

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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Volume 1 No. 13 ©SS 2026

ITALY EDITION

MARCH 19, 2026

## Trial by combat

USS Gerald R. Ford takes new tech into war with Iran **Page 3**

An aviation boatswain's mate signals to an F/A-18F Super Hornet as it launches using the USS Gerald R. Ford's electromagnetic aircraft launching system, or EMALS.

TAH PAYNE/U.S. Navy

Troops may be needed to secure Iranian uranium **Page 6**



Engineers test new tech for breaching enemy lines **Page 13**



Watchdog report outlines challenges affecting readiness **Page 12**



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## COVER STORY



U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

An E/A-18G Growler aircraft launches from the flight deck of the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford, in support of Operation Epic Fury on March 1.

# USS Ford shows off high-tech capabilities

## US Navy's newest aircraft carrier puts its cutting-edge tech on the line in Iran conflict

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford's support of Middle East operations likely is showcasing — and testing — its cutting-edge technology and capabilities, which older carriers lack.

Ford, the Navy's newest and the world's largest aircraft carrier, is more than eight months into a deployment that has seen the ship go from Europe to the Caribbean Sea and back.

The carrier was ordered to the Mediterranean Sea last month, part of a U.S. military buildup as President Donald Trump threatened Iran that an "armada" was on its way to the region.

Among Ford's features is the electromagnetic aircraft launching system, or EMALS, which replaces the more than 70-year-old technology behind the steam-powered system used on the service's Nimitz-class carriers.

EMALS provides a smoother, more controlled launch that puts less stress on aircraft, officials say. It also offers greater flexibility in launching a range of aircraft, including aerial drones, although it's unclear whether Ford has used it to launch unmanned aircraft.

Together, Ford and counterpart aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln carry about 150 aircraft, according to analysts. Those range from F/A-18 Super Hornets to EA-18G Growler airborne electronic attack planes and E-2 Advanced Hawkeye airborne control and command aircraft.

There also is a Marine Corps F-35C Lightning II fighter jet squadron aboard Lincoln, which is now in the Arabian Sea as part of Operation Epic Fury.

The U.S.-Israeli campaign that launched Feb. 28 killed Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and other top Iranian officials.

Ford's flight deck design in conjunction with EMALS and an advanced arresting gear system used to stop aircraft "have contributed to an increased sortie generation rate compared to that of a Nimitz-class carrier," the Navy said in a statement.

Electromagnetic motors are used in the ship's 11 advanced weapons elevators that can carry up to 24,000 pounds of ordnance at 150 feet per minute, according to the Navy.

Other capabilities include six in-deck fuel positions that allow quick aircraft refueling without the need to drag hoses across the flight deck.

Lifestyle improvements such as private bathrooms in officers' state rooms and higher-output air conditioning make sailors more



RUBEN REED/U.S. Navy

**Matt Shipley, deputy assistant secretary of defense for force readiness, left, listens as Chief Warrant Officer Mike Neck explains Ford's in-deck fueling stations on the flight deck during a tour in Norfolk, Va., in 2018.**

comfortable.

The Navy acknowledged that Ford's current deployment would require "sacrifice" from sailors who already have endured extended time away from their families.

Service officials also gave assurances that the ship's sewage and water purification systems were running within normal parameters and that problems were quickly fixed.

Efforts to improve morale and ensure that sailors could stay connected to family included expanded internet availability, the Navy said.

"Our sailors understand the importance of their service," Adm. Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, said in the statement. "They are away from home longer than planned because the nation needs them forward and ready. I want them to take great pride in that calling."

After a stop at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete for resupply and a chance for the crew to rest, Ford is on station in the eastern Mediterranean in support of Operation Epic Fury.

Here are five lesser-known new technologies or design changes on the Ford worth a



DARIEN G. KENNEY/U.S. Navy

**Machinist's Mate Fireman Matthew Johnston operates the plasma arc waste destruction system aboard the first-in-class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford.**

closer look:

### Waste destruction system

This garbage disposal mechanism vaporizes most of Ford's trash, including plastic, allowing it to be legally discharged at sea. With the need to store trash eliminated, plastic no longer needs to be melted down into pucks and then discarded in port.

The system uses a plasma torch powered by an electric arc to burn garbage, resulting in a gas mostly made up of hydrogen and carbon monoxide, a process called plasma arc gasification.

On a normal day, the ship burns about 2,500 to 3,000 pounds of trash at 9,032 degrees Fahrenheit. With the system, 100 pounds of trash can be reduced to 1 pound of ash, according to a Navy fact sheet.

### Rational combination ovens

Part of Ford's food service design includes high-tech ovens that function like Instant Pot pressure cookers but are significantly more powerful. They include product display menus that allow push-button cooking.

The ovens are linked to Wi-Fi and can be monitored. They're also self-cleaning, becoming a sort of self-contained dishwasher complete with soapy water and rinse cycles that eliminate the need for chemicals and scrubbing.

Additionally, Ford-class carriers have just two galleys, as opposed to the five on Nimitz-class ships. That allows for simultaneous, centralized service from the same source and cooks.

Food storage is located directly below the galleys, which are in the ship's centerline, allowing more direct access and decreasing the staffing needed to break down and store

supplies.

### Dual-band radar

This feature combines separate multifunction and volume search radars operating on different frequencies. It is managed by a single software program, minimizing human intervention and maximizing reaction time.

The system, which provides a 360-degree air picture around the ship, is the primary radar for contacting aircraft. It features a three-panel, or array, radar without moving parts, which allows for a smaller island.

Ford is the only carrier of its class with dual-band radar, which the Navy has jettisoned in favor of enterprise air surveillance radar for the USS John F. Kennedy and subsequent Ford-class carriers.

### Stores elevators

There are 10 programmable store elevators for supplies aboard the Ford situated over centralized storerooms on various levels.

The design allows for transfer of food and supplies directly into the appropriate storerooms, shrinking the working crew from the typical 50 to 100 sailors on other ships and minimizing time spent on the flight deck and in the hangar bay during replenishment.

### In-deck fueling stations

The Ford flight deck includes six in-deck fueling stations, four along the fighter line and two farther forward.

The stations accelerate fueling speed and eliminate the need for crew members to drag fuel lines across the deck. The arrangement is part of a NASCAR-style approach to fueling, maintaining and arming planes on the Ford.

That concept also is aided by the ship's smaller island, which sits farther aft to create more room to move aircraft around.

