

STARS AND STRIPES®



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JANUARY 22, 2026

Naval name game

‘Trump-class’ battleship latest twist in naming, renaming ships **Page 3**



The replenishment oiler USNS Harvey Milk conducts a replenishment at sea with the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in 2024. In 2025, the ship's name was changed from that of a gay-rights leader to that of a Medal of Honor recipient.

Maxwell Orlosky/U.S. Navy

Navy tests new food technology, recipes
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B-52s could be flying past 100th birthday
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Italy to be home of first F-35 school outside US
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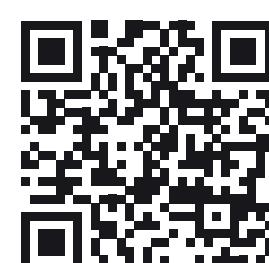
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COVER STORY

Marine monikers shift with political tides

A busy 2025 saw Navy ships named, renamed, canceled and conceived

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump scrambled Navy ship-naming traditions last month with his announcement of a new "Trump-class" battleship, to be called the USS Defiant, featuring nuclear-tipped missiles and laser defenses.

Battleships are usually named after states — the last commissioned was the USS Missouri in 1944. Ship classes are named after the first ship of the type built — the Missouri was an Iowa-class ship, named for the first of four battleships ordered in 1939.

Trump's announcement put an exclamation point on the end of a busy year for Navy ship naming.

The period between a presidential election and inauguration is often filled with last-minute ship naming.

In January 2021, Navy Secretary Kenneth J. Braithwaite traveled to Massachusetts to film a video in front of the Navy's oldest ship, the USS Constitution, nicknamed "Old Ironsides," commissioned in October 1797.

"We must always look to our wake to chart our future course," he said before announcing names for a new frigate, an expeditionary ship, an attack submarine and an amphibious transport dock.

Four years later, it was the turn of outgoing President Joe Biden's administration to go on a ship-naming spree.

Biden's Navy secretary, Carlos Del Toro, rolled out 19 new ship names — including new Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be named for former President William J. Clinton (a Democrat) and President George W. Bush (a Republican).

"When I personally delivered the news to Bill and George, they were deeply humbled," Biden said at the time. "Each knows firsthand the weight of the responsibilities that come with being Commander-in-Chief."

In 2025, the naming — and renaming — of ships didn't hit much of a speed bump with a change in the occupant of the White House.

In June, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the name of the USNS Harvey Milk stripped from the official Naval Vessel Register. Milk was a gay-rights leader and San Francisco supervisor assassinated in 1978. The Navy said Hegseth had



Alex Brandon/AP

President Donald Trump announced a new "Trump-class" battleship at his Mar-a-Lago club last month in Palm Beach, Fla.

ordered Navy Secretary John Phelan to make the change, "taking the politics out of ship naming."

The ship was renamed for Navy Chief Petty Officer Oscar V. Peterson, a Medal of Honor recipient from the World War II Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

The ship is the second of new class of replenishment oilers. According to the Congressional Research Service, Congress directed that they be named for prominent civil rights advocates. The class carries the name of the late Black civil rights advocate and longtime U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.

Phelan, Hegseth and Trump have not ordered any further name changes to the Lewis-class ships.

Before the new battleship announcement, Trump scrambled Navy ship naming plans with an announcement canceling the Constellation frigate program after the two ships were already under construction — the USS Constellation and the USS Congress.

The Navy canceled the remaining ships, including those to be named for the French Marquis de

Lafayette, who aided American patriot forces in the Revolutionary War; Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton; Spain's Louisiana Governor Conde Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid, a backer of the American Revolution; former Navy pilot Everett Alvarez Jr., who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War; and Capt. Bright Joy Hancock, one of the first female Navy officers, who served during World War I and II.

Also canceled was the new USS Chesapeake, named after the early American frigate captured by Britain in 1813, renamed HMS Chesapeake and later deconstructed for use as a watermill in Wickham, Hampshire, England. In recent years, the building has housed an antiques store.

In canceling the Constellation program, Trump announced a new generation of frigates called FF(X) based on the U.S. Coast Guard's large National Security Cutter design. The names of the future ships are to be determined.

A sidelight to the "Trump-class" battleship-naming controversy is that it could affect

naming a future aircraft carrier after the president.

Twelve of the past 17 aircraft carriers have been named for presidents, according to the U.S. Naval Institute. From Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush, nearly every president has had an aircraft carrier named for them.

The exceptions are Lyndon B. Johnson, whose name is on a Zumwalt-class destroyer to be commissioned in 2027, and President Jimmy Carter, a former Navy submarine officer, who has a Seawolf-class attack submarine named for him.

Only President Richard M. Nixon, who resigned office in 1974 because of the Watergate scandal, doesn't have a ship at sea or in the construction pipeline bearing his name.

Four of six Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers are named for presidents. If the naming tradition is followed in chronological order, future carriers could be named for Presidents Barack Obama, Trump and Biden.

Switcheroos have marked naming of submarines for decades

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Last month, a welder at a Virginia shipyard etched the keel plate of the USS Barb, the ceremonial birthing of a new submarine.

The Virginia-class fast attack submarine joins hundreds of Navy subs through history named after sea creatures. So will the next three on the construction list: the USS Tang, USS Wahoo and USS Silversides.

The names are throwbacks to an earlier time. Only one Navy submarine has been commissioned with the name of a sea creature since the USS Cavalla, named for a saltwater fish, in 1973.

Since 1862, federal law directs that the Secretary of Navy will choose the names of new ships, in consultation with the president and Congress. There are longstanding protocols: For decades, battleships were named for states, cruisers for cities and submarines for sea creatures.

But a 2012 congressional report outlining the protocols said one rule

was above all others:

"A secretary's discretion to make exceptions to ship-naming conventions is one of the Navy's oldest ship-naming traditions," the report said.

Nowhere has the naming protocol gone through as many variations as with submarines.

In 1959, the Navy rolled out a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. Instead of a fish, the first of its class was named the USS George Washington.

The other four "boomer" nuclear missile boats bore the names of people from American military and wartime history: Patrick Henry, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln and, in a sign of a different time, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

Attack subs retained fish names for another decade.

In 1969, the Navy was preparing to christen the USS Redfish when Rep. William H. Bates, a Massachusetts Republican and staunch Navy supporter, died. Navy Secretary John Chafee

broke with tradition and named the attack submarine for the congressman.

What happened next drew unfavorable comment from the New York Times in 1985.

"Within the next few years, down the ways slid the Glenard P. Lipscomb, ranking minority member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, the L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and the Richard B. Russell, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and ranking majority member of the Senate Armed Services Committee."

It was the beginning of a shift that saw submarines increasingly named for cities, then states, with occasional persons thrown into the mix. The Navy built 62 Los Angeles-class nuclear attack submarines from 1976 to 1996, with all but one named after cities.

Adm. Hyman Rickover, the "father of the nuclear Navy," accepted the politically expedient naming change. "Fish don't vote," he said.

Ironically, when Rickover retired in

1984, the future USS Providence was renamed the USS Hyman G. Rickover. It was the only Los Angeles-class submarine to break the naming protocol of American cities.

For fish-favoring traditionalists, there was hope for the future. As Cold War tensions ratcheted up in the 1980s, the Navy announced it would build more than 25 new fast-attack submarines called the Seawolf class.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and congressional efforts to cut the post-Cold War defense budget led to the Seawolf program ending with just two more submarines, with only the first, the USS Seawolf, getting a sea creature name. The second was named the USS Connecticut. The third and final, the USS Jimmy Carter, was for the 39th President, who served under Rickover as a young submarine service officer.

By the time the renewed Russian military threat had the U.S. Navy ratcheting up construction of the new Virginia-class attack submarines in

the late 1990s, the fish monikers were shelved.

Of the first 30 boats of its class christened, 28 are named for states. Boats named for former Navy Secretary and U.S. Sen. John Warner, and a new submarine named for Rickover, were the exceptions.

