

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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## 'Speed plus range'

Airborne troops incorporate Marine Osprey into training  
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Soldiers with the 101 Airborne Division conduct an air assault operation out of an MV-22 Osprey during training at Fort Campbell, Ky., on Jan. 23.  
COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

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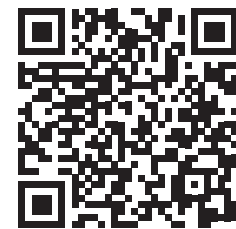
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## COVER STORY

# Airborne troops train for tilt-rotor future

## 101st Airborne Division scheduled to be first to receive MV-75

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT CAMPBELL, Ky. — The Marine Corps MV-22 Osprey touched down gently on the long, thick vegetation in a clearing on Fort Campbell's training grounds, sending debris flying across the field as soldiers stormed out the back of the tilt-rotor aircraft.

The 101st Airborne Division soldiers raced forward and dove into the grass, turning away from the hulking airframe to protect them from the hurricane-strength winds the Osprey produces with its twin rotors in helicopter mode. It marked a first for the historic division — a long-range air assault of infantry forces with a tilt-rotor aircraft. And it marked the first step to prepare the division to receive its own tilt-rotor aircraft — the MV-75 that Bell Helicopter is building for the service — in the coming years.

"We cooked that flight," said Army Staff Sgt. Peyton Porter, an infantry squad leader in the 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment of the 101st's 3rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team. A veteran of the Iraq War who has completed dozens of air assault operations on traditional Army UH-60 Black Hawk and CH-47 Chinook helicopters, Porter said he was struck by the speed of the Osprey in his first time flying in a tilt-rotor aircraft.

"It was pretty smooth, especially considering how fast it was," Porter said immediately after conducting the air assault operation during a major training exercise dubbed Operation Lethal Eagle on Jan. 23. "It was very fast. Very nice. A lot faster than any Chinook ride that I've been on."

Operation Lethal Eagle is the 101st's primary annual divisionwide home station training exercise, which brought together about 7,000 Fort Campbell soldiers to test the 3rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team's lethality. After the Army announced last year the 101st would be the service's first unit to receive the MV-75 aircraft, division planners sought to include Ospreys in Lethal Eagle to help develop the Army's doctrine for fighting with its coming tilt-rotor capability.

"We don't want [the MV-75] to arrive here with a learning curve," said Brig. Gen. Travis McIntosh, the 101st Airborne's deputy commander for operations and a longtime Army aviator. "We want it to arrive as a warfighting capability ready to go in this division. So, getting the MV-22 tilt-rotor experience today allows us to inform how we will fight with the MV-75 tomorrow."

The 101st Airborne Division has spent recent months planning for the eventual arrival of the MV-75, currently slated for 2028, but last month was the first time it got its hands on an Osprey to see firsthand the difference a tilt-rotor aircraft could make.

The MV-75, once completed, will be slightly smaller than the Osprey, but it will bring "a new world" of capability to the 101st Airborne and the Army, according to McIntosh. Leaders at Fort Campbell have begun referring to those coming capabilities as "Air Assault 2.0," he said.

"We've never been able to really get large-scale and long-range together, and that's the relevance," the general said. "We think speed plus range equals relevance. ... In this division, we only have half the equation right now, I can either give you speed or range, not both, and with the tilt-rotor capability that we will be fielding soon, we will have that relevance and bring Air Assault 2.0 into the future fight."

Though the Osprey can serve for now as a stand-in for the MV-75, the comparison of the tilt-rotor aircraft is not apples-to-apples, said Douglas Englen, a retired legendary Army aviator who is now a military sales and strategy manager for Bell Helicopter.



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes  
Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division's 3rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team conduct an air assault operation out of an MV-22 Osprey during a training event at Fort Campbell, Ky., on Jan. 23.



Soldiers with the 101st Airborne Division load an Infantry Squad Vehicle and prepare for a nighttime assault on an enemy position during Operation Lethal Eagle on Jan. 22.

He said that Bell — which worked with Boeing to build the Osprey — has taken many design and capability cues from the Osprey, but the MV-22 was purpose-built for the Marines. Bell has designed the MV-75 from scratch specifically for the Army's needs, Englen said.

Englen describes the new helicopter as a jump to a third generation in tilt-rotor aviation. Among the key concepts of the design is an all-digital platform that can be rapidly updated and equipped with the most modern software and hardware capabilities to allow the Army to adjust practically on the fly to emerging enemy capabilities.

The MV-75 is designed to carry 14 troops and a crew of four, according to the Army. It has a cruise speed of 320 mph — much faster than the Black Hawk's operating speed of 183 mph. And it will boast a range of up to 920 miles, which dwarfs the Black Hawk's 367-mile top range.

Fort Campbell officials expect to begin receiving MV-75s around 2028. Since it was chosen to build the new tilt-rotor aircraft in 2022, Bell has sped efforts to produce the new airframe, moving its goal for production up about 30 months from its initial plans, Englen said. The Army wants to further speed production, Gen. Randy George, Army chief of staff, said last month. Army officials said last month they could not immediately provide an updated time frame for MV-75 production.

Army officials believe the new capability will allow the 101st Airborne to deploy its

forces as far as Europe with just MV-75s, instead of needing to load troops and helicopters on planes or ships to reach the Continent.

Army Col. Ryan Bell, the commander of the 101st's 3rd Mobile Brigade Combat Team, described that coming capability as "extending our legs."

Bell watched closely as the MV-22 from Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 774 at Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., conducted a handful of air assault flights with his Easy Company soldiers, who had held as his reserve force for the exercise.

The colonel, an infantry officer and veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, joked that he wished he would have put himself on one of the Osprey flights to experience just how much faster it was than the Black Hawks and Chinooks he has flown on for years.

But the operation was an opportunity to learn. Bell was impressed with the Osprey's ability to rapidly load up squads of his soldiers at a location miles away from the training fight and deliver them into an engagement.

"We can move forces from much farther away, whether we're fighting in Europe or the Pacific — from a different island, for example," Bell said. "It lets me change the geometry of the battlefield because of those speed and legs — the distance it can cover so quickly."

"It's going to make us much more lethal." But Bell also said it was critical his troops



Army CH-47 Chinook helicopters sling load Humvees and Infantry Squad Vehicles into a clearing on Fort Campbell on Jan. 22.

spent Lethal Eagle focusing on basic infantry tactics while they worked to incorporate all the Army's latest technology and the tilt-rotor Ospreys. His units employed the Army's new M7 rifles, its latest night vision goggles and the new Infantry Squad Vehicle during its Lethal Eagle fight.

"We're infantry. It's all about being really good at the fundamentals," he said. "Can you shoot, move, communicate? We're getting a ton of technology. It enables us. It doesn't replace those core skill sets."

It was not lost on Bell or McIntosh the significance of placing the 2-506th's legendary Easy Company — of "Band of Brothers" fame — in the Osprey for the 101st Airborne's first-ever tilt-rotor air assault. One of the Army's first airborne units that jumped into combat on World War II's D-Day, Easy Company will now help pave the way for the next revolution in Army air-based operations, McIntosh said.

The division plans to include Ospreys in all its major training events going forward until the MV-75 arrives at Fort Campbell — so long as the Marines or another of the Army's sister services has one available, McIntosh said.

"We've often said we're not an innovation division, but we are a division that has a history of innovating, and this fits right in our profile," the general said. "This is the division that will innovate appropriately and tell our Army how to properly execute [MV-75] air assaults."