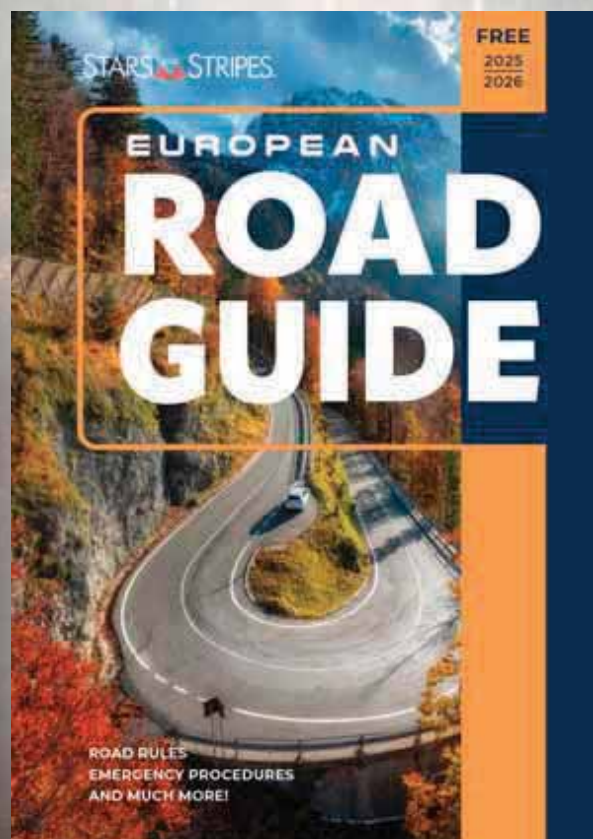


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MILITARY



Photos by the U.S. Navy

Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln sails in support of Operation Epic Fury on March 3.

# Keeping up with the carriers

11 flattops set for missions, in maintenance, more

By GARY WARNER  
Stars and Stripes

The United States has 11 aircraft carriers spread around the world.

Ten are Nimitz-class carriers, including the USS Abraham Lincoln, currently involved in air operations against Iran in Operation Epic Fury.

The USS Gerald R. Ford, the first of a new class of carriers being built at HII Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia, is passing through the Suez Canal to take up position in the Red Sea for attacks on Iran.

USS George H.W. Bush and USS Theodore Roosevelt are completing training ahead of their expected deployments.

Four carriers — USS John C. Stennis, USS Dwight Eisenhower, USS Ronald Reagan and USS Harry Truman — are undergoing maintenance, ranging from the Stennis' multiyear midlife overhaul to 17-month incremental maintenance for the Eisenhower and Reagan.

The Navy has announced plans to retire the USS Nimitz later this year, and the USS John F. Kennedy is expected to be commissioned and accepted into the Navy in March 2027.

It is slated to be homeported at Naval Base Kitsap near Seattle in 2029.

The Navy has struggled to maintain the minimum 11 carriers as required by a law passed by Congress in 2007. Nimitz-class carriers are designed for a service life of 50 years, with a major refueling and overhaul at the 25-year mark.

The last Nimitz-class carrier, USS George H.W. Bush, was commissioned in January 2009. More than eight years passed before the USS Gerald R. Ford, the first of 10 planned new-generation carriers, was commissioned in July 2017. The Ford was designated to replace the former USS Enterprise, which was decommissioned in 2012.

The Navy originally planned to retire the Nimitz in 2025 and the second-oldest carrier of the Nimitz class, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, in 2026.

It revised the timeline late last year so that the Nimitz will retire in 2026, while the Eisenhower — which turns 50 in 2027 — will remain in service until the 2030s. Extensions for the remainder of the Nimitz class carriers are also expected.

With each carrier capable of carrying more than 60 attack jets, as well as reconnaissance, rescue and transport aircraft, the shortage of even one carrier is a significant cut to the ability of the U.S. to project naval power in multiple areas simultaneously, said Mark Cancian, an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

“When Iran erupted and the president said ‘help is on the way,’ the United States didn’t have the forces, particularly a carrier, to make that threat real,” Cancian said.

**USS Nimitz**

**Commissioned:** May 1975.



A U.S. sailor signals an F/A-18E Super Hornet on the Lincoln's flight deck on March 4.

**Location:** Off coast of California.

**Status:** Deployed on Friday for exercises off South America, with eventual shift of homeport to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., later in the spring. The Navy's oldest aircraft carrier is scheduled to begin retirement proceedings in 2026.

**Homeport:** Changing from Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., to Naval Station Norfolk.

**USS Dwight D. Eisenhower**

**Commissioned:** October 1977.

**Location:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**Status:** Undergoing planned incremental availability maintenance.

**Homeport:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**USS Carl Vinson**

**Commissioned:** March 1982.

**Location:** Naval Air Station North Island, Calif.

**Status:** Undergoing post-deployment availability.

**Homeport:** Naval Air Station North Island.

**USS Theodore Roosevelt**

**Commissioned:** October 1986.

**Location:** Naval Air Station North Island.

**Status:** Undergoing Fleet Replacement Squadron Carrier Qualifications, which trains pilots to transition into combat aircraft they will be flying at sea.

**Homeport:** Naval Air Station North Island.

**USS Abraham Lincoln**

**Commissioned:** November 1989.

**Location:** Currently operating in the Middle East.

**Status:** Deployed since November 2025, first in the Pacific and then in the Indian Ocean. The Lincoln currently is in the Arabian Sea deployed as part of Operation Epic Fury.

**Homeport:** Naval Air Station North Island.

**USS George Washington**

**Commissioned:** July 1992.

**Location:** Yokosuka, Japan.

**Status:** The Navy's only forward homeported aircraft carrier is finishing in-port maintenance.

**Homeport:** Yokosuka, Japan.

**USS John C. Stennis**

**Commissioned:** December 1995.

**Location:** Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Undergoing multiyear midlife Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH) that includes replenishing the two nuclear power plants on a Nimitz-class carrier. Reactors are turned off, and after cooling, rods are removed and replaced with new fuel assemblies. Overhaul of major systems and upgrades to most modern equipment available. Electrical and plumbing systems are updated. Weapons systems, radar, and communications are upgraded.

**Homeport:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**USS Harry S. Truman**

**Commissioned:** July 1998.

**Location:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**Status:** Undergoing Planned Incremental Availability. The Truman would be the next carrier to go into RICOH after Stennis.

**Homeport:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**USS Ronald Reagan**

**Commissioned:** July 2003.

**Location:** Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Bremerton, Wash.

**Status:** Undergoing planned incremental availability. Currently in dry dock. Work schedule to be completed later this year.

**Homeport:** Naval Base Kitsap.

**USS George H.W. Bush**

**Commissioned:** January 2009.

**Location:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**Status:** Finished U.S. Navy Composite Training Unit Exercise, preparing for deployment with a carrier strike group. The George H.W. Bush is preparing for deployment to the Middle East to relieve USS Gerald R. Ford.

**Homeport:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**USS Gerald R. Ford**

**Commissioned:** July 2017.

**Location:** Middle East in support of Operation Epic Fury. It was previously involved in the operation to seize Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

**Status:** Deployed for attack on Iran. The Ford was sent from Venezuela and has now been deployed for nine months with no date for its eventual return to its homeport.

**Homeport:** Naval Station Norfolk.

**PCUs**

Prior to commissioning, aircraft carriers are officially referred to as PCUs — Pre-Commissioning Units. The ships receive their official name when commissioned into the Navy. Current PCUs and their name once commissioned. The Navy plans on a total of 10 Ford-class carriers. The Secretary of the Navy has the authority to name the four ships.