At the end of President Donald Trump's first term, the Navy decided it was time bring back the sea creature names. Navy Secretary Kenneth Braithwaite chose the names of four World War II submarines that had some of the highest scores for sinking enemy ships: Barb, Tang, Wahoo and Silversides.

The switch was short-lived. When President Joe Biden was elected in 2020, new Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro made a U-turn. He named a Virginia-class submarine the USS John H. Dalton, in honor of the Navy secretary under President Bill Clinton. Eight more were given place names associated with the Navy, including Potomac, Norfolk and Brooklyn.

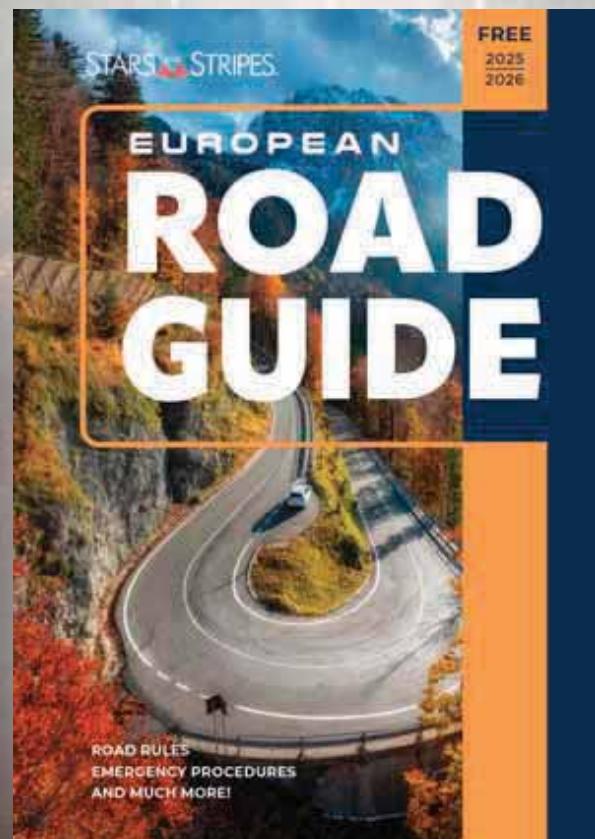
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MILITARY

Navy aims to extend endurance at sea

Improvement efforts include high-tech galley equipment, freeze-dried food

BY KAYLYN BARNHART BATISTA
Stars and Stripes

At a lab in Natick, Mass., a team of Navy civilians and contractors is testing new galley equipment and food recipes with one goal in mind: keeping sailors well-fed, healthy and mission-ready during long deployments at sea.

By combining food science, engineering and frequent feedback from the fleet, the team is working to modernize Navy galleys to extend endurance at sea aboard ships and submarines.

"The long-term goal is to keep the warfighters at sea doing what they have to do," said Rick Watts, a Navy project officer on the Joint Food Service and Engineering Team.

After more than 20 years serving as a Navy culinary specialist, including time aboard submarines, Watts retired as a master chief and now works to solve everyday challenges in Navy galleys.

His team evaluates commercial kitchen equipment to determine suitability for shipboard use, including space constraints, constant motion, power supply and water requirements.

Smart technologies are being tested to address personnel shortages and training gaps in ship galleys. Automated tilt skillets, for example, are designed to simplify complex cooking tasks. With recipes pre-programmed into the system, the skillet guides culinary specialists step by step, producing consistent meals and reducing food waste.

A new deep-fat fryer, developed over the past year, is also being prepared for testing with the submarine force.

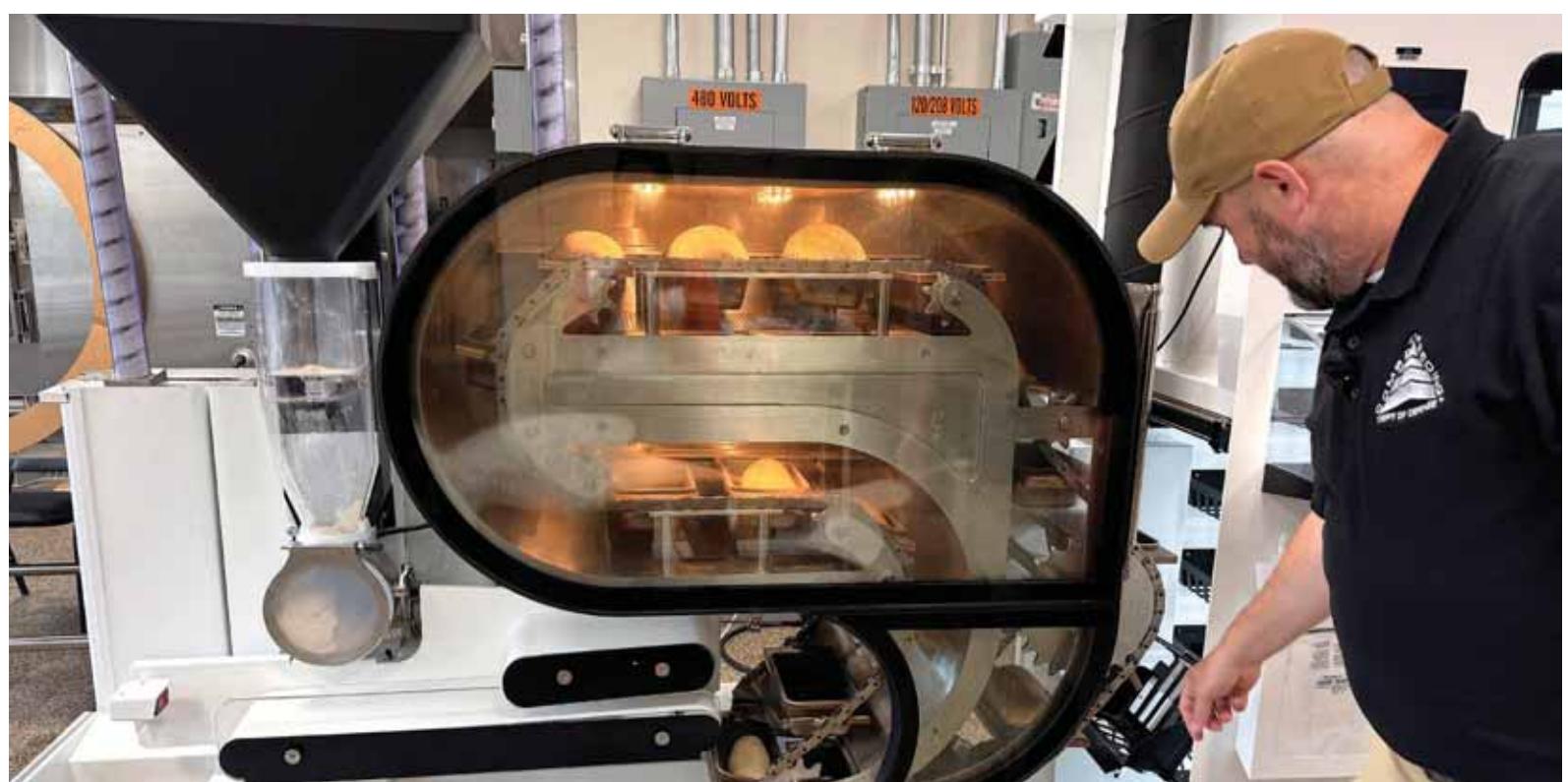
"Our No. 1 challenge is obsolescence," Watts said. "We have older equipment, so we have to find new solutions for those."

Looking further ahead, the Breadbot — an automated bread production system — is being explored for potential shipboard use. While promising for the future, Watts said it still has some "growing pains" and is not yet ready for implementation on Navy vessels.

