving sailors a voice in how the uniforms are designed, according to the release.

The service announced its five-year Size Modernization Program in 2024 as a multiphase effort to create more consistent uniform sizing and fit, initially focusing on female uniforms.

The first uniform item updated to modern



A researcher with Navy Exchange Service Command's Navy Clothing and Textile Research Facility records measurement data during a fit evaluation at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, Va., on Aug. 20.

sizing was the Summer Dress White short-sleeved overblouse, introduced during the 2024 chief petty officer season.

Service khaki slacks with back pockets also became available to female sailors in August. The Navy's current fit system includes

"Alpha" and "Bravo" categories. However, after fit clinics in 2022, researchers determined that additional categories were needed to ensure all body types are represented, according to the release.

"We are committed to providing certified, high-quality Navy uniforms so that Sailors are comfortable and professional looking so that they can focus on their mission," Brianna Plummer, group leader at the Navy research facility's Design & Testing Laboratories, said in the release.

Cmdr. Jennifer Lo, who has served in the Navy for 30 years, said in the release that finding uniforms that fit has been a longstanding challenge.

"I feel like I'm drowning when I wear men's sizes," she said.

Lo and other female sailors find that a properly fitted uniform is about more than appearance; it is about "confidence and functional readiness," the release said.

The research team's next step is to analyze the measurements and sailor feedback and use the findings to guide future sizing recommendations.

While the research facility is now focused on updating female uniforms, it plans to evaluate male uniform sizing in the coming years, according to the release.

MILITARY

Navy uses lessons from Lincoln deployment

Service looks to boost welfare as Roosevelt prepares for mission

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The Navy says it is using lessons gleaned from recent grueling deployments as it prepares another aircraft carrier for the Middle East amid escalating U.S.-Iran hostilities.

That effort includes improving logistics by increasing storage aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt for food, hygiene products and other supplies, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman said in a video posted Sept. 8 on X.

Officials also are paying careful attention to quality-of-life issues for sailors and Marines aboard Roosevelt and working to improve communication with their families, Caudle said.

“As one carrier returns home, we listen to its sailors and families,” Perryman said. “We capture what works and what didn’t, and we make it better the next time.”

Roosevelt is expected to depart San Diego in the coming weeks to relieve the aircraft carrier USS George Washington in the Arabian Sea during a deployment expected to last more than seven months, USNI News reported in August.

The preparations follow the lengthy deployments of USS Gerald R. Ford and USS Abraham Lincoln. They also come amid heightened scrutiny of the Navy’s ability to sustain some 19 warships in the Arabian Sea as they enforce a U.S. naval blockade of Iranian ports and facilitate the transit of oil tankers and other commercial ships through the Strait of Hormuz.

The aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush and the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer are among the vessels operating in the region.

Last month, Stars and Stripes reported that Lincoln sailors and their families had raised concerns about mental health and the risk of self-harm aboard the carrier.

Sailors aboard the Lincoln also told the newspaper that at least one fellow service member had been stopped from jumping off the ship a few months ago. The Navy did not respond to questions about that incident.

Sailors and their family members also described food and water shortages, mail disruptions and other quality-of-life issues.

Soon after, the Japan-based Washington



ALEXANDER BUSSMAN/U.S. Navy

Sailors carry out flight operations on the flight deck of the USS Theodore Roosevelt on September 7, 2026. The Roosevelt is preparing to join approximately 19 U.S. warships in the Arabian Sea to enforce a blockade of Iranian ports as tensions between the two countries escalate.

was sent to relieve the Lincoln, which subsequently made a five-day port call in Thailand that ended Sept. 6. It was the Lincoln’s first regular port call since leaving San Diego nearly 10 months ago.

As of Sept. 11, the carrier had been deployed for 295 days, most of them in a combat zone. It is expected to return to San Diego within the next month.

The Ford completed a 326-day deployment in May, setting a record for the longest post-Vietnam War carrier deployment. During that time, Ford operated in multiple regions, including the Caribbean, Eastern Mediterranean and Red seas.

It also experienced a serious laundry room fire that injured three sailors, dis-

placed hundreds more and required a stop at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete for repairs.

The changes, such as increasing storage capacity, will help Roosevelt remain self-sufficient for longer periods, especially when resupply may be difficult, Perryman said.

“Small things matter during a long deployment, because taking care of our sailors is part of maintaining combat readiness,” he added.

New entertainment equipment on mess decks, more durable fitness equipment and spare cardio machines ready for replacement will improve sailors’ quality of life, Caudle said, adding that holiday supplies were being purchased in advance.

Additional efforts include software updates and instructions designed to keep critical services running even in less than optimal circumstances, such as when a ship is operating in a degraded condition, Caudle said.

A specialized team was sent to inspect and optimize Roosevelt’s climate control systems to ensure the crew and equipment can operate effectively, he said.

Officials also are working with the ship’s ombudsman and family readiness groups to provide families with reliable and consistent communication throughout the deployment, he said.

“That’s what a learning Navy looks like,” Caudle said.

GAO: Submarines lost 15K operational days to backlogs, delays

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy has lost 15,000 operational days on U.S. attack submarines due to maintenance backlogs and delays at shipyards, according to a recent government report.

The Government Accountability Office said in the Aug. 27 report that the submarines are forced to spend idle time in port instead of being deployed or used for crew training because of long waits at shipyards.

“Delays resulted in an estimated \$3.4 billion in costs to sustain crews and submarines” when not operational, the report said.