**USS John F. Kennedy**

**Commissioning expected:** 2027.

**Location:** Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Undergoing builder's sea trials. Slated to replace USS Nimitz in the fleet.

**Homeport:** Planned for Naval Base Kitsap in 2029.

**USS Enterprise**

**Commissioning expected:** 2030.

**Location:** Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Under construction. Slated to replace USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in fleet.

**Homeport:** TBD.

**USS Doris Miller**

**Commissioning:** TBD.

**Location:** Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Under construction. Slated to replace USS Carl Vinson in fleet.

**Homeport:** TBD.

**USS William J. Clinton**

**Commissioning:** TBD.

**Location:** To be built at Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Planned. Slated to replace USS Theodore Roosevelt.

**Homeport:** TBD.

**USS George W. Bush**

**Commissioning:** TBD.

**Location:** To be built at Newport News, Va.

**Status:** Planned. Slated to replace USS Abraham Lincoln.

**Homeport:** TBD.

**Future PCUs**

Navy plans call for four additional unnamed Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be built at Newport News with commissioning in the second half of the 21st century.

## MILITARY



ARILEZA SOTAKBAR, ISNA/AP

Residents look on and take pictures as flames and smoke rise from an oil storage facility struck as attacks hit the city during the U.S.-Israeli military campaign in Tehran, Iran, on Feb. 28.

# 'The mother of all commando raids'

## US may need to put boots on ground to secure uranium in Iran, analysts say

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. special operations forces may be needed to secure Iran's uranium stockpiles, analysts say, as uncertainty over missing nuclear material persists amid American airstrikes on Iranian military targets.

Thousands of U.S. and Israeli attacks have destroyed warships, missile launchers, facilities and weaponry. But questions about the fate of canisters containing enriched uranium could trigger action on the ground.

In June, the U.S. carried out bunker-busting attacks on Iran's nuclear program that were believed to set the program back years. Still, nuclear proliferation experts warn that nearly 1,000 pounds of uranium could be weaponized if centrifuges remain operational.

"It would take the mother of all commando raids — plus heavy equipment — to retrieve the canisters," Barbara Slavin, an expert on Iran with the Stimson Center think tank, wrote in an email.

President Donald Trump didn't rule out such a move in the future.

"Right now, we're just decimating them, but we haven't gone after it," Trump said aboard Air Force One on March 9, referring to Iran's nuclear sites. "But (it's) something we could do later on. We wouldn't do it now."

Suspected locations for the material include damaged tunnel complexes at Iran's Esfahan site and inside facilities at Fordow and Natanz.

Recovering the material could require digging through rubble in harsh terrain while a war is underway, analysts say. Given uncertainty over who ends up controlling Iran's nuclear sites, the U.S. could face a scramble to seize enriched uranium and centrifuges.

"If the current conflict leads to the erosion and eventual loss of control by the Iranian regime, and the emergence of instability or a power vacuum, the security of nuclear mate-

**"To truly effect both regime change and secure the vulnerable WMD-relevant material in Iran, the United States may yet have to put boots on the ground."**

Stimson Center think tank

rials, technology and knowledge will be a major issue," wrote Daniel Salisbury and Alexander Bollfrass, experts with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in an analysis.

A regime downfall could create an opening for theft of centrifuges and materials by groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic State, Slavin wrote in a Stimson Center analysis co-authored with proliferation experts Richard Cupitt and Christina McAllister.

Attempts by the U.S. military to recover the material likely would involve elite special operations forces supported by heavy equipment and technical experts, analysts say.

"To truly effect both regime change and secure the vulnerable WMD-relevant material in Iran, the United States may yet have to put boots on the ground," the Stimson Center report said.

"Verifying compliance with dismantling its nuclear enrichment, missile, and drone programs, and investigating potential biological and chemical weapons programs and, if confirmed, dismantling them, will certainly take large numbers of investigators and inspectors at the very least," the report said.

Trump has shown a willingness to launch



AP

An image from Vantor shows the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran on March 2, after U.S. attacks.

high-risk operations with special operations troops.

In January, the U.S. Army's Delta Force swooped into Venezuela in a daring operation to capture dictator Nicolás Maduro. Last month, Trump awarded U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 5 Eric Slover with the Medal of Honor for his heroics during the raid.

For the Pentagon, the stated main objective of Operation Epic Fury is the dismantling of Iran's ability to project military power, including the destruction of its missile and drone programs.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Power Studies, said many of the administration's goals can be achieved by airstrikes.

What stands out so far is the level of detailed intelligence on Iranian targets that has enabled the U.S. and Israel to achieve air dominance and operate at will, he said.

"It is the intelligence with respect to knowing where the systems and capabilities that

you want to have an effect upon are located. And it's not just simply a question of destroying every single missile that the Iranians possess, but it's also affecting their ability to use them, and we demonstrated over and over again how that is possible with air power," Deptula said.

How prepared the U.S. is to move quickly to secure Iran's nuclear material is an open question.

The overall attack "appears to have been planned for months with the explicit goal of encouraging the overthrow of the government. It is less clear, however, that there has been any associated forethought given to securing the stockpiles," the Stimson Center report said.

But when it comes to a plan for containing Iran's nuclear program, and making sure the material doesn't fall into the wrong hands, Deptula said it is a virtual certainty that military commanders have been planning through scenarios.

## MILITARY

# Congress clears path for Medal of Honor

## Legendary Marine officer cited for actions in Vietnam

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Senate cleared the way for a legendary Force Reconnaissance Marine to receive the Medal of Honor for his lifesaving actions in April 1967 that spared the lives of his nine-man team during a vicious fight in Vietnam.

The unanimous approval of the bill on March 3 waived time restrictions to consider the Medal of Honor for retired Maj. James Capers Jr., who despite his own horrible injuries cleared the way for his Recon team to safely evacuate the village of Phu Loc after it was ambushed by North Vietnamese soldiers. Capers, 88, helped his Marines — all of them wounded in the attack — board a helicopter and fought off the assaulting force to ensure the bird's escape.

The Senate vote came about one month after the House approved the measure, sending the bill to President Donald Trump. Trump will have the final say on if the Silver Star awarded to Capers in 2010 for his actions at Phu Loc will be upgraded to the nation's top military honor.

"I'm proud Congress has acted to send this legislation to the President's desk to ensure Maj. Capers receives the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award for valor, and the gratitude of a nation he served with honor," Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C., who introduced the legislation to allow Capers the Medal of Honor in May 2025, said in a statement. "We applaud you, and our nation thanks you for your service."

Norman has lobbied Trump since the beginning of his second administration to award Capers the Medal of Honor. Many other supporters, including several veterans' groups and filmmakers, have worked even longer to see Capers' award upgraded.

Capers, in a 2018 interview with Stars and Stripes, said he was proud to receive the Silver Star, the military's third highest award for battlefield valor.

That award came after he was nominated for the Medal of Honor, but the Marine Corps downgraded the decoration after review. Receiving the top award for heroism, he said, would mean more for the men with whom he fought and bled that day at Phu Loc. Capers also said it would alleviate any concern that his skin color influenced the downgrade decision.