Alongside equipment testing, food technologist Brittany Koukoulas works with Navy recipe development on the Functional Food Nutrition Intervention Team. Her team constantly experiments with ingredients to develop new food recipes that meet the "Go For Green" nutritional standards for sailors.

Her team is currently experimenting with freeze-dried ingredients to see if they can help extend ship endurance, allowing vessels to stay at sea longer without running out of food. Recently, she worked on a strawberry shortbread cookie recipe.

"There is a push on finding out some information about freeze-dried ingredients based on some



ZACHARY WHEELER/U.S. Navy

Rick Watts, a Navy Project Officer with the Combat Feeding Division at the U.S. Army DEVCOM Soldier Center in Natick, Mass., inspects the Breadbot, an automated bakery by Wilkinson Baking Co., for potential shipboard use.



U.S. Army

Brittany Koukoulas, left, and Rick Watts, middle, demonstrate rehydration of freeze-dried products.

conversations with the fleet," said Koukoulas, who is currently conducting research and development in the lab.

Watts added that freeze-dried ingredients have been highly successful for the submarine force and now surface vessels are beginning to show more of an interest recently.

Developing and finalizing one food recipe can

take two to five weeks before it is submitted to Naval Supply Systems Command for review and distribution to the fleet, according to Koukoulas. An average of 15-20 new recipes are implemented in the fleet each year.

Kitchen equipment takes much longer than recipes to reach vessels. Tests take about a week, followed by reports and reviews from NAVSUP



U.S. Army

Koukoulas prepares side-by-side comparison samples of beef enchilada casseroles, in the Navy kitchen at the DEVCOM Soldier Center.

and Naval Sea Systems Command, said Watts. Depending on priority, installation of equipment can take months or even years.

Navy adds second physical fitness test requirement per year

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Active-duty sailors will have to complete two physical fitness assessments per year starting in 2026, the Navy announced in a return to its pre-coronavirus pandemic fitness testing schedule.

All sailors in the active component will now be tested during cycles between Jan. 1 and June 30 and July 1 and Dec. 31, according to a Naval Administrative Message governing fitness standards published last month.

Reserve component sailors must complete at least one fitness test during the year, according to the message.

The increase in fitness testing aligns with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's push for increased physical standards across the U.S. military. The

service has also made its fitness tests and body composition standards — which include a measure of waist-to-height ratio and body fat percentage — gender neutral, per Hegseth's orders.

The Navy will now require commanders to integrate some physical training into every workday for their sailors, the messages said. The Navy did not provide specific guidance for commanders to accomplish that.

Most sailors will take the Navy Physical Readiness Test twice per year. That test includes a two-minute pushup test, a timed forearm plank and a timed 1½-mile walk or run. Commanding officers or officers in charge may authorize a 2,000-meter row, a 14-minute stationary bike ride, or a 500- or 450-meter swim instead of the walk or run, according to the Navy.

Sailors in combat arms jobs — including

SEALs, special warfare combat crewmen, explosive ordnance disposal and fleet diving positions — will take the Navy-wide PRT once per year and the new Combat Fitness Test once per year, according to the guidance.

The combat arms test includes an 800-meter swim with fins, a two-minute pushup test, an untimed pullup test and a 1-mile run. The pushups, pullups and run are to be completed with 20 extra pounds via a weight vest or plate carrier, according to Navy documents.

The service's new fitness policy also changes the requirements to remain in the service. Any sailor who fails three fitness tests during a four-year period will be administratively separated, according to the policy. Those failures do not have to be consecutive. Previously, the Navy moved to kick out sailors after two or more consecutive fitness test

failures.

However, on Jan. 1, the Navy was to conduct a one-time reset of all past fitness test failures to zero, according to the new message. That means sailors who have a failed fitness test on their record before Jan. 1, 2026, will not have that used against them for reenlistment, promotion or continued service purposes.

Pregnant and postpartum sailors are exempt from physical fitness testing during pregnancy and for an additional 12 months "after giving birth, loss of pregnancy or having a stillbirth," according to the service.

After the 12-month period, postpartum sailors are required to obtain medical clearance and participate in the current Navy fitness assessment cycle, according to the service.

MILITARY

Italy base to host F-35 pilot training school

Site will be first facility outside US, highlighting NATO demand for jets

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — An Italian air base in Sicily will host the first F-35 Lightning II pilot training facility outside the U.S., an indication of NATO's increasing demand for the fifth-generation fighter jet.

The roughly \$130 million multinational training school will be situated at a joint military-civilian airport near the city of Trapani on the island's northwest side, according to U.S. and Italian media reports citing a formal announcement by the Italian defense ministry earlier this month.

Establishment of the European pilot training center for the F-35 responds "to the growing demand for training linked to greater program participation by NATO and European countries," the Italian online military magazine Analisi Difesa reported Jan. 8, quoting directly from defense ministry documents.

Italy is among at least 13 European countries flying the fighter jet, which is quickly becoming a cornerstone of European defense.

For example, Dutch F-35s shot down Russian drones over Poland in September, one of a string of European airspace violations blamed on Russia that had NATO debating how to respond.

Italy and Denmark plan to add 25 and 16 of the aircraft, respectively, to their fleets, manufacturer Lockheed Martin said in a statement Jan. 7.

The U.S. has F-35 pilot training facilities at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, among other installations.

Development of the Trapani training facility will be financed by the Italian government and overseen by the F-35 Lightning II Joint Program Office as well as Lockheed Martin, according to a Defense News report.

It's expected to have two full mission simulators, with initial ground training offered by December 2028.



RAINA DALE/U.S. AIR FORCE

Italian air force F-35A Lightning II jets fly over Alaska. The Italian air base in Trapani, Sicily, will host the first pilot training facility for the aircraft outside the U.S., according to media reports in the two countries.

Completion of the center is expected by July 2029, Defense News reported.

The joint program office and the Italian defense ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Lockheed Martin deferred comment on plans for an Italy-based F-35 pilot training center to the Italian government.

Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto told

reporters last year that Sicily would be the first location outside the U.S. to train F-35 pilots, the Italian news agency Ansa reported in July.

The training facility at Trapani further expands Italy's stake in the F-35 program. The country already has a maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade facility in the north for Europe-based jets.

The hub, which inducted its first Eu-

rope-based U.S. F-35 for planned depot maintenance in March, also includes the jet's only European assembly line.

The training facility at Trapani will be the third Italian base with an F-35 squadron, joining Amendola and Ghedi air bases.

U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella, near the Sicilian town of Catania, is about 192 miles southeast of Trapani. It is adjacent to an Italian air base.

NATO urged to deploy drones to track Russian activity

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO should build a fleet of polar-hardened drones to keep closer tabs on Russian submarines and military maneuvers in the Arctic, says a recent report that calls for a strategy of "deterrence by detection" in the region.

A wide range of aerial, ground-based and undersea unmanned systems is urgently needed to give allies an edge in the hotly contested High North, the Center for European Policy Analysis said.

To deter Russian aggression, NATO must be able to identify threats as they are gathering, the authors of the Dec. 16 report said.

"This means being able to track Russian submarine patrols leaving the Kola Peninsula, monitor aircraft flights across the Barents and Bering Seas, identify changes in Russia's Arctic force posture and infrastructure, and detect potential surface and subsurface threats to critical infrastructure," the report said.

Over the past decade, Russia has steadily been strengthening its position in the Arctic, adding military capabilities and expanding bases. China also has its eye on the region after declaring itself a "near-Arctic" state in 2018.

The melting of sea ice has opened the possibility for new sea routes, increased commercial activity and, with it, more military competition.

The United States and other NATO members also have stepped up in the region, with more drills focused on challenges related to operating in

polar conditions.

U.S. naval deployments in the Arctic aimed at boosting situational awareness and deterring potential Russian aggression also have increased. Still, gaps persist, according to CEPA.