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MILITARY

# Soldier who blocked suicide bomber to be awarded the Medal of Honor

## Staff Sgt. Ollis' actions credited with saving Polish soldier, others

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — A U.S. soldier who died saving the life of a Polish counterpart in Afghanistan in 2013, will receive the Medal of Honor.

President Donald Trump approved the recognition, the parents of Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis said in a statement Feb. 3.

"Knowing that Michael's life, legacy and final act of courage have not been forgotten leaves us with a feeling of overwhelming pride and eternal gratitude," Robert and Linda Ollis said in the statement.

Ollis was serving with the 10th Mountain Division when his outpost in Ghazni came under attack by insurgents. During the battle, the 24-year-old Staten Island, N.Y., native stepped in front of wounded Polish Lt. Karol Cierpika to protect him from a suicide bomber. His actions were credited with saving several other lives.

In the years since, Ollis has been posthumously recognized with numerous valor medals, including the Silver Star, which in 2019 was upgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest military honor.

His actions also have become part of military lore in Poland, which recognized Ollis with the Polish Army Gold Medal for valor.

The dining facility at the U.S. Army's Camp Kosciuszko in Poznan also bears Ollis' name. At a 2023 ceremony that christened it the Staff Sgt. Michael Harold Ollis Warrior Grill, Cierpika was on hand. Over the years, the Polish officer forged a bond with the Ollis family.

Ollis' 2013 heroics and other Army experiences, including aspects of his life while he was stationed in Germany and on deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, were chronicled in the 2024 book "I Have Your Back" by author Tom Sileo.



Robert Ollis, father of U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis, touches the embossed lettering of his son's name on a memorial plaque at a ceremony on Oct. 27, 2023. The dining facility at Camp Kosciuszko in Poznan, Poland, was named after Michael Ollis at the ceremony.

In a post on X, Sileo said the awarding of the Medal of Honor for Ollis comes after years of advocacy.

"Many of us pushed for Michael to receive this award & tonight our mission is com-

plete," Sileo wrote.

Sileo credited combat veteran Eric Geresy, a senior adviser to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, for "relentlessness in ensuring" that Ollis get the recognition.

# New carrier undergoes sea trials in Atlantic

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The John F. Kennedy returned to its Virginia shipyard Feb. 5, completing a weeklong sea trial as it moves toward a scheduled delivery to the Navy early next year.

The John F. Kennedy is the second of 10 planned nuclear-powered Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be built by Newport News Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries. The Navy's most recent procurement cost estimate is \$13.196 billion.

The carrier, designated CVN-79, is scheduled to be delivered and commissioned into the Navy in March 2027.

"Our nation is depending on us to deliver these critical assets that will protect freedom around the world, and we're proud to see CVN-79 take another step toward joining the fleet," said Derek Murphy, vice president of new construction aircraft carrier programs.

The carrier left Newport News, Va., on Jan. 30 for "testing important ship systems and components at sea," the shipbuilder said.

Newport News Shipbuilding said technological advancements on the carrier design would increase operational efficiency and reduce manning requirements; the ship would need about 900 fewer sailors than the Nimitz-class, according to Navy estimates. The Ford class also features an upgraded pair of nuclear reactors, increasing its electrical power-generation capacity.

The Ford-class carriers use electromagnetic systems for aircraft elevators and launching systems. Adjustments to the new system have been one factor in what the Congressional Research Service says is a two-year delay in the delivery of the Kennedy. Other delays were due to certification of the arresting gear.

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order telling the Navy to use traditional steam-powered catapults to launch aircraft from future carriers. However, no aircraft carrier is scheduled to be built and delivered until after Trump leaves office in January 2029.

The Navy has started a \$145 million electrical systems overhaul at Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., where the Navy has said the Kennedy will eventually be homeported. Similar upgrades will be required at bases where future Ford-class carriers are homeported.

The USS Gerald R. Ford is homeported at Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia. The commissioning of the John F. Kennedy and its assignment to Naval Base Kitsap in 2029, west of Seattle on the Puget Sound, will give the Navy one of its newest class of carriers on the East and West Coasts.

The Nimitz and Ford-class aircraft carriers are the largest warships in the world, with a displacement of about 100,000 tons, according to the Navy.

The Navy plans to build 10 of the new carriers to replace the 10 Nimitz-class nuclear-powered carriers commissioned between 1975 and 2009. The last aircraft carrier built for the Navy that used steam turbines was the previous carrier named after the 35th president, USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67), which was retired in 2007.



The USS John F. Kennedy leaves Newport News, Va., for sea trials on Jan. 28.

# Navy pilot who shot down 4 Soviet jets over Korea to receive Medal of Honor

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Korean War veteran Royce Williams, who was involved in a secretive dogfight with seven Soviet fighter planes more than 70 years ago, will receive the Medal of Honor, the White House confirmed this month.

Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., said President Donald Trump let Williams know he would receive the nation's highest award for courage under fire.

"My friend, constituent and hero Royce Williams is 100 years young, a Top Gun pilot like no other, and an American hero for all time," Issa said. "The heroism and valor he demonstrated for more than 35 harrowing minutes almost 70 years ago in the skies over the North Pacific and the coast of North Korea unquestionably saved the lives of his fellow pilots, shipmates and crew. His story is one for the ages and it now has its rightful chapter as Royce receives the Medal of Honor."

On Nov. 18, 1952, Williams was piloting an F9F-5 Panther when he encountered seven

Soviet MiG-15s. Williams, a lieutenant at the time, shot down four of the fighters and survived a 37-millimeter round to his fuselage. Though his plane was badly damaged, he managed to make a safe landing on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Oriskany off the North Korean coast.

After the mission, he was directed to keep silent about the high-stakes dogfight that pitted him against Soviet aviators at the peak of the Cold War.

"In the moment I was a fighter pilot doing my job ... I was only shooting what I had," Williams said in an earlier Navy account of the dogfight. "They had me cold on maneuverability and acceleration — the MiG was vastly superior on those counts to the F9F. The only thing I could do was out-turn them."

Williams battled the Soviet pilots for 35 minutes, making the encounter the longest dogfight in U.S. military history, according to the Navy.

For more than 50 years, Williams kept quiet about the mission, which was detailed in Soviet records in 1992 after the communist country's collapse. Williams was initially



Retired U.S. Navy Capt. Royce Williams will receive the Medal of Honor.

awarded the Silver Star, and that was elevated to the Navy Cross in 2023. His supporters have continued to press for higher recognition.

Issa was among the people spearheading the effort to award Williams the Medal of Honor.

The National Defense Authorization Act for 2026, finalized in December, included legislation that removes a five-year statute of limitations rule so that Williams, whose exploits as a Navy pilot are now part of military lore, can be considered for the nation's highest honor.

Stars and Stripes reporter John Vandiver contributed to this report.

Huntington Ingalls Industries

## MILITARY

# Aviano receives last new rescue helicopter

Delivery completes unit's transition to new platform, replaces its aging fleet

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The sixth and final combat rescue helicopter with a name paying homage to the crews that flew its predecessors in Vietnam has arrived at its new home in northern Italy.

Aviano Air Base received its last HH-60W Jolly Green II, the Air Force said in a statement.

The delivery completes a transition to the new platform by the 56th Rescue Generation Squadron that began about one year ago, as the Air Force sought to replace its aging fleet of HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters.

The Jolly Green II is named after the Vietnam War-era Sikorsky HH-3E Jolly Green and HH-53 Super Jolly Green, whose crews are regarded as the pioneers of aerial combat search and rescue, the Air Force said in 2020.