The report is an unclassified version of a classified report issued in April, the GAO said.

The GAO said it conducted the report because of the strategic importance of attack submarines.

“According to the U.S. Navy, its 44 attack submarines, as of fiscal year 2025, provide the United States an asymmetric advantage to gather intelligence undetected and attack enemy targets, among other missions,” the report states. “These capabilities make attack submarines some of the most requested as-



KENNY JONES/U.S. Navy

USS North Carolina prepares to undock at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Aug. 12.

sets by the global combatant commanders.”

The GAO report included “active idle time,” when submarine crews “must remain pier-side because they are no longer certified to conduct normal operations and cannot be inducted into a maintenance period.”

The GAO said the Navy has made inroads into cutting active idle time, but inactive idle time is growing worse.

Without significant changes, the report said that 15 attack submarines could enter inactive idle status between FY2026 and FY2030. The

Navy could incur more than 14,000 additional days of inactive idle time, at a cost exceeding \$3.1 billion, just to operate and support those inactive submarines.

The report said another problem is the long waits to decommission nuclear submarines, which may have cost \$722 million from 2016 to 2025.

The GAO recommended the Navy fully evaluate alternatives to more efficiently decommission attack submarines and develop an attack submarine inactivation plan that reduces inactive idle time.

Maintenance on nuclear-powered attack submarines is done at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, in Kittery, Maine; Norfolk Naval Shipyard, in Virginia; Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, in Bremerton, Wash.; and Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, in Hawaii.

Two shipyards where submarines are constructed can also do maintenance work: General Dynamics Electric Boat in Groton, Conn., and Huntington Ingalls Industries Newport News Shipbuilding in Newport News, Va.

The report says the Navy verbally concurred with GAO’s recommendations but did not provide written responses.

DINING

Rare chance for Kazakhstan cuisine in Italy

Bistro Alma'Ta, found near Aviano Air Base, offers up new flavors

By KENT HARRIS
Stars and Stripes

Italy is justifiably known for its food, but trying to find non-Italian offerings or some foreign cuisine that isn't duplicated all over the place can be a challenge in much of the country.

So Elmira Berdiyarova wasn't exactly treading familiar ground when she opened a restaurant just minutes south of Aviano Air Base featuring fare from a country that not many Italians — let alone Americans — have ever visited.

Bistro Alma'Ta, located on the main street of Roveredo in Piano, calls itself the first Kazakh restaurant in Italy.

"It was a bit of a gamble, but she wanted to find a way of presenting some of the best of two nations," her son, Giacomo, said during a recent visit.

The standard menu is sparse and doesn't change much, in part because of the restaurant's tiny kitchen. But twice each month, Berdiyarova offers full-course menus focused on one of Kazakhstan's many ethnicities.

The appetizer list had two salads featuring potatoes, carrots and eggs with either apples and cucumbers or beets. There was also a focaccia-adjacent bread stuffed with cheese, meatballs stuffed with vegetables and spices, a fried bread called boursak and a savory pastry filled with cheese and herbs.

There were only three mains listed and one was unavailable. The two available were manty, a ravioli-like pasta filled with meat, vegetables and spices, and a dish resembling paella known as plov.

Two other offerings were available that day: a cold soup featuring cucumbers and onions and a soy noodle dish that closely resembled something one might get at a local Chinese restaurant.

Berdiyarova was born in Kazakhstan and trained to be a dentist. She eventually decided to become a sommelier.

That expertise in wine is on display in her restaurant, which features regional offerings from Italy as well as wines from the countries of Georgia and Armenia, the latter being the birthplace of her husband.

The seating capacity at Alm'Ta is less than a dozen inside and not much more on the outside. So reservations are a good idea, especially on the weekends.

Berdiyarova said her clientele seems to come to the restaurant both for its dishes and its vintages.

Like most restaurants here serving non-Italian food, she's had to alter the dishes a bit to suit the local palate because many Italians are wary of strong unfamiliar spices.

She nevertheless strives to maintain the integrity of the dishes and said they would be recognizable to those from her home country.

Bistrò Alma'Ta
Address: 34/A Via XX Settembre, Roveredo in Piano, Italy



PHOTOS BY KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes
Insalata Olivier, a salad of potatoes, carrots, eggs, tuna, apples and cucumbers, is served with boursak, a fried bread, at Bistrò Alma'Ta. The salad is a standard appetizer on the restaurant's menu.



Plov, a paella-like rice dish, is one of a handful of regular main courses at Bistrò Alma'Ta. The restaurant's menu stays small in part because of its tiny kitchen.



A sampling of appetizers at Bistrò Alma'Ta includes a savory pastry filled with spinach, a stuffed meatball, fried bread and a dipping sauce. Owner Elmira Berdiyarova has adapted some dishes for Italian palates while keeping them recognizable to those from her native Kazakhstan.

Prices: Appetizers 3.50 to 10 euros, main dishes 16 to 19 euros, desserts 6 euros. Wines ranging from 3.50 euros a glass (18 a bottle) to 7.50 a glass (43 per bottle). Grappa and vodka 5 to 12 euros.

Hours: 6:30-10:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 5-10:30 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Information: +39 327 2964542, www.alma-ta.rest



The sign for Bistrò Alma'Ta hangs above the entrance on the main street of Roveredo in Piano, Italy. The restaurant, just minutes south of Aviano Air Base, calls itself the first Kazakh restaurant in Italy.

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