"To begin with, NATO doesn't have a formal Arctic strategy," the report said. "While this is a sensitive policy matter, the lack of a dedicated strategic framework for the region risks diluting resourcing and cooperation between regional allies on various levels."

Procurement of Arctic-capable drones across NATO remains "fragmented, slow, and risk-averse," the report said.

Most allies also treat Arctic-specific drone requirements as secondary modifications rather than purpose-built characteristics, which means limited numbers of reliable Arctic-ready drones, according to the think tank.

NATO should accelerate procurement of systems that consider the technical requirements for operating in the Arctic, the authors urged.

In addition, the alliance ought to establish new drone units with specialized training, which would free up manned aircraft and ships for other tasks, according to the report.

"The next decade is a decisive window of opportunity," the report stated, adding that those fastest to adapt to the challenges of the harsh High North terrain "will shape a future Arctic security architecture capable of deterring and defeating emerging threats."



TYLER FRASER/U.S. NAVY

A U.S. Navy sea drone transits the Pacific Ocean. A new report urges NATO to develop unmanned systems for use in the air, on the ground and in the sea to monitor Russian military activity in the High North.

MILITARY

Contract may extend B-52 life to 100 years

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Boeing received a \$2 billion contract last month to start work on extending the life of 60-year-old U.S. Air Force B-52H Stratofortress bombers into the 2060s.

The program to upgrade all 76 B-52Hs is expected to cost \$48.6 billion. The Air Force will redesignate the bombers as B-52.

The \$2 billion contract awarded on Dec. 23 is to upgrade two aircraft with new engines, avionics and other systems, which can be tested before the rest of the planes are converted.

Since entering service with the Air Force in 1955, the B-52 has been powered by eight TF-33 Pratt & Whitney turbofan engines. Pratt & Whitney has said it could no longer support maintenance on the engines after 2030.

Under the Commercial Engine Replacement Program, the Air Force sought new power plants already used in civilian aircraft that could be converted to use in the B-52.

The winning plan calls for eight Rolls-Royce F-130 engines used in the Gulfstream G650 business jet and in the military variants of the light jet transport, the C-37.

The plan would also upgrade brakes and wheels, improve avionics and communications and



A B-52H with possible arms loads on display at Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

convert some remaining analog dials in the bombers' cockpit to digital displays.

The upgrade is expected to keep the B-52H — delivered in 1961 and 1962 — flying as late as the 2060s. The Air Force said some planes could surpass 100 years in service.

The Air Force wants to keep the B-52 because it can carry over 70,000 pounds of weaponry more than 8,600 miles without refueling.

The Air Force plans to retire its B-1 Lancer and B-2 Spirit bombers by the end of the decade while it receives about 100 Northrop Grumman B-21 Raider stealth bombers.

The B-52 was initially built as a high-altitude heavy bomber to replace the Convair B-36 Peacemaker strategic bomber. It could reach targets in the Soviet Union, more than 8,000 miles away.

In its conventional bomber role, it served in the

Vietnam War, earning the nickname BUFF — for "Big Ugly Fat Fella," though variations substituting an expletive for "Fella" were common.

Flying at subsonic speeds with no stealth capability, the B-52 has shifted to a role as a launch platform for stand-off conventional and nuclear missiles.

"The B-52 is capable of dropping or launching the widest array of weapons in the U.S. inventory," according to an Air Force profile of the bomber. "This includes gravity bombs, cluster bombs, precision guided missiles and joint direct attack munitions."

The B-52Hs are currently assigned to the 5th Bomb Wing at Minot Air Force Base, in North Dakota, and the 2nd Bomb Wing at Barksdale Air Force Base, in Louisiana. Both wings are part of Air Force Global Strike Command. The Air Force Reserve Command's 307th Bomb Wing at Barksdale also operates the B-52H.

The first B-52 flew in 1952 and was delivered to the Air Force in 1955. The Air Force received 755 B-52s in total, with the last models — the B-52H — delivered in 1961 and 1962.

Work on the B-52 upgrades will be done in Seattle, Oklahoma City, San Antonio and Indianapolis, the Pentagon said. The work is expected to be completed in 2033.

Mandatory 2-mile run in fitness test dropped by Air Force

BY ZADE VADNAIS
Stars and Stripes

Airmen will no longer be required to complete a 2-mile run to meet fitness standards, according to updated guidance released by the Air Force.

Previously mandated once per year under a policy revision in September, the 2-mile run is now optional for both semiannual tests. Airmen may instead choose the high aerobic multi-shuttle run to fulfill the cardio component.

Fitness testing remains paused until the end of February to give units time to adjust to the updated standards and procedures. The upcoming diagnostic period, which begins March 1, will now end June 30 instead of Aug. 31 as previously planned.

Diagnostic tests are unofficial assessments conducted under official conditions and are widely treated as practice runs. After completing one, airmen may accept the score and have it entered

into their records or decline it and test again later.

The service is maintaining its shift to twice-yearly testing, regardless of score. That change, announced in September, ended a policy in place since 2010 that allowed airmen who scored 90 or above to test just once a year.

Fitness scores will begin appearing in annual performance briefs starting in February for officers and in May for enlisted members, according to the update.

The updates came the same day the Space Force announced changes to its own fitness program, which shares several similarities with the Air Forces.

Unlike airmen, Space Force guardians began testing under new guidance on Jan. 1. The twice-yearly requirement applies to participants in the branch's continuous fitness assessment program, a pilot that tracks individual fitness through wearable devices.

Guardians who joined the initial phase of the study were told they would be exempt from

physical training tests for two years. Those who enrolled in the second phase, which began in October, were told they would need to complete only one test per year.

In a key difference from the Air Force's policy, guardians must complete the 2-mile run at least

once annually.

Both services fall under the Department of the Air Force. The updates are part of a broader Defense Department review of grooming and readiness standards ordered by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in March.



TIFFANY DEL Oso/U.S. Air Force

Airmen do a 2-mile run as part of a physical training test at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash. Under revised Air Force guidance issued Jan. 6, airmen will no longer be required to complete a 2-mile run to meet fitness standards.

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RACING AROUND EUROPE

By Kat Nickola
Stars and Stripes

In the dark hours of a Sunday morning, I stepped off the edge of an iron bridge 40 meters above the Nervion River in Bilbao, Spain. Rappelling down to the shoreline was a welcome relief. After attempting to race 300 kilometers across the Basque country, blisters were forming on my blisters, and I needed a shower and some sleep.

By this time, my team of four had kayaked in the sea, trekked

overland, navigated in cold dark forests, lugged bags, found checkpoints, mountain biked in the nighttime rain, napped at a bus stop, tramped through a cave, rappelled down multiple cliffs and waterfalls, ate little and slept less for the previous three days. We didn't require all 72 hours to complete the 10 stages of the 300km course, but we also didn't hit every checkpoint. Happily, we earned a completion.

ADVENTURE RACING

The Basque Expedition Race my team finished was part of the European Adventure Racing World Series (ARWS) European Circuit. Sometimes called an expedition race or raid, these multi-day events don't just test endurance in multiple sports, but also a team's ability to navigate without electronic devices through an unmarked course in the wilderness to find checkpoints along the way.

Sound like grueling fun? Visit www.arworldseries.com with your team.

- Inferno | www.infernорun.it | With beach and mud editions, this Italian obstacle series also has training camps across Italy.
- Tough Mudder | www.toughmudder.de | This worldwide obstacle race staple has competitions in Germany, France and the U.K.
- Spartan Races | uk.spartan.com | Parent company to the Tough Mudder series, the Spartan Races offer more variety in obstacle types, race lengths and occur across Europe.
- Wolf Runs | thewolfrun.com | With races in spring, summer and autumn, the Wolf Run trilogy of events are held in England.