Aviano supports the only U.S. fighter wing south of the Alps and is a key hub for U.S. and NATO air operations in southern Europe. It's the only U.S. air base in Europe or Africa to host combat search-and-rescue helicopters.

The latest Jolly Green is based on the HH-60M Black Hawk frame, has a larger fuel capacity for longer range and better threat detection and countermeasures, according to the Air Force. The helicopter is made by Sikorsky, which also produces the Army's Black Hawk.

Airmen assigned to the squadron conducted an "unfolding" of the unit's newest Jolly Green II on Jan. 13, according to video footage posted by the Air Force. Unfolding entails moving and locking rotor blades into an operational, radial position.

The unit maintains the helicopters in support of the 56th Rescue Squadron, which provides



JOSEPH BARTOSZEK/U.S. Air Force

**A brand new Air Force HH-60W Jolly Green II helicopter is stationed on the flight line for blade unfolding at Aviano Air Base, Italy, on Jan. 15. With the base's sixth Jolly Green II in the fold, its fleet of the cutting-edge combat rescue helicopter is now fully operational.**

combat rescue and recovery, humanitarian assistance, noncombatant evacuation and disaster relief for U.S. and NATO throughout Europe and Africa.

When Air Force leaders introduced the next-

generation Jolly Green II more than five years ago, they said the platform's primary mission would be conducting day or night combat search-and-rescue operations into hostile environments to recover isolated or stranded per-

sonnel during war.

The Air Force has ordered 96 Jolly Green IIs so far, a Sikorsky representative said in a September 2025 interview with *AirMed&Rescue* magazine.

## Navy expands overseas access to mental health program, app

By JONATHAN BAEZ  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has expanded its partnership with the mental health app Headspace to a handful of overseas installations, extending free access to coaching and mindfulness tools for sailors and their families.

"The program is available to eligible sailors and their invited family/loved ones at select pilot sites," Headspace spokeswoman Lexi Herosian said by email. "This can be anyone in the sailor's support network; it does not need to follow the sailor's Page 2."

A Page 2, also known as NAVPERS 1070/602, records data about a sailor's dependents and emergency contact information.

Headspace offers video- and text-based coaching sessions with mental health care professionals who are nationally board certified, as well as artificial intelligence-powered tools focused on meditation and mindfulness, according to a mission statement on the company's website.

The Navy's partnership with Headspace began in February 2025 as a pilot program at three stateside installations: Naval Air Station Lemoore, Calif.; Naval Submarine Base New London, Conn.; and Naval Base Kitsap, Wash.

The program's second phase expands access to three installations outside the continental United States: Naval Station Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Naval Support Activity Naples, Italy; and Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan.

To enroll, eligible participants must register through a Navy-specific Headspace portal.



JONATHAN BAEZ/Stars and Stripes

**A sailor tries out Headspace during a presentation about the mental health care app.**

A Department of Defense ID number and the name of the participant's home installation are required.

"The locations for the pilot program were selected based on geographical and operational area demands and tempo," Lt. Kathryn Cole, spokesperson for the Chief of Naval Personnel, said by email. "The pilot program's success will be determined by several factors including the number of Sailors who participate in the pilot, Sailor feedback and cost effectiveness."

About 12% of sailors at the first three pilot bases enrolled in the program, Cole wrote.

The overseas rollout follows the conclusion in January of the Navy's spiritual awareness month, during which the service offered relationship workshops, yoga classes, canine therapy and mindfulness seminars to sailors across the force.

## Over \$500K in upgrades to Naples gyms designed to help sailors achieve fitness goals

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — New treadmills and other equipment planned for Naval Support Activity Naples gyms this year will cap more than \$500,000 in facility upgrades designed to improve sailor fitness and quality of life, base officials say.

Those improvements include four outdoor pop-up gyms and two new training zones at the base's fitness centers designed to help sailors build the strength and endurance needed to meet the demanding requirements of their jobs, NSA Naples said in a statement last month.

The modern, accessible fitness options not only underscore the Navy's "Sailors First" initiative, but also "ensure our warfighters have the tools they need to stay physically and mentally prepared for any challenge," Capt. John Randazzo, commander of NSA Naples, said in the Jan. 27 statement.

In March, Defense Department Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered a rapid services-wide review of physical fitness, body composition and grooming standards.

As part of the DOD initiative, the Navy will require active-duty sailors to complete two physical fitness assessments each year starting in 2026, a return to pre-pandemic standards, *Stars and Stripes* reported in December.

The change is among related service initiatives, such as gender-neutral fitness tests and body composition measurements, responding to Hegseth's order.

Over the summer, NSA Naples established

outdoor fitness centers, called "fit boxes," at its Capodichino and Gaeta, Italy, sites. Two more are at the base's Support Site, which includes barracks and family housing.

The boxes, actually converted cargo containers, feature barbells, weights, sleds, kettlebells, a climbing rope, pullup bars and other fitness equipment needed to keep sailors ready for the tactical demands of their jobs, Naples fitness officials said at the time.

MWR also established two training and nutrition zones at the base's fitness center with squat racks, deadlift platforms and other equipment that directly support the specific requirements of the Navy's fitness test, the base said.

Those projects cost \$157,000 and \$267,000, respectively, Lt. j.g. Valentine Mulango, a base spokesman, said in a separate statement.

Another \$120,000 will be spent in 2026 for new treadmills, cross-trainers, fitness test-approved bikes, and sled mills, Mulango said.

Additionally, MWR also offers an interactive digital platform that offers with virtual classes, such as spin, yoga or Zumba accessible 24 hours daily.

That option, along with the ability to use fitness centers after hours when staff are gone, offers sailors convenience and control over their personal fitness goals, the base said.

New equipment and training options are about giving "sailors the best equipment to train effectively, prevent injuries, and exceed the standard," Austin Holmes, MWR Naples fitness director, said in the January statement.

"This is about building stronger, more resilient warfighter," Holmes said.

MILITARY

# NSA Naples rejects results of radon tests

BY ALISON BATH  
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — U.S. Naval Support Activity Naples community members will have to wait at least another year to learn whether their on-base workspaces are contaminated with potentially dangerous levels of radon.

The base is rejecting the results of yearlong testing for exposure levels in offices, rooms and other workspaces, NSA Naples commanding officer Capt. John Randazzo said in a statement Feb. 10.

Blank control detectors used in the testing were faulty, a finding that indicates a problem with the entire testing process, Randazzo said.

“Because we cannot accept these results, we will conduct a complete re-test of all the affected facilities,” Randazzo said.

NSA Naples is seeking funding to begin retesting as soon as possible, with an anticipated completion date in 2027, according to Randazzo.

The blank detectors used in the base’s 2024-25 evaluation should show radon exposure results below a specific minimum threshold to be valid, Randazzo said.

But 26 of 30 blank detectors in the recent test batch detected radon over that limit, according to a fact sheet accompanying Randazzo’s statement.

Randazzo did not say what the minimum threshold was, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers levels consistently at or above 4.0 picocuries per liter of air hazardous.

The base did not release test results for any of the offices, rooms or other on-base facilities in the study, which was done by a government contractor.

The new development is the latest setback in efforts to resolve problems at NSA Naples involving radon, an odorless and colorless gas that is linked to cancer.

In August 2024, a Defense Department Inspector General report revealed that base officials hadn’t notified military personnel and their families that



SEAN RINNER/U.S. Navy

**An environmental worker at Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy retrieves radon detectors at a base facility in September. The base rejected the results of a yearlong study of radon levels there, and a retest is expected to take at least a year.**

the base had the service’s highest rating for potentially excessive levels of radon.