Capers, the first Black man to lead a Marine reconnaissance company and receive a battlefield commission, had been in Vietnam about a year



PATRICK KING/U.S. Marine Corps

**Former Marine Corps Maj. James Capers salutes during a ceremony at Camp Lejeune, N.C., in June 2021.**

when his unit — known as Team Broadminded — was ambushed that day in April 1967. The team had already conducted dozens of highly classified commando raids, often behind enemy lines.

But the fighting that day at Phu Loc was perhaps more intense than any had ever seen, Capers said.

The attack was initiated by claymore mines that ripped Capers' abdomen open and broke his leg, but he was undeterred. He charged ahead to free his injured men from the assault.

"If I was going to die there in Vietnam, I was going to die fighting," Capers said.

He fought off the attacking force — an entire NVA regiment — for nearly an hour, taking bullet wounds to both of his legs, as his team escaped to a landing zone for helicopter extraction.

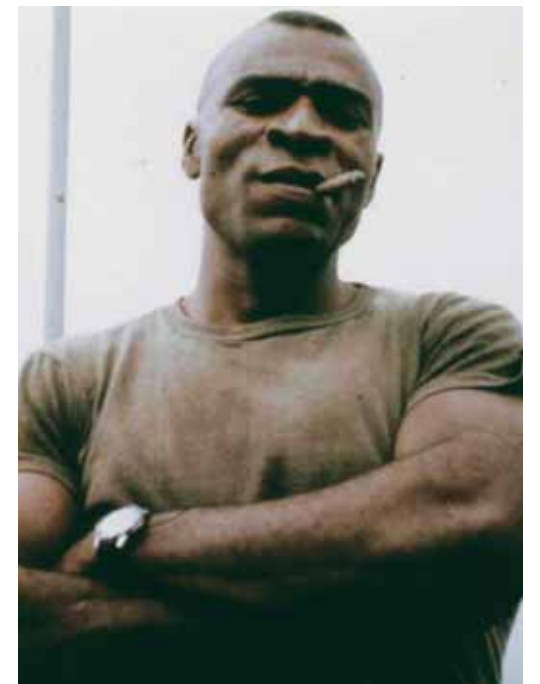
When the chopper arrived, Capers ordered his men and their dead war dog — King, who was killed in the attack — loaded first. Then he jumped off the helicopter as it struggled to take off.

"I figured it's better to lose one man than to lose the whole team," Capers said. "Any commander worth his salt would care for his men before his self."

But his men objected, ultimately, pulling Capers back aboard the helicopter, which after

two attempts escaped the battle. All nine members of Capers' unit survived the enemy ambush, each injured but alive.

Capers "demonstrated extraordinary courage and leadership during the Vietnam War, risking everything to save his fellow Marines while severely wounded," Norman said. "His heroism has been known for decades, but the recognition he deserves has been far too long in coming."



MJC Ent.

**James Capers Jr. is pictured in the undated photo during his time in Vietnam as a team leader in Third Force Recon.**

**"If I was going to die there in Vietnam, I was going to die fighting"**

**Retired Maj. James Capers Jr.**

## NASA facility in Ohio may reopen for hypersonic tests

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force may revive a shuttered wind tunnel to test hypersonic systems in realistic atmospheric conditions, according to a recent offer published on the government contracting site.

The service's test center at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., is researching whether there are any contractors, including small businesses, to lead a project to reactivate a NASA hypersonic test center in Sandusky, Ohio.

Located at the Neil Armstrong Test Facility, the tunnel is capable of testing hypersonic vehicles and engines at speeds up to Mach 7 and altitudes up to 120,000 feet, according to NASA.

Hypersonic flight is generally defined as speeds at or beyond Mach 5. The F-35 Lightning II's top speed, by contrast, is Mach 1.6, or about 1,200 mph, according to Lockheed Martin.

Hypersonic weapons are considered key to future military conflicts, with faster speeds giving targets less time to evade or defend themselves, an Atlantic Council report last year said.

The wind tunnel reactivation process is expected to take 18 to 24 months, according to the solicitation published last month. Responses are due by March 19.

The facility is designed to create a synthetic air test medium that chemically and thermodynamically mimics the composition of the atmospheric air, according to the document.

An inventory and inspection of the wind tunnel indicates that it is still viable, the solicitation states.

"The facility has been in a mothballed status since 2007, and its reactivation presents a unique opportunity to fill a critical national testing capability gap," the announcement says.

It also notes that the Pentagon is committed to the development of scramjet technologies in support of hypersonic flight.

Unlike conventional jet engines, which use moving parts like compressors and turbines for combustion, scramjets use external air to combust and ignite fuel, making them ideally suited for hypersonic flight within the atmosphere, according to NASA.

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**N**estled inside a large gorge in southeastern Sicily are the idyllic turquoise waters of the Riserva Naturale Cavagrande del Cassibile. Although this dog-friendly hike is challenging, the stunning views sweep away any fatigue. In addition to marveling at the grandeur, you can reward yourself with a refreshing swim in the plunge pools at the bottom. The water offers a fun swim somewhere that isn't a beach, making this a real hidden gem in Sicily.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Distance: roughly 2.80 miles
- Time: Half to full day
- Difficulty: Challenging
- Elevation Gain: roughly 1,065 feet

From NAS Sigonella, the canyon is an hour and a half drive south, in the province of Syracuse. There are two entry points with two different trails to access the gorge and pools – one in the north and another in the south. The northern trailhead is the one that you will be directed to when searching for the Cavagrande del Cassibile on Google Maps. Though the hike itself may be easier, I do not recommend this starting point. It requires some off-road driving on a single-lane unpaved and pothole-riddled road and also prohibits dogs.

Since my dog loves to hike, I went down to the southern trailhead. To find this entry point, you should search for “Bar Trattoria Pizzeria Cava Grande Ra Zia Gina” on Google Maps. This will guide you to a paid parking area (I was charged four euros) with a cafe/bar that serves snacks, refreshments and food (grabbing ice cream here post-hike was a great reward). The south location is dog-friendly, and I saw many others with their dogs, big and small.

#### SOUTH TRAIL

The most important thing to note about this hike is that you must only do what is within your comfort level. There is no doubt that there are sections of the route that are challenging, though I spotted many children and people of varying abilities taking their time. Bringing a buddy is always advisable for safety.

As for the trail itself, you will be starting from the top of the canyon. At a leisurely pace with a



small dog, it took me three hours and 20 minutes to complete a roundtrip hike – from trailhead at the top, down into the canyon and back out. This timing does not factor in the well-deserved time I spent lounging around and swimming in the pools at the bottom. For this reason, I would budget at least a half-day for this trip, but a full day will give you plenty of time to enjoy the canyon. Bring a picnic.

For the most part, the path is outlined clearly, except at the bottom of the canyon where you are free to explore the series of water-filled pools. The path down varies in grade and steepness (your thighs will feel the burn on the return ascent) and there are spots that are not well manicured. Once you get to the bottom, there are multiple opportunities to cross the stream (the Cassibile River) that runs through the middle. Ensure the safety of yourself and others before crossing the water because there is a slip hazard. To combat this, bring grippy water shoes.