- Trail Running | www.trailrunning.de/termine | In Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France.
- Marathon.de | www.marathon.de | Marathons and smaller runs in Germany, Austria, Switzerland

TRIATHLON

My first segway into racing was via a triathlon. This sport is great for having variety in your training and cool scenery during the race. They come in shorter spring distances, intermediate and Olympic distances, and the long well-known Ironman. In Europe, small local triathlons are hard to find; instead it is popular to find series put out by triathlon organizations.

- World Triathlon | triathlon.org | International organization with a European series.
- Ahotu | www.ahotu.com | Multi-sport events across Europe.
- Deutsch Triathlon Union (DTU) | www.triathlondeutschland.de | List of triathlons across Germany.

BUCKET LIST EVENTS

Not for the faint of heart, these massive events offer athletes the chance to test their limits.

- Dolomiti Superbike | www.dolomitisuperbike.com/en | Legendary mountain bike ride in the Italian Alps.
- Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc | montblanc.utmb.world | Ultramarathon in the French Alps.
- Three Peaks Challenge | www.threepeakschallenge.uk | Climb the three highest peaks of Scotland, England and Wales.
- Athens Marathon | athensauthenticmarathon.gr | Run on the Greek route that started it all.
- Norseman | nxtri.com | Race across Norway on the toughest triathlon on the planet.



BICYCLE RACES

Whether you are a roadie, ride BMX, crush the mountain bike trails or participate in another cycling, sport there are events for you. Cycling is huge in Europe, so expect fanatics from clubs alongside casual riders. Try these two websites to find a race near you.

- Radsport Events | radsport-events.de | In Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium Austria, Switzerland, and adjacent alpine regions. The website is in German, click "Umkreissuche" for a handy map search.
- Battistrada | battistrada.com | For larger events across Europe, in English and with easy sorting by biking type or location.

RUNNING EVENTS

Much like in the States, there are running events like 5Ks and fun runs across Europe all year. Local events are still very much advertised via the free local newspaper or your community's website. A simple Google search for a location and run distance is also quite effective since 5K, 10K and marathon are effective keywords everywhere. However, there are also a few great resources for larger, regional runs.

- Park Run | www.parkrun.com | Non-competitive 5K runs every Saturday across Europe.
- Ahotu | www.ahotu.com | Across Europe and not just running events.



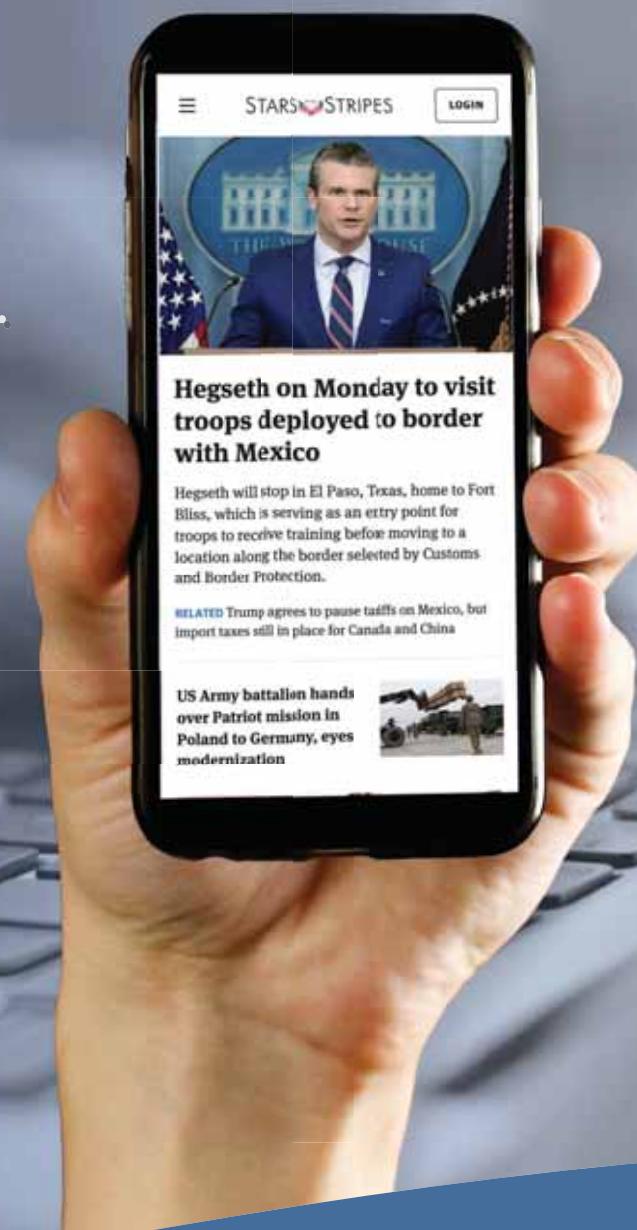
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Europe's Memorial STUMBLE STONES

By Kat Nickola
Stars and Stripes

While walking through town one day, I noticed a small brass cobblestone in the street. Coming nearer to it, I could see that it had an inscription. It read, "Heir Wohnte BERTHA WERLE Geb. Grünwald Jg. 1874 Deportiert 1940 gurs interniert Noe seit 1943 mit hilfe überlebt." In English, it says, "Here lived Bertha Werle (née Grünwald) born 1874, deported in 1940 and interned at the Noe camp until 1943; survived with help."

It was a Stolperstein; a stumble stone, one of thousands that dot cities across Europe to memorialize former citizens who were victims of Nazi persecution. They are placed in front of former residences or businesses and researched in detail to tell the individual stories of people who lived and worked at those locations and to hold the atrocities of the holocaust in memory.

The first 22 Stolpersteine were placed in 1993 in the city of Köln by the artist Gunter Demnig. The idea for the stumbling stones rose from a single brass, engraved cobblestone Demnig had set in the ground at the Köln Rathaus in 1992. It was a memorial honoring the memory of the 1,000 Sinti and Roma people who were deported to Auschwitz by the Nazi government 50 years prior.

Following the trial run in Köln, Demnig began the Stolpersteine Project with the goal of restoring the names of Nazi victims back to the places where they lived. Since then, the wide-reaching memorial installations have

expanded to include thousands of stones across cities throughout Europe.

The name stumble stone is not to be taken literally; the brass cobbles are laid smoothly into the surrounding surface. Instead, Demnig is quoted as saying you are intended to "stumble with your head and with your heart." Happening upon a stone, whether touring a famous city or wandering a tiny village, is a heart-rending reminder of how deeply local but paradoxically wide-reaching the impact of Nazi ideology was. Each represents a human life.

Before a stone is installed, the victim's life is researched and surviving family members are involved in the process of memorializing. Local interest groups typically take the reins for bringing the project into their town, applying for approval by the city government, and often involving high school groups to aid in the research process.

There have been some cities and individuals that choose not to have the Stolpersteine Project install memorials. Notably, the city of Munich has rejected the installation of stumbling stone memorials, citing concerns that it is disrespectful to step on victim names. Instead, other commemorative pieces are used.

Visit www.stolpersteine.eu for more details about the Stolpersteine Project.



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STUMBLE STONES NEAR YOU

Because installation of the brass markers is a local project, databases for the memorial stumbling stones may be held at the local interest group level, by a local government or even by the state. Here are some websites with information about cities with Stolpersteine near U.S. military installations in Europe.

"PIETRE D'INCIAMPO" IN ITALY

- Region of Veneto: www.internamentoveneto.it
- Venice: www.pietredinciampovenezia.it
- Map of stones in Italy: lab24.ilsole24ore.com/pietre-inciampo

"PAVES DE MEMOIRE" IN BELGIUM AND FRANCE

- Brussels: pavesdememoire-struikelstenen.be
- France: mapstr.com/user/stolpersteinefrance

"STOLPERSTEINE" IN GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS

- Ansbach: www.synagoge-ansbach.de
- Frankfurt: www.stolpersteine-frankfurt.de
- Heidelberg: www.stolpersteine-heidelberg.de
- Kaiserslautern: stolpersteine-kl.de
- State of North Rhine-Westphalia: stolpersteine.wdr.de
- Netherlands: stichting-stolpersteine.nl
- Nürnberg: www.stolpersteine-nuernberg.de
- Stuttgart: www.stolpersteine-stuttgart.de
- Wiesbaden: www.am-spiegelgasse.de

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The Parakeets of Rome

BY KAT NIKOLA
Stars and Stripes

The green Monk parakeet is one of two invasive species of parakeet that have taken over the city of Rome. While many Romans (and tourists) enjoy the birds, their presence is controversial. Some biodiversity experts claim they compete with local woodpeckers and seagulls, while others disagree and can find no evidence for damage to the urban environmental system.