NSA Naples also didn’t do timely testing for radon at some homes, offices, medical facilities and child care centers as required by Navy policy, the IG found.

And although officials knew about the base’s risk rating for possibly elevated levels of the radioactive gas, they didn’t inform nearly 4,000 military personnel living off base that their homes could be tested, the report stated.

The failures could create a health and safety risk

to those stationed at NSA Naples, the IG said.

The investigation was prompted by a whistleblower complaint regarding the base’s handling of its radon management program, particularly in off-base housing.

In response to the IG findings and recommendations, the base launched a campaign using social media, newsletters and other platforms to regularly inform its community about the base’s radon rating.

The effort includes details on where people can get additional information about potential health

risks and how to test for radon in their homes. The base also conducted the yearlong radon exposure test.

Radon forms when the radioactive metals uranium, thorium or radium break down naturally in rocks, soil and water. People are exposed to the gas when it seeps through cracks and gaps in buildings, according to the EPA.

Radon levels can be lowered by means ranging from temporary measures like increasing ventilation to adding a professionally installed depressurization system.

## Family survey finds greater food insecurity

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

More than a quarter of military families polled in the most recent annual survey by a leading aid organization for service members and veterans said they consistently struggle to put food on the table.

That is among the financial strains of military life that make it a challenge to meet basic needs, Blue Star Families found as part of the nonprofit’s Military Family Lifestyle Survey for 2025.

Frequent relocations, out-of-pocket expenses for military moves, child care shortages, and interruptions of a spouse’s education and career are contributing factors to the financial hardships of U.S. personnel, according to the survey.

The data highlight “how persistent, service-connected financial pressures continue to shape military family life,” the organization said in a statement releasing the survey’s findings.

About 28% of survey respondents were categorized as having “low or very low” food security, an increase from 16% in 2023, when that category was last reported, according to the survey.

In addition, 22% of participants said they used a food pantry or received food from a military food distribution center in the 12 months preceding the survey, while 30% of active-duty respondents said they “often or sometimes” could not afford to eat balanced meals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, according to Blue Star Families.

“That should be a call to action for the government, for the services and, frankly, for the private- and public-sector support to get after this challenge,” said Lindsay Knight, Blue Star Families’ chief impact officer, according to the Deseret News.

“If our military families aren’t getting quality,

healthy meals, that endangers the viability or the sustainability of the all-volunteer force in the future,” she said.

The 2025 survey drew responses from more than 6,000 military-connected respondents, including a cross-section of active-duty service members and their spouses or domestic partners.

The top issue, identified by 50% of survey participants, was military spouse employment, followed by military pay (48%) and time away from family (39%). Child care, housing and child education concerns all registered at 33%.

Military spouses in the survey reported an unemployment rate of 23% in 2025. That compares with an average nationwide figure of 4.4% last year. Although 67% said they were in the labor force, 70% identified as being underemployed.

Those rates remained stagnant compared with the 2024 survey, in which a majority (66%) also reported experiencing some level of underemployment, such as pay not matching work experience or education or being overqualified for one’s position, according to the 2024 survey findings.

Child care shortages contribute to difficulties maintaining and seeking employment, the survey found, and respondents also expressed concerns with the high cost of child care and the quality of care.

Among survey respondents, families of enlisted service members on active duty reported a greater prevalence of financial and food insecurity than officers’ families.

Just over half of enlisted personnel’s families said they were “just getting by” or “finding it difficult to get by” financially, compared with 17% of officers’ families; 40% of enlisted families reported experiencing food insecurity, compared with 9% of officer families, according to the findings.

The proportion of active-duty family respondents who reported their family financial situation as “living comfortably” or “doing OK” was 62%, the same as 2024 survey findings.



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Story and Photos by Melvina Taylor  
Contributing Writer

The cold months can feel different when living in Sicily, even though the island typically evokes images of beaches, granitas by the sea and cacti-lined roads. It's unlikely that pine forests, foggy mountains and chestnut gathering come to mind. However, near NAS Sigonella, there are plenty of places to get that woodland fix. Below are my three favorite places near the base to go for a nice nature walk.

### Bosco Cerrita

My top recommendation to experience the woodland in Sicily at Bosco Cerrita on Mt. Etna. The incline is not steep, as it's more of a cobbled walk, but proper footwear is still necessary.

This is an out-and-back hike with minimal signage, but if you stick to the paved path, you'll stay on track. The location is perfect for a casual stroll with the opportunity to see local fauna and wildlife. I have seen evidence of many animals, including porcupine quills.

And when the correct temperatures hit, the forest floor gets flooded in yellow and orange leaves. It is extremely dog friendly, and generally quiet. It can get busy during mushrooming or chestnut season, and during the various cycling events that occur.

The winding roads getting to Bosco Cerrita can be tight, but as you drive through the small villages, look out for the festival banners. They have many throughout the year, notably the Porcini Festival in Fornazzo and the



Lago Maulazzo

Ottobrata Festival in Zafferana. You can also see various vendors selling their produce, like apples and pumpkins, or their wares, such as handwoven wicker baskets.

Check the weather before going. There have been a couple times where I wished I had brought a hat and a big coat, something I never thought I'd have use for in Sicily.

### Lago Maulazzo

The next suggestion is in Nebrodi National Park, past the northside of the volcano. While the end goal of this walk is a lake, there are trees, shrubs and streams that line the path to get there. It is about a two-hour drive from NAS Sigonella and is perfectly doable for a day trip. I suggest packing some lunch and a picnic blanket to enjoy at this idyllic lake. The entrance is marked by some signposts and a parking area. Some people choose to drive the dirt road leading to the lake, but I highly



Piano Vetore

recommend walking it.

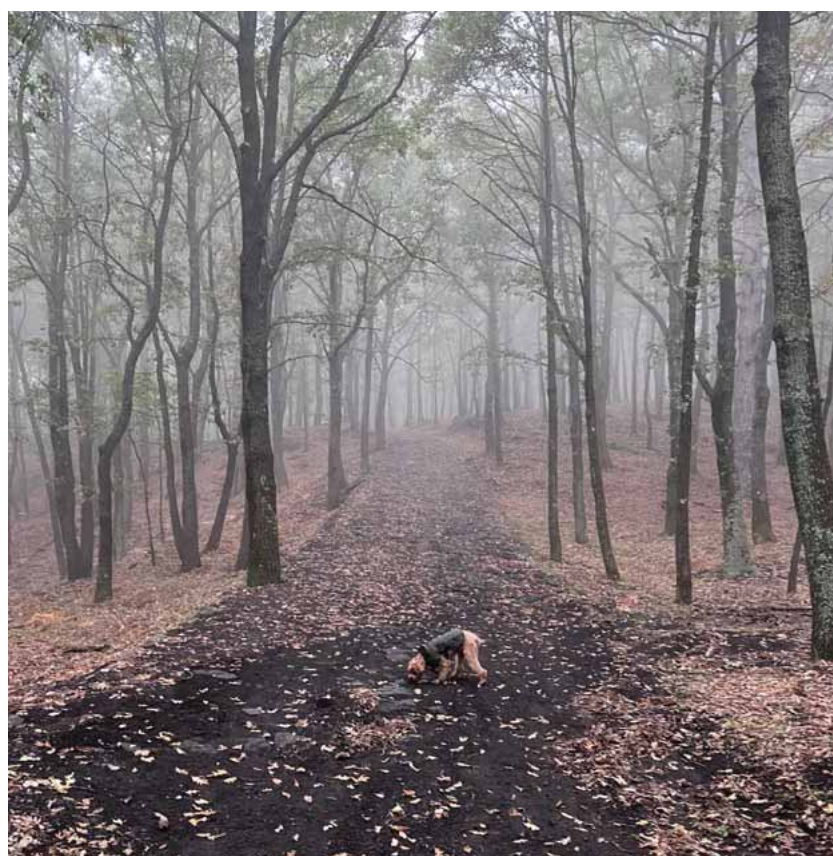
The hike to Lago Maulazzo has little-to-no incline and the path is easy, although there is not much in the way of signage. It doesn't take too long to reach the lake, and along the way you'll be met with a cool breeze, babbling brooks, moss covered trees and a large pond full of frogs (they are noisy). Once you reach the lake, you can choose a spot along the bank (you can easily walk around the whole lake) or choose one of the picnic tables. It is an incredibly peaceful location, and the drive boasts epic views of Etna, particularly in the cold months when she is snow-capped.