There are many outstanding views on the trek. Stopping at the lookout points really inspires awe due to the sheer magnitude of the gorge. You can also spot systems of houses and structures that

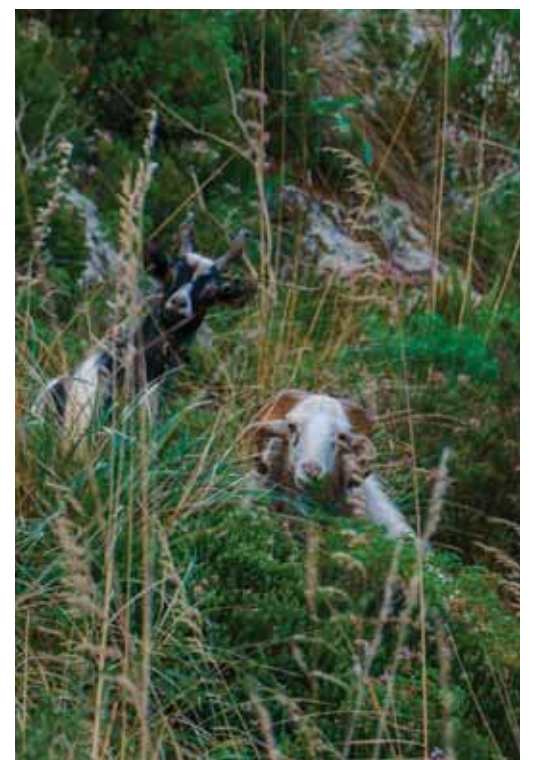


were dug into the canyon's sides that date back several centuries. Any archaeological enthusiast will enjoy seeing the most notable of these systems, “Grotta dei Briganti,” or Brigand's Cave.

Once at the valley floor, the landscape is completely different. The glistening pools are so inviting for a swim and are a great way to cool off. It is here, listening to the rush of the waterfalls and taking in the beautiful Mediterranean flora, that you truly notice how spectacular this location is.

#### TIPS

- Wear appropriate hiking gear such as trekking shoes for the uneven and at times slippery terrain, and long trousers for walking through brush.
- Be sure to bring some cash for parking and the bar at the trailhead.
- Bring a lot of water and wear sunscreen; the pools are not well-shaded.
- Pack a picnic lunch to enjoy your time at bottom.
- Wear a bathing suit under your clothes for a swim.



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# Vacationing in a European Holiday Village

By Kat Nickola  
Stars and Stripes

Vacations don't need to be overscheduled sightseeing tours. Sometimes what you really need is some simple relaxing downtime with your family; a safe place to go with activities and services that facilitate family fun. In Europe, holiday villages fill this niche and then some.

A holiday village is a purpose-built vacation resort that offers accommodations, activities, time out in nature and indoor pursuits with the goal of bringing families together. Visualize a family-oriented summer camp, but with conveniences that both teens and adults want like lively evening events, restaurants and adrenaline options. This is quality time galore!

Reservations at a holiday village typically include your accommodation, use of facilities and some of the activities. Food at restaurants or on-site grocery stores costs extra as most visitors self-cater to some extent. The accommodations range from glamping tents to luxury homes and nearly always include a complete kitchen. The most common room on offer is somewhere in the middle: a small fully equipped cabin.

Four well-established companies have holiday villages throughout Europe, and each has its own vibe.



## EuroParcs

Another Dutch-run chain of holiday villages, EuroParcs is less expensive than Centre Parcs, but still offer plenty to do. Here, the focus is on outdoor pursuits or local area attractions. Accommodations range from camp pitches and glamping tents to cabins and tiny houses. They are often located near other tourist sites and cities so it's easy to venture out. At the parks there are sports fields, playgrounds, kid's clubs and trails. Many also have pools, natural swimming lakes or wellness centers. In addition, there is a restaurant and snack bar for the times you don't feel like cooking inside your rental.

EuroParcs offer 50 holiday villages in:

- Austria
- Belgium
- Germany
- Luxembourg

## Canvas Holidays

This English company calls its holiday villages campsites, but don't let that deter you. Much like Eurocamp, very few have tent or RV pitches and instead have a village of comfortable and modern mobile homes or glamping tents available to rent. The goal here is outdoor adventures, and most Canvas Holidays villages are located in sunny, warm places where the beach and countryside are the focus. They also have some of the best budget vacations available on this list. Kids clubs are a hit with families while evening discos and field trips are available for teenagers. In addition, almost all villages have an extensive outdoor swimming pool with slides and inflatable obstacle courses. There will also be sports facilities, a small cafe, a grocery store and evening entertainment.

Canvas Holidays offer over 200 holiday villages in:

- Austria
- Croatia
- France
- Germany
- Holland
- Italy
- Spain
- Switzerland

## Eurocamp

A British company, Eurocamp has the most variety of village types. There is no campsite available for your own tent or RV. Instead, the word "camp" is used to refer to a fun family outdoors-focused experience; visualize grilling out at a nice state park campground while the kids play at the playground or your teenagers take a kayak out on the lake. Accommodations are in well-equipped mobile homes. Eurocamp villages are sorted into four different categories. The first are called 'Campsites' and are the original holiday villages with a pool, playground and small cafe. In the next category are the 'Villages' which have bigger pools with slides, kids' clubs and more activities; The 'Resorts' category takes it to the next level with spas, restaurants, nighttime entertainment, and beachy locations. Lastly, the 'Splash Parcs' have extensive indoor and outdoor pools, waterslides and spas.

Eurocamp offers 150 holiday villages in:

- Austria
- Croatia
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Luxembourg
- Netherlands
- Spain
- Switzerland



## Centre Parcs

The villages at this Dutch-run company have the most upscale options on this list with cottages, fancy treehouses and luxury homes tastefully secluded and surrounded by nature. Centre Parcs guarantees that each park is 90 percent nature. Each has numerous activities included like a petting farm, adventure trails, playgrounds, sports fields, skate parks, evening entertainment and a big indoor water park called AquaMundo. There are also plenty of other paid activities like spa visits, ropes courses, paddleboarding, horseback riding, paintball, archery and craft workshops. There are cafes and restaurants onsite, plus a super-market for groceries.

Centre Parcs offer 34 holiday villages in:

- Belgium
- France
- Germany
- Ireland
- U.K.



TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE | stripesurope.com



# Bassano del Grappa:

## A Day Trip for History, Drinks and Mountain Views

By Kimberly Kephart  
Contributing Writer

Bridge Ponte degli Alpini at river Brenta Bassano

©YASONYA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Tucked at the foot of the Venetian Alps, Bassano Del Grappa is not just another pretty Italian town. It is a perfect blend of history, culture and striking scenery, all within easy reach for a rewarding day trip from Vicenza, Aviano or Venice.