Rome is one of the world's top destinations for UNESCO Heritage Sites, with so many places making the list that the entire city center is grouped into one big complex of archaeological areas, architectural works, and history that spans thousands of years. In addition, the Vatican City is another massive site that preserves the art and religious influence of the Holy See.

When the parakeets moved into the eternal city is unclear. It is assumed that sometime in the late 1970s, the parakeets escaped or were released, by a private owner. Since that time, they have established breeding colonies and their pretty, bright-green plumage can be seen near all the top sites in Rome. Perhaps they are just another newcomer to add to the diverse and eclectic heritage of the city.



PHOTO BY RACHEL KOTZAR

Visit Iconic Taormina

BY ANNA DELANGE
Contributing Writer

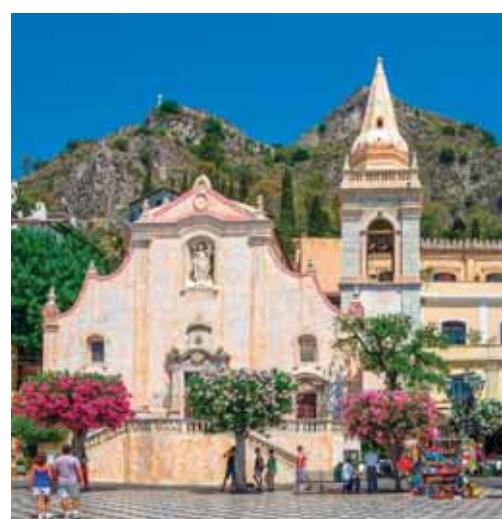
Sicily may not have the Amalfi Coast or Cinque Terre, but we are an island with some beautiful coastal towns. Possibly one of the most famous towns on the island is Taormina, located just over an hour north of NAS Sigonella.

The Isola Bella is one of the most iconic things to see while visiting Taormina, even though it is not technically in town. Depend-

ing on the tide, you may find yourself walking across a thin strip of sand to visit the actual island. Isola Bella was once privately owned by a woman who loved plants and gardens, which is why there is beautiful florals across this small island.

To reach the area of Isola Bella, you can make it easy on yourself by taking the cable car from Taormina to Mazzaro Bay, or you can find the stairs and take the scenic route. I highly recommend taking the cable car if it is a summer day, unless you are prepared to go on a hot, miniature hike. Taking the stairs back up to the town is ingrained in my memory and is a story my friends and I laugh about.

Once you make it to the center of town, check out the **Ancient Theater of Taormina** which is one of the best-preserved Greco-Roman theaters in Italy. It is still used to this day. In the summers, the space hosts the Taormina



Film Festival, in addition to operas and theatrical performances.

Corso Umberto is one of the main streets of this hilltop town and will lead you to the main square, **Piazza IX Aprile**. In the square, there is a beautiful church that has a double staircase and the bars bordering the square are perfect for an aperitivo. This is where you can find some of the most magnificent and famous photo spots in Taormina. There is a beautiful view of the sea,

the ancient theatre and even Mount Etna smoking in the background. From this view point you can also spot the **San Domenico Palace Hotel**, which was the set for season two of the television show "White Lotus," and has made the town even more of a must-see destination.

If you want to continue to lazily stroll, enjoy the peaceful **Villa Comunale**, the public gardens of Taormina. This shady spot has an incredible panoramic walkway.

Foodies must try one of the most famous places in this town: **Bam Bar**. Grab a granita with brioche and enjoy this great fresh treat. If you are a big fan of pistachio, however, head over to get a granita at Nove Pistachio instead. For a memorable meal, **Osteria da Rita** is a famous restaurant serving up Sicilian food on some beautiful plates that are to the aesthetic of this authentic eatery.

Driving to Taormina from Sigonella is quite easy as it's mostly spent on the A18. Just remember that there is a toll waiting for you!

Taormina deserves the love and attention it gets from the tourists, but don't think it shouldn't also be on your list just because tourism has discovered the town.



MILITARY

DOD ends 'painful' experiments on cats, dogs

Defense budget bill bans continuation of using animals in 'trauma' exercises

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The defense bill that President Donald Trump signed into law puts an end to many military experiments on cats and dogs and declares a ceasefire to shooting animals in "trauma" exercises.

The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, enacted Dec. 18, includes a provision that bans the Defense Department from continuing to conduct and sponsor "painful research" on domestic cats and dogs as live test subjects.

The bill also orders the Defense Department to ensure that it will not engage in "live-fire trauma training" that targets dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals.

Supporters said the bill ends exercises that involved shooting, critically wounding and killing goats and pigs to help educate medics in treating combat injuries. The legislation directs the military to use technologically advanced human simulators instead.

The shift is part of a government-wide effort to phase out the use of live animals in federally sponsored tests, studies and training, with pressure growing from the Trump administration, Congress and animal welfare groups to end the practice.

The Navy in May implemented a total ban on experiments using cats and dogs. The Department of Veterans Affairs is phasing out research on cats, dogs and non-human primates.

The defense secretary can make exceptions in the interests of national security. Exemptions also may be made for training and studies related to military or service animals.

Lawmakers from both parties welcomed the restrictions on live-animal tests and training in the 2026 defense bill.

"It is indefensible to waste tax dollars designed to boost our national security on cruel and pointless experiments on cats and dogs," said Sen. Jodi Ernst, R-Iowa, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army National Guard.

"Research and testing methods involving dogs and cats are outdated. We must adopt more scientific approaches to improve lives," said Rep. Don Davis, D-N.C., a former first lieutenant in the Air Force.

The military, for example, increasingly uses technologically advanced human simulators that



AUDREY CHAPPELL/U.S. Air National Guard

The 139th Medical Group partnered with the Naval Medical Center in San Diego to practice emergency simulations in July. The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act orders the Defense Department to ensure that it will not engage in "live-fire trauma training" that targets dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals, instead directing the military to use human simulators.

physicians say better prepare medics for battlefield injuries.

New restrictions on using domestic cats and dogs in military studies target research that is "painful" but does not end all experiments.

Defunded are animal experiments that cause significant and unrelieved pain and distress, under criteria set by the Agriculture Department.

The bill's language banning the military from conducting live-fire trauma tests on animals

identifies dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals. But advocates say the prohibition applies to all animals. The defense secretary is directed to use alternatives that include advanced simulators, mannequins and cadavers.

Sailors charged in fake marriages to Chinese nationals

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

Two Navy sailors are facing federal charges for what authorities say were sham marriages with Chinese immigrants seeking U.S. residency.

Jacynth Bailey and Morgan Chambers are charged with one count each of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, federal court records show.

Bailey and Chambers were to receive \$45,000 and \$35,000, respectively, as part of the scheme to recruit American citizens, preferably U.S. service members, prosecutors said in separate filings last month in federal court in Jacksonville, Fla.

The Navy didn't immediately respond to questions about the rank and duty assignment of the sailors. The service has an air station in Jacksonville.

If convicted, Bailey and Chambers face up to five years in prison. Neither of them has appeared in court or entered a plea, but each waived their right to be formally indicted.

Their attorneys declined comment on Jan. 5, citing the pending case.

At least two other sailors are involved in the case.

In August, former Navy recruiter Brinio Urena pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, The New York Times reported on Jan. 2.