### Monte Vetore

This last recommendation actually consists of a couple of spots close to the Silvestri Craters. A popular starting point is called "Nature Trail Monte Nero Zappini" near "Piano Vetore," although you'll find people parking in

many different areas at this location. While not predominately wooded, there are sections that are pine dense. What sets this location apart is the many different routes you can take, making it perfect for revisiting. There are also amazing views of Etna's craters, which are often smoking. You can explore many notable spots here, such as an open-air church, old buildings, and picnic spots, and I encourage looking on Google Maps to uncover the many hidden gems of this location.

Hopefully this guide serves as your gateway into the woods of Sicily. There is so much to explore here. Please keep in mind that it does snow in Sicily, notably on Mount Etna and some places in Nebrodi Park. So, keep an eye on the conditions. If you look outside and see a snowcapped Etna, then it's a good idea to check the roads and weather before venturing out, as some of the mountain roads require chains when the snow arrives.



Bosco Cerrita

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By Kimberly Kephart  
Contributing Writer

For many Americans stationed or traveling in Italy, grappa is a mystery. You see it on menus, you hear it joked about as a “fiery” digestive and occasionally you are handed a clear shot at the end of a meal with little guidance. But grappa, Italy’s traditional spirit made from distilled grape skins, does not have to be intimidating. When you know how to approach it, it becomes one of the most expressive and regionally rooted drinks in the country. Whether you are trying it for the first time or want to understand what is in your glass, here is an easy guide to drinking grappa the way Italians do.

### What is Grappa?

Grappa is a pomace brandy meaning it is distilled from the leftover skins, seeds, and stems of wine grapes. Instead of going to waste. Those grape remnants are turned into a spirit that reflects the variety, region and method used to produce it. Originally a farmer’s drink, grappa has evolved into a crafted spirit with styles ranging from light and floral to rich and aged.

By law, to be called grappa, it must be produced in Italy, made from Italian Grapes and distilled from Pomace. Everything else, style, flavor, strength—depends on the distillery.

If you have only tried harsh table grappa in a restaurant, choosing a younger or aromatic version from a reputable producer is the best

place to start. There are three types of grappa:

1. **Young (Giovane)** Clear, bright, and often the most straightforward. Best if you are new to grappa.
2. **Aromatic (Aromatica)** Made from grapes like Moscato or Gewürztraminer; naturally more fragrant and floral.
3. **Aged (Invecchiata or Riserva)** Rested in wooden barrels, giving it color and a warmer, rounder flavor similar to a mild whiskey or brandy.

In some regions, you will find flavored liqueurs inspired by grappa. Poli’s Elixir Prugna, a soft plum-and-amaretto liqueur, is a perfect example and a gentle introduction for anyone unsure where to start.



### Tasting Grappa

When I learned that the right glass makes an enormous difference to my grappa experience, I was floored. In Italy, grappa is not served in a shot glass. The ideal shape is a tulip glass, narrow at the base and wider at the top, which concentrates the aroma without overwhelming your nose. Many distilleries, including Poli Grappa, now design their own versions to guide the spirit toward the front of the palate, where sweetness is perceived first. If all you have is a small wine or cordial glass, that works too. Just skip the shot glass.

Grappa is typically served in one of two ways: Chilled (8–10°C / 46–50°F) for young or aromatic grappas and slightly warmer at room temperature for aged grappas. If in doubt, err on the cooler side. A cold grappa will soften quickly in the glass as you drink it.

Do not shoot grappa. You sip it, just like you would a good whiskey or cognac. Start with a slow inhale so the alcohol does not overpower. Take a small sip and let it sit on your tongue. Notice where you feel the sweetness — usually at the front of the palate. Take a second sip. This is the one where the flavor shows itself. Good grappa should feel clean, not burning.

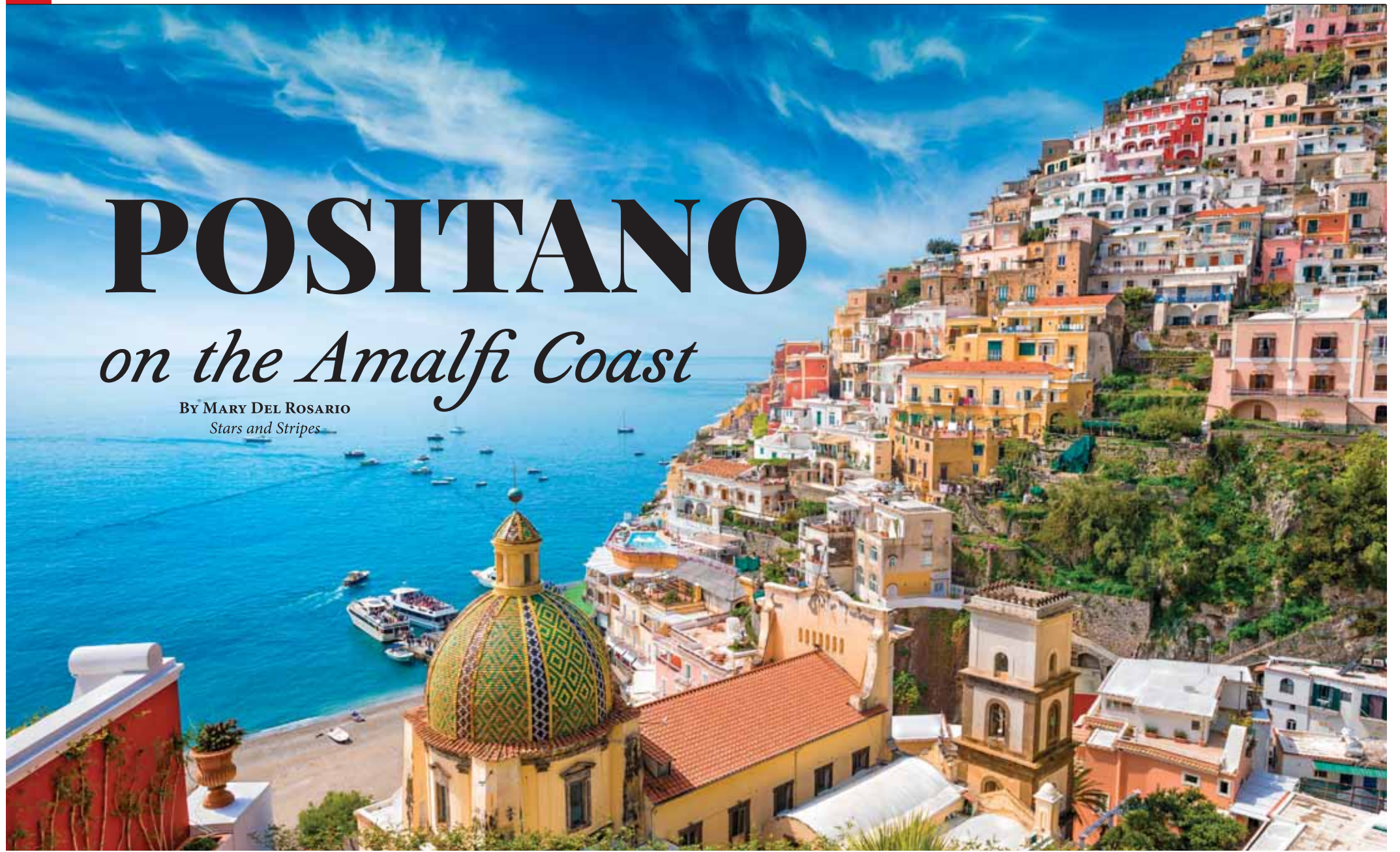
Grappa is traditionally enjoyed after a meal as a digestive, alongside chocolate or biscotti or added to espresso as a “corretto.” A special Veneto ritual called *resentin* mixes grappa with the dregs of coffee.