Start your visit where the town's identity is most visible: the iconic Ponte Vecchio, also known as the **Ponte degli Alpini**. Designed by Andrea Palladio in the 16th Century and rebuilt several times due to damage from World War I, the covered wooden bridge stands as a symbol of Bassano Del Grappa's past. It is also a gathering place and you will often spot veterans of the Alpini corps sharing stories over a glass of local grappa nearby.

**Grappa**, the town's namesake, and signature spirit is serious business here, so it's a great place to taste some. Take time to visit a distillery or two, Poli and Nardini are historic names, and offer the same fiery, fragrant brandy made

from grape pomace. Even if you are not usually a fan of grappa the process and tradition behind it are worth experiencing.

Right along the main street, you'll find the **Poli Grappa Museum**. This is a great starting point for those who want to learn more about the history of Grappa and of course the different types. One recommendation is to head into **Antico Laboratorio San Giuseppe** to pick up some gifts for you or your family. If you ask nicely the owners will let you sneak a few sips.

Learn about the Alpini at a local restaurant. Just steps from the bridge, the **Taverna Al Ponte** doubles as a cozy spot for lunch and an informal museum dedicated to the Alpini,

Italy's elite mountain troops. It's here that you'll have one of the best meat and cheeseboards in a beautiful local atmosphere. You can even get an Aperol Spritz for less than €5. After you are done, head downstairs to the **Alpini Museum** and learn a little bit about the history of the Alpini. The photos and the artifacts give insight into the role these soldiers played in WWI and WWII, especially in the brutal campaigns fought in the mountains above.

Speaking of history, American author Ernest Hemingway spent time in this region as an ambulance driver during WWI and he was gravely wounded near the Piave River not far from Bassano del Grappa. The landscapes and wartime atmosphere he experienced in northern Italy deeply influenced his novel "A Farewell to Arms." You can even take time to visit a museum dedicated to his time in the area. **The Hemingway Museum** is small and does not have much in the way of English translation but is honestly worth a small visit!

From the center of town, it's a short walk up to the **Castello Degli Ezzelini**, a medieval fortress with panoramic views and a small art gallery inside. The castle grounds are peaceful and will give you a higher vantage point over the rooftops and winding streets of the old town. On good air quality days, the mountains seem to extend on forever and are made more beautiful by the blue glacial color of the Piave River.

If time allows, or if you are up for an afternoon adventure, drive up to **Monte Grappa**. This would be the perfect way to end your day, sunsets here are incredible. The winding road climbs through forested hills to a monumental WWI memorial and offers jaw-dropping views over the Venetian plain. It is a humbling, quiet place that reflects the cost of the wars fought here and rewards visitors with one of the most expansive vistas in Northern Italy.



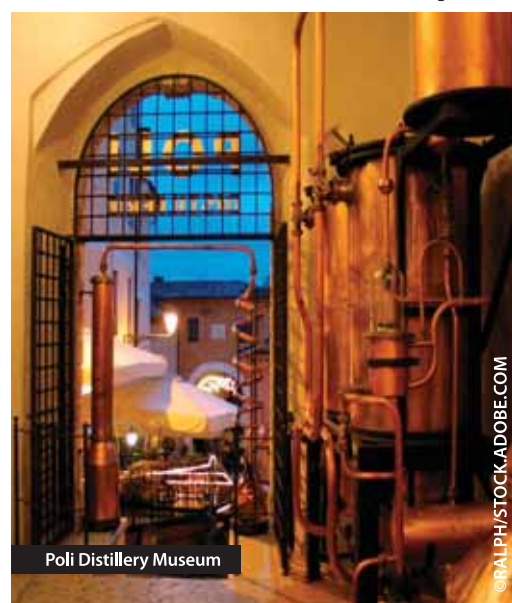
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Bassano Del Grappa is about a one-hour drive from Vicenza and two hours from Aviano. Trains run regularly from nearby cities like Padova and Treviso. From Venice Mestre, it is about 1.5 Hours. Wear comfortable shoes, have a jacket for higher elevations and assign a designated driver (if sampling grappa). It is wise to remember that many restaurants and businesses close for what is called Riposo. Please keep this in mind when planning your day. You'll likely run into this in smaller towns throughout Italy. It is also wise to carry snacks on the off chance you miss lunch.



Poli Distillery Museum

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Poli Distillery Museum

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Hemingway Museum

©MICHAEL GEISSINGER/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



Castello degli Ezzelini

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## MILITARY

# GAO cites challenges affecting readiness

Pentagon has not fully implemented earlier recommendations

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Years of delayed maintenance and staffing shortfalls continue to drag down overall readiness, according to a Defense Department watchdog agency report that acknowledged the military's ability to carry out specific missions despite those limitations.

The Government Accountability Office report released earlier this month drew on years of studies examining issues such as the condition of ships and aircraft, personnel levels and training.

The report was assembled before the U.S. launched its most recent attacks on Iran and makes no mention of the ongoing war. But its findings are less focused on the immediate needs of a major campaign than on long-term sustainability.

The GAO said the Pentagon has yet to fully implement more than 150 recommendations from earlier reviews intended to improve equipment availability, strengthen personnel pipelines and support better decision-making on readiness.

Many of those recommendations span multiple administrations and remain open years after they were issued. The GAO said the Defense Department generally agreed with its recommendations.

"U.S. military readiness has been degraded over the last two decades due to a variety of challenges, including maintaining existing systems while acquiring new capabilities," the report says.

One of the most persistent problems involves a shortage of trained maintainers for ships and aircraft.

Technicians and mechanics are responsible for keeping complex systems operating safely, and the GAO said many units lack enough qualified workers to keep up with required repairs.

Short staffing has contributed to long-running maintenance backlogs, with aircraft and ships spending extended periods out of service.

Across the Army and Air Force, only two of 27 aircraft types reviewed met their availability targets in most years between 2015 and 2024, the report said. The Army's CH 47F Chinook heavy-lift helicopter and the Air Force's C 130J transport plane failed to meet availability goals for much of the past decade, as units struggled with parts shortages and delayed depot work.

The Navy reported similar problems, the GAO found.

Executive officers surveyed by GAO said many ships did not have enough trained sailors to complete required maintenance while underway, leaving some tasks deferred until vessels returned to port.

Safety concerns also weighed on readiness. The report noted an increase in serious accidents involving the V-22 Osprey in 2023 and 2024, including crashes that resulted in deaths,



**Soldiers perform maintenance work on a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Ford Island, Hawaii. A Government Accountability Office report noted that the Army's heavy-lift helicopter did not meet its availability goals between 2015 and 2024.**

OLMA COWART/U.S. Army



**A U.S. Air Force C-130J Super Hercules aircraft sits on the flightline at Yokota Air Base, Japan. The Air Force met the availability goal for the aircraft one time between 2015 and 2024.**

TREVOR GORDNIER/U.S. Air Force



**A Navy aviation mechanic performs maintenance on an MH-60R Sea Hawk aboard the USS George H.W. Bush. Many vessels don't have enough sailors available to complete maintenance work while at sea, the GAO report said.**

JUAN SERRATOSGUZMAN/U.S. Navy

serious injuries or aircraft destruction.