As part of his plea deal, Urena admitted to marrying a Chinese woman for money in August 2024 and also admitted to helping recruit fellow service members to do the same.

His sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 21.

Navy reservist Raymond Zumba pleaded guilty in July to attempting to bribe a Naval Air Station Jacksonville official in exchange for fraudulent military identification cards for two ineligible people with links to China.

Zumba's sentencing in that case is set for Jan. 14.

Separately, he also faces a charge of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud related to his April 2024 wedding to a Chinese national, according to a Dec. 5 federal court filing in Jacksonville. A Dec. 12 court entry indicates that Zumba agreed to plead guilty in the case.

Urena and Zumba were not named in

charging documents for Bailey and Chambers.

But in their Dec. 5 filing, prosecutors said Zumba recruited Urena in May 2024 to enter a sham marriage.

After Urena's wedding, Zumba asked him to obtain a military identification card for his new wife because it would help the immigration process, according to the filing.

He also asked Urena "to help him find and recruit other U.S. citizens who would be willing to marry Chinese nationals and facilitate their immigration status for money," the filing states.

In October 2024, Urena and an unidentified Navy sailor contacted another service member to recruit her for marriage to an unidentified Chinese national.

About a month later, Urena introduced the service member to Zumba, who specified the payment terms, according to the filing.

That marriage took place on Jan. 2, 2025, after Zumba and another unidentified co-conspirator drove the service member and her soon-to-be husband from New York City to a Connecticut courthouse, according to court documents.

The documents do not name the service

member involved, but the dates and payment terms are consistent with information contained in a court filing for Bailey.

Afterward, Bailey attended a "sham wedding party," during which photographs were taken to substantiate the legitimacy of the marriage for immigration application purposes.

Bailey also was paid an additional \$10,000 at the party, court documents show.

She also was asked to apply for and obtain a military identification card for the Chinese national that would allow him access to U.S. military facilities, prosecutors say.

Chambers flew to Las Vegas in October 2024 for her wedding and afterward was paid \$10,000 cash in a restaurant restroom, court documents state.

A separate court document indicates that Urena flew with an unidentified co-conspirator to a sham wedding in Las Vegas that took place on the same October 2024 day.

The scheme came to light during a conversation between Zumba and a confidential informant, court records show.

MILITARY

NATO foes' Arctic forays 'not for peaceful purposes'

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The Arctic is rapidly becoming a front line for NATO competition with Russia and China, as adversaries expand their presence in the High North and probe alliance defenses, the top American general in Europe said recently.

Russian and Chinese naval vessels are conducting more frequent joint patrols in Arctic waters, and Chinese icebreakers and research ships have expanded their operations in the region for military advantage, U.S. European Command's Gen. Alexus Grynkevich said Jan. 11 at a security conference in Sweden.

"It's not for peaceful purposes," said Grynkevich, who also serves as NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe. "They're not studying the seals and the polar bears. They're out there doing bathymetric surveys and trying to figure out how they can counter NATO capabilities on and under the sea. So that's something that could grow very quickly, and we need to be mindful of it and ready for it."

Grynkevich's comments come as the Arctic emerges as a point of contention between the United States and its allies in Europe.

President Donald Trump renewed his push for the United States to take possession of Greenland, an autonomous territory of ally Denmark.

The Trump administration hasn't ruled out the possibility of using military force to take control of the territory, which Trump says is needed for national security reasons.

Trump has said his preference is for the U.S. to reach a deal on transferring control of the island to Washington.

"If we don't do it the easy way, we're going to do it the hard way," Trump said Jan. 9 without elaborating on what the "hard way" might entail.

So far, officials in Greenland and Denmark have balked at the idea of a deal.

And the notion of launching a military offensive on a NATO ally has been blasted by numerous U.S. elected officials, including several influential Republican senators.

Other European allies, including Germany and France, have expressed political backing for Greenland's right to determine its own future.

Grynkevich sidestepped the issue when asked about Trump's push for Greenland.

"I won't comment on the political dimensions of recent rhetoric. It's not my place to do that as a



MESHAQ HYLTON/U.S. Marine Corps

Marine Cpl. Melvin Melchor hikes to a security point during Exercise Freezing Winds 24 in Pahkajarvi, Finland, in 2024. Adversaries are expanding their presence in the Arctic, driving NATO allies to compete, a top U.S. general says.



RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY PRESS SERVICE/AP

Russian navy missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov sails off for an exercise in the Arctic.

military officer," he said.

Instead, he pointed to ongoing discussions in NATO's highest political body, the North Atlantic Council, saying allies are involved in "healthy dialogue" there on thorny issues.

Allies must deal with adversaries including

Russia, China, Iran and North Korea that are increasingly aligning their efforts in ways that directly challenge the West, Grynkevich said.

Russia continues to test advanced military systems in the Barents Sea, while "shadow fleets" of oil tankers linked to Russia, Iran and Vene-

zuela help finance Moscow's war effort and pose growing risks to undersea cables and other critical infrastructure in the Baltic and Arctic regions, he said.

In response, NATO has taken steps to strengthen deterrence across northern Europe, Grynkevich said.

He cited new operations aimed at protecting underwater infrastructure and improving air and missile defense integration along its eastern flank.

Grynkevich said that for now, he does not believe that NATO territory is under immediate threat from Russia, partly because the war in Ukraine is occupying the vast majority of the Kremlin's forces.

Also, Russia is "aware of the incredible power of the alliance," he said, adding that "Russia knows that it cannot afford to take us on."

Air Force duty identifier patches back a year after retirement

BY JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

Air Force duty identifier patches — the shoulder patches bearing abbreviated career field descriptions like MX, PA and PJ and relegated to the dust bin a year ago — are back.

Chief of Staff Gen. Ken Wilsbach ordered the patches returned to service Jan. 9 as part of updated dress and appearance regulations.

"I've decided to bring duty identifier patches back because the Air Force is made up of many different specialties, each with a unique role in our mission to generate airpower," he said in an Air Force news release. "We are a unified force working together to win."

The policy change for duty identifiers is one of six highlighted by the Air Force in a memo from Richard Anderson, assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs. The memo also addresses backpacks, earbuds, text messaging and eyeglass and sunglass frames and lenses.

The patches, or tabs, were worn on the left shoulder of airmen's camouflage utility uniforms until a Jan. 24, 2025, memo from Wilsbach's predecessor, Gen. David Allvin, who took the opposite view when he banished more than 134 tabs for various career fields.

"As we identify ourselves as one type of airman or another, with one specialty or another, we really diminish ourselves," Allvin said at the time. "Our real value is our integral part of a winning war fighting team."



MATTHEW LUCIBELLO/U.S. Air Force

A cyber duty identifier patch is worn by a cyberspace operations officer at Camp Nett in Niantic, Conn.

A list accompanying Wilsbach's order reinstating the patches lists 103 approved designators, from 1SGT for first sergeant to FAO for foreign affairs officer and POL for fuels.

Reinstating the duty identifiers is "intended to honor the skills and heritage within the force," according to the release.

"Your expertise matters. These patches are a reflection of the skills you earned, and every patch tells a story that ends with AIRPOWER," Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force David Wolfe said in the release.

The reversal was generally welcomed on the Air Force amn/nco/snco Facebook page, an unof-

ficial site where service members sound off on Air Force news and events.

"I had mine hidden under my unit patch the whole time," commenter Austin Jones, a member of the Alaska Air National Guard, posted Jan. 10. "I knew this day was coming."

Other changes announced Jan. 9 include guidance on earphones and earbuds.

Wearing any earpiece, headphones or Bluetooth wireless technology while in uniform, indoors or outdoors, is authorized only for official duties, according to the release.

"The use of personal electronic media devices, including earpieces, speaker phones or text messaging while walking in uniform is limited to emergencies or when official notifications are necessary," the release states.