A few tips:

- Do not shoot grappa. You will miss all the nuances.
- Do not judge it by the cheapest bottle on the table. Quality varies more than with most Italian spirits.
- Do not swirl it like wine. It releases too much alcohol and overwhelms the aroma.
- Do not expect it to taste like vodka or whiskey. Grappa is its own category with its own rules.

Grappa does not have to be the fiery mystery at the end of a meal. Once you know how to drink it, it becomes one of Italy’s most distinctive spirits: expressive, regional and full of personality. If you are stationed or traveling in northern Italy, trying grappa the right way is more than a tasting. It is a window into local tradition and craft continues to define many different regions.





# POSITANO

## *on the Amalfi Coast*

BY MARY DEL ROSARIO  
*Stars and Stripes*

**W**ith multi-colored terracotta houses perched atop a cliff, bougainvillea cascading down restaurants and shops, and the beautiful, sapphire Mediterranean hugging the edges, Positano is everything a picture-perfect Amalfi Coast dream is made of.

Positano is roughly an hour and a half south of Naples and makes a great getaway after settling in. It is accessible by a walk-on ferry from the downtown Naples Molo Beverello port. There is parking at the port. If you choose to drive to Positano, it's best to find lodging that includes parking. The few public parking lots are expensive.

Since Positano is an ideal city for walking, meander down the winding roads and enjoy the atmosphere. Stumbling across a cute café among the many unmarked roads always makes the best memories. Not the walking type? Rent a scooter instead to capture the best views of the town and coastline.

If you're into the art scene, check out the eclectic and traditional art galleries sprinkled across the village. The Art & Craft gallery highlights local painters, while just down the road Absolute Positano hosts a collection of works by local studio artists and ceramicists. If you like shopping, be on the lookout for handmade, leather sandals and linen clothes that are unique to Positano.

For those who love adventure, rent a boat and explore the open, blue Mediterranean. Positano Boats, located near the beach, hires a variety of boats. It is highly recommended

you opt for a skipper on board if you have no experience at sea. Be sure to visit the Green, White and Emerald grottos. These picturesque caves are near Positano along the Amalfi coast and are only reachable via boat. Sunset cruises are also a popular option. Other water activities include stand-up paddling (SUP), parasailing and kayaking.

One of the best things about the Amalfi coast is the ability to visit neighboring villages. The ferry from Positano to Capri is a popular route operated by three ferries with trips up to seven times per day.

### Beaches

In Positano, there is no shortage of jaw-dropping beaches. Whether you're looking for a secluded area or want to mingle with other beachgoers, these are the top beaches to put on your itinerary.

**Spiaggia si Positano Marina Grande** – Known as the “large beach,” this easily recognizable beach is known for its colorful rows of umbrellas dotted along the shore. In the middle is the spiaggia libera or free beach where you don't need to pay to rent an umbrella or chair. Be sure to bring your beach towel. It is one of the livelier beaches in the area. For clubgoers, Music on the Rocks is also located here.

**Fornillo Spiaggia** – This small and secluded beach is away from the Positano dock and can be reached by the Strada Statale.

**Spiaggia Arienzo** – It is known as the “300 steps beach” because there are exactly that many steps beachgoers need to climb down to reach it.

**Laurio Beach** – This small beach is Positano's best-kept secret and is popular among the locals. It is further east along the coast and has two beach restaurants.

### Local Food

Positano offers a great selection of local foods to please the palette. Try some of these favorites while on the Amalfi Coast.

**Lemon sorbet** – The best can be found at Covo dei Saraceni Hotel.

**Seafood pasta** – Served with fresh prawns, octopus and mussels.

**Risotto** – The one in La Terra serves their seafood risotto in a crispy parmesan tortilla.

**Cornetto** – Similar to a croissant but is softer and has less butter.



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## MILITARY

# Admiral: Iran significantly outclassed by US

By ALISON BATH  
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Iran is no match for American military forces, the Navy's highest-ranking active-duty officer said.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, told hundreds of sailors at an all-hands call Feb. 4 that although he doesn't take Iranian posturing lightly, U.S. forces overmatched Tehran's threats "significantly" when it comes to capabilities.

"We have a very good approach of providing the president of the United States military options," Caudle told an audience at Naval Support Activity Naples. "Iran knows this. So, the fact that we have that type of capability is a strong deterrent."

The U.S. bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities in June in an operation dubbed Midnight Hammer was evidence of the American military's "capability to do things on that order and that scale," he said.

Caudle and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman were in Naples on Feb. 4 and 5 to meet with officials and sailors of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet.

The visit followed Caudle's attendance at the Paris Naval Conference earlier in the week.

On Feb. 5, President Donald Trump told NBC News that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei should be "very worried." Trump has repeatedly warned Iran that the U.S. has an "armada" coming to the region.

A day earlier, U.S. Central Command confirmed that a Navy F-35 Lightning II fighter jet had shot down an Iranian drone as it "aggressively" approached the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea.

U.S. and Iranian officials met for negotiations Feb. 6 in Oman. The administration wants Tehran to stop its nuclear program altogether and get rid of its enriched uranium, among other demands.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has beefed up naval forces in the Middle East, sending the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group with its three destroyers and Carrier Air Wing 9 into the region.

There are at least eight Navy destroyers in the area, including two more in the Persian Gulf, one in the Red Sea and two in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

All told, there are 40,000 U.S. service members throughout the Middle East sta-



Sailors attended an all-hands call with Adm. Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, left, and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman on Feb. 4, at U.S. Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy.

PHOTOS BY ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes



Caudle, left, and Perryman speak to sailors.

tioned in Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and other countries.

Caudle's remarks were in response to a sailor's question about concerns that poten-

tial hostilities with Iran could ignite a broader conflict in the Middle East, putting sailors and their families there at risk.

The safety and security of U.S. forces, military families and Defense Department civilians at U.S. Naval Support Activity Bahrain and other locations in the Middle East is of the utmost concern, Caudle said.

He pointed to Joint Force capabilities along with strong partnerships throughout the region that allow base access and overflight of other nations.

Force protection is a persistent conversation for Caudle and the region's top commanders as they weigh concerns and options, he said.

For example, amid escalating tensions with Iran in June, the Pentagon approved voluntary departures for military families. Many chose to temporarily return to the U.S.

But restricting dependents from accompanying sailors assigned to Bahrain or other Navy bases is not a favored option, as it runs counter to the service's efforts to support the well-being of sailors, he said.

"Families are essential to the effectiveness of a sailor's life," Caudle said. "I'm not a big fan of unaccompanied tours."