Gaps in oversight and information sharing limited the Defense Department's ability to fully understand safety risks involving the aircraft, the GAO said.

The report also highlighted readiness challenges in specific regions.

In Europe, it pointed to problems with moving equipment and supplies quickly across the

Continent in the event of a conflict with Russia.

In the Indo-Pacific, challenges include maintaining and repairing equipment in contested areas and ensuring reliable fuel supplies for military operations.

The report emphasizes that many of these problems are long-standing and will require continued attention from military leaders and lawmakers.

## Army launches new merit-based retention bonus program

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army will kick off its new retention bonus system, using physical fitness scores, technical expertise and commander evaluations to determine a soldier's payout to reenlist.

"We were hearing a lot from our exit surveys that individuals want to be recognized for the excellence they bring to the table, and this is one of those ways that we plan on doing that," Col. Angela Chipman, chief of military personnel accessions and retention division, said.

While still driven by the Army's need to best incentivize retention in certain in-demand spe-

cialties, the new Quality Tiered Incentive Program will also consider a soldier's job and fitness performance in a way the service had not done prior.

"If they show up and perform better on the physical fitness test, and they volunteer to do some of the harder jobs and go to the harder schools, and they're the ones that are consistently showing up as members of a team, they can expect to be recognized and given a monetary value as a result when it comes to their incentive to be retained," Chipman said.

The bonus overhaul is part of the Army's ongoing transformation to improve and modernize its

human resources programs.

Those efforts range from transferring certain tasks from physical paper forms to online personnel systems to finding ways to get civilians working in high-demand tech industries into a direct officer commission faster.

"It's really linked to the rapidly changing operational environment that you see in the world," Brig. Gen. Gregory S. Johnson, director of military personnel management, said. "It's really rooted in technological change, and the Army's continuous transformation is nested there. From the HR perspective, that, that means we have to be agile and responsive as well."

Under the new retention bonus system, a commander will rank soldiers by military occupational specialty and rank.

Then the soldier's physical fitness score and technical proficiency score will add in to determine where each stands in the final ranking for bonuses.

Those soldiers with "the most merit" will likely see a bump, Johnson said.

However, the total amount spent on retention bonuses within the Army overall is not set to change.

The Army will track the program's progress through monthly reports, according to a memo.

MILITARY



PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Smoke pours from a smoke machine carried in the air by a TRV-150 unmanned aircraft during a training scenario on March 5, at Fort Hood, Texas.

# Engineers' new tech enters the breach

## Training showed how new machines can help save lives

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT HOOD, Texas — Clearing the path to the front lines of combat only has about a 50% survivability rate for Army combat engineers.

Challenged to improve that, Fort Hood's 36th Engineer Brigade trained this month in breaching operations using more than a dozen pieces of new technology to find the right mix that will make sure all soldiers survive.

"We are executing in concert with a maneuver formation to remove soldiers from the breach and get the armored formation through," said Maj. Michael Caddigan, operations officer for the 36th Engineer Brigade. "One of the most complex things we do is breaching a complex obstacle."

The efforts of the engineer brigade began last year on the periphery of the Army's Transformation in Contact initiative that pushes the service to rapidly field new technology, Caddigan said. It's all about saving lives and being ready for what the next war will look like.

"We would put 150 soldiers against this problem set behind us. We would expect to lose about 75 of them with the old ways of doing things," he said. "Now, using our [machine assisted] capability, our expectation is that we keep those 150 soldiers alive for the next fight."

To do that, the brigade re-created a historical obstacle line seen in World War II and Desert Storm and incorporated elements of the ongoing battlefield seen in Ukraine's war against Russia. A line of barriers known as "dragon's teeth" stretched across a swath of dusty Texas training ground as members of the Army, Marine Corps and Air Force watched from a nearby cliff.

The brigade then brought in 16 new technologies — some of which the Army is considering for purchase, said Lt. Col. Nick Rinaldi, from the Army Applications Laboratory, part of the Transformation and Training Command.

"If we wait to practice until we've acquired a final product, we won't have enough repeti-



Spc. James Clubb, a combat engineer with the 36th Engineer Brigade, operates an M5 RACER unmanned vehicle to breach an obstacle during a training scenario.



Soldiers from the 36th Engineer Brigade carry a TRV-150 unmanned aircraft capable of moving up to 150 pounds during training at Fort Hood.



The 36th Engineer Brigade received two M5 RACER unmanned vehicles to breach obstacles without soldiers directly on the line from a retired Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency program.

tions," Rinaldi said. "We have to stay relevant and on the edge of capability, but the only way to do that is if we're training with our equipment."

This month's scenario included the TRV-150 unmanned aircraft capable of carry-

ing up to 150 pounds — for this it carried a smoke machine to provide cover — and remotely operated track vehicles and bulldozers.

One autonomous vehicle, known as the M5 RACER, came to the brigade last year

through a retired Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency program. The unit took ownership of the green, rubber-tracked vehicle, which pulls a trailer with a mine clearing line charge that soldiers remotely detonate.

Some of the additional equipment tested was not available to be discussed or photographed publicly.

The closest soldiers got to the dragon's teeth obstacle during breach operations was about 500 meters, Caddigan said. The goal is to move that back to 3 kilometers or farther.

Spc. James Clubb, a combat engineer, operated the RACER using a laptop and a modified video game controller. It took him just a couple hours to learn, he said.

"I absolutely love the fact that I can sit down, do my job and make sure that not only I'm safe, but my teammate is safe, and the mission is still getting executed," he said.

Typically, Clubb said he works as part of a team to breach an obstacle. His job is to get out of the Bradley about 100 meters out, set the explosives and ignite them from a safe distance.

"Mind you, all this is while we're being shot at by the enemy forces," Clubb said. "I have approximately eight seconds of survival while on the breach."

The brigade will next take selected technologies from this home-station training to a 2027 rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., alongside 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Caddigan said. Then, to a future deployment to Europe.

## MILITARY

# Pilot gets Silver Star for 'selfless decision'

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Maj. Michael "Danger" Blea was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on a night involving high G maneuvers and missiles detonating within feet of his aircraft.

At a ceremony this month at Ramstein Air Base, Blea received the Silver Star for "extraordinary heroism in combat" during a Middle East deployment in 2025, U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa said.

Blea and his fellow F-16 "Wild Weasel" pilot, Lt. Col. William "Skate" Parks, each earned a Silver Star for a harrowing mission they flew together on March 27, 2025.

Fewer than 100 airmen have earned the military's third-highest valor award, after the Medal of Honor and service Crosses, in the post-9/11 era, according to USAFE-AFAFRICA.

Blea and Parks were deployed with the 480th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron out of Spangdahlem Air Base at the time. Parks, the squadron's former commander, received his Silver Star at the Pentagon in November, according to the Air Force.

Blea is also moving on. He has orders to Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, where he's transitioning to the F-35, the Air Force's most advanced fighter jet.

He volunteered for the assignment, even though the F-16 will "forever hold a piece of my heart," he said on March 11. "It's the jet that kept me alive and taught me to be a 'Wild Weasel.'"