The regulations allow exceptions during travel on public transportation and while wearing physical training gear during individual or personal fitness training.

As for eyewear, so-called smart glasses equipped with photo, video or artificial intelligence capabilities are not allowed while in uniform.

"Authorized eyeglass lenses must be conservative, clear, slightly tinted, or photosensitive lenses," the release states.

Authorized eyeglass and sunglass frames must be black, brown, white, dark blue, gray or transparent material, or gold or silver wire. Authorized sunglass lenses must be traditional gray, brown or dark shades, according to the regulation.

MILITARY

Army shuts down foreign training command



JAQUARI LINDSEY/U.S. ARMY

Command Sgt. Maj. Darvin T. Williams, Security Force Assistance Command, stands before the colors and formation during the SFAC inactivation ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., on Jan. 8.

4 security aid units to end as focus shifts to combat power

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army shuttered its Security Force Assistance Command at Fort Bragg, N.C., closing the one-star headquarters that oversaw its brigades of soldiers specially trained to advise foreign military forces.

Unit leaders cased the command's colors for a final time Dec. 8, signaling the inactivation of the SFAC as part of a broader Army reorganization effort that has prioritized units that generate combat power over other capabilities.

The reorganization mandated last year by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth will also result in the shuttering by the end of the year of four of the Army's six Security Force Assistance Brigades, or SFABs.

Col. Matthew Bunch, who took command of the SFAC from Brig. Gen. Kevin Lambert in June, said that despite the command's inactivation, its soldiers — known as "advisors" for their role in aiding partner armies — had proven successful in their mission to improve allied and partner military forces around the globe.

"From its inception, the Security Force Assistance Command headquarters enabled advisors to deploy with purpose, clarity, and the support necessary to build meaningful relationships with allies and partners," Bunch said during the inactivation ceremony, according to a news release. "Through planning, coordination, and an unwavering commitment to readiness, this headquarters empowered our brigades to operate in every geographic combatant command, advancing the Army's mission in places where trust,

cooperation, and shared understanding mattered most. The impact of SFAC's work will continue to be felt long after these colors are cased."

The SFAC was established in late 2018 alongside the 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade, which was also headquartered at Fort Bragg, until its inactivation in November.

The 1st SFAB stood up at Fort Benning, Ga., in 2017, as top Army officials pitched it as a smaller-than-normal brigade of volunteer soldiers who are experts in their craft and receive extra training to advise foreign armies on the trades of soldiering. Ultimately, the Army stood up six SFABs — five active-duty brigades and one National Guard unit — and the SFAC to oversee the training and manning of those units.

The SFABs were the brainchild of retired Army Gen. Mark Milley, who served as the Army chief of staff before becoming the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Milley pitched them as units purpose-built to conduct the kind of training, advising and assisting operations that brigade combat teams had been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Milley and other top Army officials wanted to employ SFABs to take deployment pressure off the Army's brigade combat teams, which had for years been rotated in and out Afghanistan and Iraq to train those nations' forces to fight the wars there.

As Chinese and Russian military aggression grew during the last decade, top Army generals wanted to shift their combat brigades' focus to preparations to fight a large-scale war against an enemy equipped with similar capabilities

to the United States.

As operations wound down in Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years, the SFABs were assigned to geographic combatant commands, where they maintained near constant presence to train partner nation forces.

The service intends to leave only two SFABs beyond 2026. The 1st SFAB, which is aligned to U.S. Southern Command, will remain at Fort Benning and the 5th SFAB, which is aligned to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, will remain at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., said Maj. Ryan Miller, an SFAC spokesman.

Under the reorganization, the 1st SFAB has been assigned to the Army's new U.S. Army Western Hemisphere Command, Miller said. The 5th SFAB has been placed under U.S. Army Pacific's command.

The 4th SFAB will hold its inactivation ceremony later this month at Fort Carson, Colo., Miller said. It had been placed on operations in Europe.

The 3rd SFAB at Fort Hood, Texas, will inactivate in late 2026, Miller said. It had previously been aligned with U.S. Central Command but will serve under U.S. Army Pacific until its inactivation, he said.

Bunch, an infantry officer who had previously served as the SFAC's second in command, said that the work of the SFAC and its SFABs would continue to have meaning for the Army for the foreseeable future.

"As we inactivate this command, we recognize that its influence and the relationships it helped forge will continue to guide the Army's approach to global engagement for years to come," he said.

New AI-focused career path launched for Army officers

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

A new career path for Army officers that focuses on artificial intelligence and machine learning further cements the service's doctrinal shift toward cutting-edge technology and autonomous warfare.

The occupational specialty "49B Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning" officer will be phased in as an official area of concentration starting in January through the Army's Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, according to an Army statement.

The occupational specialty "49B Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning" officer will be phased in as an official area of concentration starting in January through the Army's Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, according to an Army statement.

Officers with advanced academic and technical backgrounds in fields related to AI or machine learning are particularly sought to participate in the new program, the Army said.

The service is also considering

offering the career path to warrant officers in the future, according to the statement.

"We're building a dedicated cadre of in-house experts who will be at the forefront of integrating AI and machine learning across our warfighting functions," Army spokesman Lt. Col. Orlandon Howard said in the statement.

"Ultimately, it's about building a force that can outthink, outpace and outmaneuver any adversary," the statement added.

The new job specialty will be offered initially to any officer eligible for the Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, the statement said.

The program is designed to facilitate the transfer of officers into the new occupational specialties within Army

manning requirements.

Those chosen for transfer to 49B will be reclassified by Sept. 30, the end of the current fiscal year, the statement said.

The new cadre will undergo rigorous graduate-level training and receive hands-on experience in constructing, maintaining and deploying the Army's AI-enabled systems, the statement said.

These "uniformed experts" will speed integration of advanced systems to expedite battlefield decision-making and streamline logistics, and they additionally will field and manage the next generation of battlefield robotics, the statement said.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has spurred the Army to embrace artificial intelligence and autonomous systems in recent years, as small, off-



MICAH WILSON/U.S. AIR FORCE
Soldiers assigned to the Artificial Intelligence Integration Center and other units conduct drone test flights and software troubleshooting during a training exercise near Hohenfels, Germany.

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the-shelf drones deployed by both sides in the conflict proved transformational for future combat.

The service has tested a range of systems in the Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels training areas in Germany as part of initiatives like the revised Army fighting doctrine known as Transform-

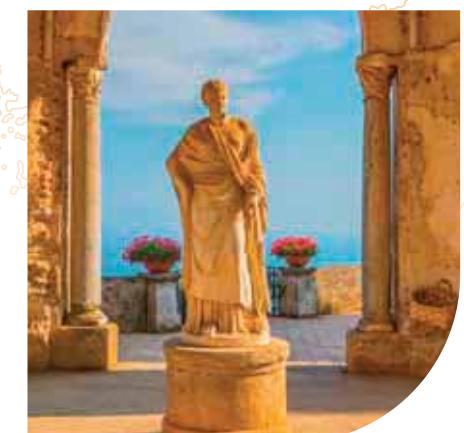
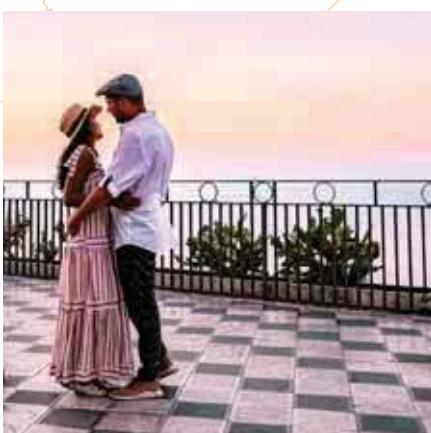
ing in Contact and the counter-drone Project Flytrap.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently launched the military-focused AI platform GenAI.mil, which is powered by Google Gemini, to further signal the "AI-driven culture change," according to a statement from the Pentagon.



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