## NATO allies set to launch Arctic surveillance mission

By JOHN VANDIVER  
Stars and Stripes

NATO is poised to step up its military presence in the Arctic region with a new surveillance mission modeled along the lines of a similar effort in the Baltics.

"The activity will even further strengthen NATO's posture in the Arctic and High North," Col. Martin L. O'Donnell, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe spokesperson, said Feb. 5.

Planning for the effort, to be called Arctic Sentry, is already underway, said O'Donnell, who did not indicate when the operation might launch.

The initiative is the latest example of how NATO is stepping up efforts to counter Russia in northern Europe and along the alliance's eastern flank. A year ago, NATO began Baltic Sentry, which was prompted by a series of suspected undersea sabotage incidents that resulted in damage to energy pipelines and communication cables.

The effort has incorporated a wide range of naval surveillance drones, warships, submarines and aircraft to identify and track ships.

Allied officials have said the mission has paid off over the past year with fewer instances of mischief-making in the Baltic Sea.

NATO's plan to boost operations in the High North comes as the Arctic as a whole has become a major focal point for the alliance. President Donald Trump has argued that the alliance is vulnerable to Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Trump has cited such concerns as a justification for the United States to take control of Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark.

Trump's push for control of the territory has rattled some members of the alliance. However, tensions appear to have eased in recent weeks following Trump's visit last month to an economic forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In Davos, Trump said he and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte had reached the "framework of a future deal" on Greenland. Details of the plan, however, have yet to emerge.

Discussions are now taking place on a potential deal that could see a larger American presence in Greenland, where the U.S. currently has around 200 troops based.



U.S. Marines and sailors prepare to launch an RQ-20 Puma unmanned aircraft system from a combat rubber reconnaissance craft during Operation Baltic Sentry in southern Finland, on Feb. 28. NATO is poised to step up its military presence in the Arctic region with a new surveillance mission similar to Baltic Sentry, an alliance spokesman said.

BRIAN BOLIN JR./U.S. Marine Corps

MILITARY

# Navy, Marine pilots getting new helmets

Next-gen headgear much lighter, easier to upgrade for advanced capabilities

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
Stars and Stripes

Some Navy and Marine Corps aviators will get lighter, more capable helmets in the coming years as the services replace the headgear their pilots have worn for decades with a modern model.

The Navy in January awarded Gentex Corp. a \$22.6 million contract to produce more than 5,000 Next-Generation Fixed Wing Helmets for Navy and Marine pilots flying F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets, EA-18G Growlers and other fixed-wing aircraft, Naval Air Systems Command announced Feb. 4. The new helmets will replace the Gentex-built HGU-55/P and HGU-68P that pilots have worn since the 1980s and 1990s, respectively.

The helmets were designed with extensive input from current Navy and Air Force flyers, according to Gentex. The new helmets are much lighter than the legacy headgear and easily upgradeable to incorporate digital advancements — like modernized heads-up displays and night-vision capabilities — to futureproof

them for the foreseeable future, according to the company.

The new helmet, dubbed the NGFWH, “delivers meaningful advancements in aircrew safety, comfort, and mission performance, ensuring Naval aviators and Naval flight officers are equipped with technology that keeps pace with the rapidly evolving demands of modern aviation,” Robert McCay, Gentex’s vice president for aircrew systems, said in a news release. “We are honored to continue our trusted partnership with the U.S. Navy and look forward to providing the US military and international allies with the [new] helmet system for decades to come.”

Those advances will “improve both aircrew health and combat effectiveness,” according to the Navy.

The advanced carbon-fiber construction reduces the amount of weight pilots feel on their heads and an “optimized center of gravity” is designed to address chronic neck and back strain pilots have reported for decades from long missions with heavy headgear, according

to the Navy.

“The NGFWH is a leap forward in aircrew ergonomics. By utilizing a lighter, more balanced carbon-fiber shell, we are significantly reducing the long-term physical toll on our aviators,” Capt. Joseph Kamara, the Naval Aircrew Systems program manager, said in a news release. “This isn’t just a piece of safety gear; it’s a modular platform that allows us to rapidly integrate the next generation of digital cockpit technology without needing to field an entirely new helmet every few years.”

The latest helmet comes as the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force have all worked in recent years to upgrade pilots’ headgear. The new helmets will not be available to F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter pilots, who wear a highly advanced helmet specifically built for that aircraft. The \$400,000 F-35 helmet takes pilots about two days to have personally fitted to their bodies, Defense Department officials have said.

The Navy said the NGFWH contract awarded to Gentex is open-ended and more of the hel-



U.S. Navy

Some Navy and Marine Corps aviators will get lighter, more capable helmets in the coming years.

mets could be produced after the initial 5,000-helmet order.

## All services working to meet new mandate for free Wi-Fi

By ROSE L. THAYER  
Stars and Stripes

The Army’s first effort to deliver free wireless internet to soldiers living in barracks — part of a militarywide mandate — has exceeded expectations among troops at Fort Riley, Kan.

In less than one month, 807 soldiers have signed up for the free service, said Maj. Guster Cunningham, 1st Infantry Division spokesman. That’s above the 769 sign-ups anticipated at this point in the pilot program involving 11 barracks buildings.

“We believe Fort Riley is the best place to live, raise a family, deploy and return to in this region. The provision of free Wi-Fi that works helps send a clear message to our soldiers who reside in the barracks; we are committed to improving their quality of life at Fort Riley,” Cunningham said in a statement.

The Army launched the pilot program in January in response to a congressional mandate to get broadband internet access to the junior enlisted troops in unaccompanied housing as part of the fiscal year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act, an annual law that lays out Pentagon priorities.

The other services also have begun to meet the requirement, with the Navy the furthest along in the process.

It has free Wi-Fi available at roughly 88% of its unaccompanied housing and expects to reach nearly all barracks by the end of 2027, according to Navy Installations Command.

The next bases in line for internet are Naval Support Activity Naples and Naval Air Station

Signonella in Italy and Naval Support Activity Souda Bay in Greece, said Destiny Sibert, spokeswoman for Navy Installations Command. Exact dates are still pending finalized contracts.

As of Dec. 31, 78% of residents in participating buildings were enrolled in the free Wi-Fi program, Sibert said. Sailors can also upgrade for a fee to get faster download speeds — though about 68% stick with the free plan, she said.

The Air Force has a plan in development that would get internet service to dorms in about 20% of its bases by the end of September, said Laurel Falls, spokeswoman for the Air and Space Forces. This would include Wi-Fi in common spaces of unaccompanied housing.

The Air Force would add 25% coverage in fiscal year 2027 and the remaining installations in the following year, she said.

“The DAF is committed to accelerating this schedule where it can. Internet connectivity will ensure residents can pursue educational opportunities, manage personal administrative tasks, and stay connected with friends and family, among other things,” Falls said.

The Marine Corps said it is developing its plan as well.

Next in the Army for a pilot program is Fort Wainwright, Alaska, in the spring, the service said. The effort will test bringing Wi-Fi to “a remote and isolated environment.”

“Soldiers in permanent-party barracks across the United States can expect to start seeing free Wi-Fi plans around 2027, pending funding,” the Army said.



ADRIAN GREENWOOD/U.S. Army

A U.S. soldier sets up a Bumblebee quadcopter for launch during an exercise at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany on Jan. 28.

## Buzz building in Army after \$5.2M Bumblebee drone deal

By LARA KORTE  
Stars and Stripes

American soldiers facing the ever-present threat of drone barrage on future battlefields will soon be able to call on a real stinger of a knockout force.