The Spangdahlem fighters train as "Wild Weasels," a mission to suppress enemy air defenses that dates back to the Vietnam War and the one that Blea and Parks were conducting on the night they earned their Silver Stars.

The Air Force statement does not specify the enemy or country involved in the mission, but at least two public accounts of the event say the actions occurred against the Houthis over Yemen and the Red Sea.

Blea said he could not confirm those details, either.

But he was able to describe what it looked and felt like when the ground lit up underneath him and Parks, the flight lead, on a moonless night as they prepared to head out while low on fuel.

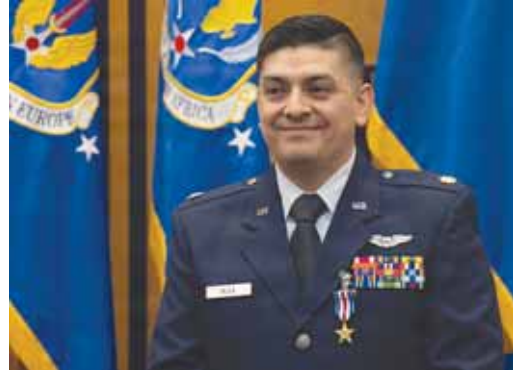
"We were doing an escort," Blea said, making sure the aircraft they were accompanying were "protected throughout the night."

It was toward the end of the sortie, and Blea needed to get to the tanker since he was low on fuel.

"We turn around to start heading back," he said. That's when the night took a sudden turn.

"I look outside and just see the ground light up," he said, the first indication that the enemy was launching surface-to-air missiles under their location. "It's pitch black, we're on (night-vision goggles), the moon is completely obscured.

"The missile lighting up the ground is one of the images that will forever stick with me," Blea said.



ALEXANDRA LONGFELLOW/U.S. Air Force  
Air Force Maj. Michael A. Blea, 480th Fighter Squadron assistant director of operations, is awarded the Silver Star during a ceremony at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, on March 3.

His medal citation says Blea's "selfless decision to act as a decoy, drawing the full fury of the enemy's integrated air defenses, including four radar-guided missiles and a barrage of anti-aircraft artillery, ensured the success of the critical bombing mission, which aimed to cripple enemy ballistic missile storage facilities."

During the course of about 15 minutes, Blea used a combination of defensive measures and high G maneuvers to evade the missiles, which detonated within feet of his aircraft, his citation says.

Blea described one missile that sailed within 20 to 30 feet of him, so close the smoke plume behind it lit up his aircraft canopy and he watched it explode "just as it flies past me."

While still within enemy territory, "Blea calmed his nerves and expertly rejoined on an emergency air refueling tanker operating lights out and in low illumination," his citation reads.

Blea said he's honored to receive the Silver Star but the award to him is recognition of the teamwork by his squadron during the entire deployment.

"Between the maintainers that gave us jets night in and night out that we never questioned were going to work to the tanker crews that we had, I owe them a huge debt of gratitude," he said.

Another reward was being greeted by maintainers, a few pilots and other crew when he landed back at base that night. "I had so much support at my jet waiting for me," he said.

The enormity of the moment, however, didn't sink in until he opened the jet's canopy and felt a rush of fresh air, he said. "That's when it kind of hit me, that I'm safe, I'm on the ground; we lived through it and we had mission success."

One of his good friends climbed up the ladder and put his hand on his chest, Blea said. "He said, 'Dude, you're back, take a deep breath.' That's the first time I realized I hadn't taken a deep breath in the last three hours."

In that moment, Blea said he felt "just the gratitude to be alive, and the rewarding feeling that the training worked and we were able to do what we set out to do."



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER ARTHUR/U.S. Army

The M111 hand grenade will replace the Mk3A2 series, which is restricted because of its asbestos body. The M111's plastic body is fully consumed during detonation.

## Army to issue first new hand grenade since 1960s

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers have a new baseball-sized weapon in their arsenal designed to give them an advantage in close-quarter fighting.

The Army on March 10 approved for full release of a hand grenade built for urban combat, marking the first new grenade to enter the service since the Vietnam War era.

According to the service, the M111 will provide an advantage in confined spaces while augmenting the M67, which is the primary hand grenade American soldiers have fought with since 1968.

Unlike the M67, which replaced the older "pineapple" grenade and releases steel fragments in all directions to inflict injury, the M111 leverages blast overpressure, the force generated by an explosion that can lead to severe injuries, according to an Army statement.

The M67 is more suited to fighting in open terrain, a key lesson the Army learned during door-to-door urban combat in Iraq, Col. Vince Morris said in the statement.

Inside a building, M67 shrapnel can be limited by enclosed spaces or barriers, the Army said. Fragments can pierce a thin wall and risk the lives of American service members on the other side, Morris said.

The blast overpressure generated by the



The M111 will be the first new grenade for the Army since 1968.

M111 "can clear a room of enemy combatants quickly, leaving nowhere to hide while ensuring the safety of friendly forces," said Morris, project manager for Close Combat Systems at the Capabilities Program Executive Ammunition and Energetics.

The canister-shaped M111 was developed by Army engineers at Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey.

It replaces the obsolete Mk3A2 hand grenade series, which stopped being issued in 1975 due to asbestos in its exterior coating. The M111 uses a plastic body that is fully consumed during detonation, according to the Army.

## Vicenza High School principal ousted amid DODEA investigation

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — A former Department of Defense Education Activity principal of the year was removed from his Vicenza High School post and is under investigation for what the agency termed "inappropriate conduct."

Marc Villarreal was relieved of his duties earlier this month as principal of the school, which is on a base that is part of U.S. Army Garrison Italy, a DODEA statement said.

DODEA officials did not disclose details about the accusations of inappropriate conduct, and Villarreal declined comment.

A message from school leaders to parents said there is "an active investigation" into Villarreal, who was selected as DODEA's principal of the year in 2023.

Community superintendent Michael Jimerson was named acting principal, the statement said.

Villarreal had been the principal at Vicenza since at least 2024, according to an Army statement.

About 299 students in grades 9 to 12 are currently enrolled at the school, according to DODEA Europe enrollment data.

Villarreal was removed from the Principal's Corner page on the school's website. Only Doris Brodie, the assistant principal, is listed on the page.

Leaders of the union that represents DODEA schools in Italy, Turkey, Spain and Bahrain said they learned of Villarreal's removal around the same time DODEA announced it.

Villarreal previously worked at Sigonella Middle High School in Sicily. He was

a teacher and assistant principal there before becoming the Vicenza principal, according to his DODEA biography. He joined DODEA in 1998.

In 2023, former DODEA director Thomas Brady praised Villarreal for establishing strong partnerships with parents and military leaders at Sigonella, according to an agency statement at the time.

Jimerson was selected as the Vicenza community superintendent for the DODEA Europe South District in November. Prior to that, he was the principal of Stuttgart High School in Germany.



Villarreal

Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher  
Erik Slavin, Editor in Chief  
Brian Bowers, Italy Edition Editor  
Scott Foley, Revenue Director

### 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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