The Army signed a \$5.2 million deal for the Bumblebee V2, a type of small inexpensive drone that counters enemy aircraft by crashing directly into them.

Joint Interagency Task Force 401, the Pentagon’s leading counter-drone organization, awarded the contract to Perennial Autonomy in late January, the Army said in a statement.

The agreement calls for an unspecified number of the multirotor, first-person-view drones, which can identify, track and neutralize threats, according to the statement.

“Having a low-collateral kinetic option is not just an advantage,” task force director Brig. Gen. Matthew Ross said in the statement. “It is increasingly becoming essential for protecting our forces.”

The system mimics similar strategies deployed by Ukraine, which has relied on cheap interceptor drones to take down Russian counterparts.

Besides protecting troops in combat, the Bumblebee will also be used to safeguard critical infrastructure at home, Army officials said.

The Bumblebee V2s will first head to Fort Bragg, N.C., for testing to ensure their readiness for the demands of the battlefield, the Army said.

The Pentagon has begun to focus heavily on countering unmanned aircraft, underscoring the danger posed by the drone fleets of adversaries like Russia and Iran.

Last year, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth established task force 401 to coordinate counter-drone efforts across the department.

The group has been scaling up American drone defense systems at home and abroad. It recently updated guidance to give U.S. base commanders a wider berth when it comes to countering enemy drones.



1ST INFANTRY DIVISION/Facebook

Under a program at Fort Riley, Kan., soldiers living in barracks will be able to have free Wi-Fi.

## MILITARY



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN BAEZ/Stars and Stripes

Petty Officer 3rd Class Issuaha Townes interacts with Penny, a therapy dog that regularly participates in the USO's Therapy Tails program at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Jan. 19.

# Navy expands meaning of spiritual support

## Innovation includes community, yoga, canine therapy

BY ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy marked Spiritual Awareness Month on a global scale for the first time, an initiative aimed at supporting sailors of all beliefs, including those who find meaning through community rather than organized religion.

The observance was intended to strengthen sailors' "spiritual wellbeing" through religious services, confidential counseling and other connections to community, according to Navy Installations Command.

"Naval service is incredibly demanding which requires our warriors to remain ready, both physically and spiritually," command spokeswoman Destiny Sibert said by email on

Jan. 27. "This month is dedicated to creating a supportive environment for our Sailors and their families."

The effort began in 2022 as a regional observance at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla. Vice Adm. Scott Gray, head of the installations command, expanded it into a global program beginning this year.

At Yokosuka — home to the U.S. 7th Fleet and the Navy's largest overseas installation — January featured a range of activities, many adapted from existing programs.

Events included all-hands emails, relationship workshops, yoga classes, canine therapy and mindfulness seminars, said Chaplain (Cmdr.) Daniel Clark, the base's command chaplain.

"This doesn't even necessarily have to pertain to religion itself — it's spirituality, it's the anchor," he said during a Jan. 20 interview at Yokosuka.

Outside organized religion, spirituality may include family, shared values, fellow sailors or devotion to country, Clark said.

"It could be along the lines of patriotism — a connection with, say in the United States,



Chaplain (Cmdr.) Daniel Clark discusses the Navy's Spiritual Awareness Month initiative at the Chapel of Hope on Yokosuka Naval Base, Jan. 20.

"Some people may not use the world 'spirituality,' but that really is, in fact, what it is — it's that thing that grounds us and roots us."

Chaplain (Cmdr.) Daniel Clark

having been "degraded in an atmosphere of political correctness and secular humanism."

Clark said Navy Installations Command already emphasizes mental and physical health, making spiritual awareness a natural extension.

He and his team coordinated events with such organizations as the Red Cross, Fleet and Family Services and the USO.

At the USO, that included Therapy Tails, a program allowing sailors to spend time with therapy dogs. Jacee Maldonado, a military spouse, and her dog, Penny, are regular volunteers.

"I really think it just helps them spiritually, and just gives them, you know, kind of of-flooding the bad and just feeling a little bit of joy, even if it's only for a couple of minutes," she said at the Jan. 19 event.

For Petty Officer 3rd Class Issuaha Townes, of Jacksonville, Fla., Therapy Tails and the communities at the USO and Yokosuka's Liberty Center have been important support networks during his time in Japan.

"I can honestly say, as far as me trying to stay grounded, just interacting with people here has helped a lot," he said Jan. 19 at the USO.

the Constitution and the values that it portrays," he said. "Rooting yourself in that, that's one example of a non-religious but spiritual connection.

"Some people may not use the world 'spirituality,' but that really is, in fact, what it is — it's that thing that grounds us and roots us."

Clark said the observance was organized before Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced plans to "make the Chaplain Corps great again."

Hegseth announced in a Dec. 17 video posted to X that he intends to pursue a "top-down cultural shift putting spiritual wellbeing on the same footing as mental and physical health." He also said he plans to reinvigorate the chaplain's role, which he described as

Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher  
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### CONTACT US

633 3rd Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20001  
Editorial: (202) 886-0005  
Advertising: (202) 886-0014  
Additional contact information: [stripes.com](http://stripes.com)

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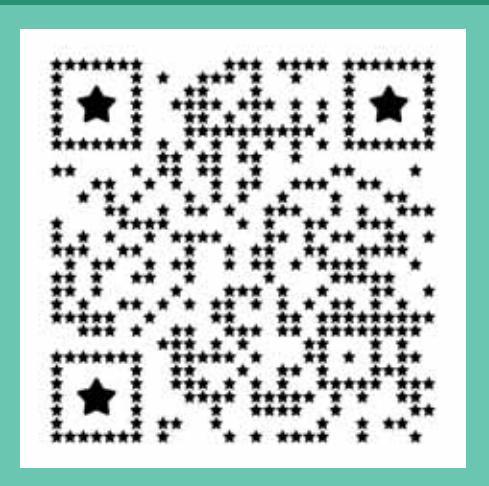
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- Car Rental Service **Economy Rent**
- Dentist **Studio Dentistico Valenti**
- Lunch Spot **Ristorante Locanda Fullini-Zaia**
- Gelato/Granita **86 Il Gelato**
- Special Occasion Restaurant **Ristorante Agriturismo TerraRossa Caneva**
- Breakfast Spot **Brunch Republic Pordonone**
- Cocktail/Wine Bar **Weiss Café**
- Winery **Bessich**
- Pizzeria **Pizzeria Joi**
- Day Trip **Dolomites**
- Children's Attraction **Caribe Bay**
- Hiking Trail **Parco Grotte del Caglieron**

### VICENZA

- Hair Salon/Barber **Centro Estetico Santiago**
- Nail Salon **bonbon nail I S.lazzaro**
- Car Dealership **Patriot Military Automobiles**
- Dentist **Studi Dentistici Dr. Frozzi**
- Pizzeria **Vesuvio**
- Gelato/Granita **Il Gelataio di Vicenza**
- Gelateria La Golosa**
- Gelateria Brustolon**
- Breakfast Spot **Brunch Republic Vicenza**
- Winery **Cantina col Dolvigo**
- Day Trip **Verona**
- Hiking Trail **Lago di Fimon**

## The countdown is on! Southern Italy's winners revealed in our next edition!

### Save for later!



# LIFE TRAINING.



Maternity is a magical chapter in a woman's life, but can also be emotionally and physically challenging. At Reach Out, we take pride in supporting present and future mothers feel at their best, with healthcare services grounded in solid scientific evidence. From mental health support to post-pregnancy rehab, discover how we stand by women from day one throughout their journey to motherhood.



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