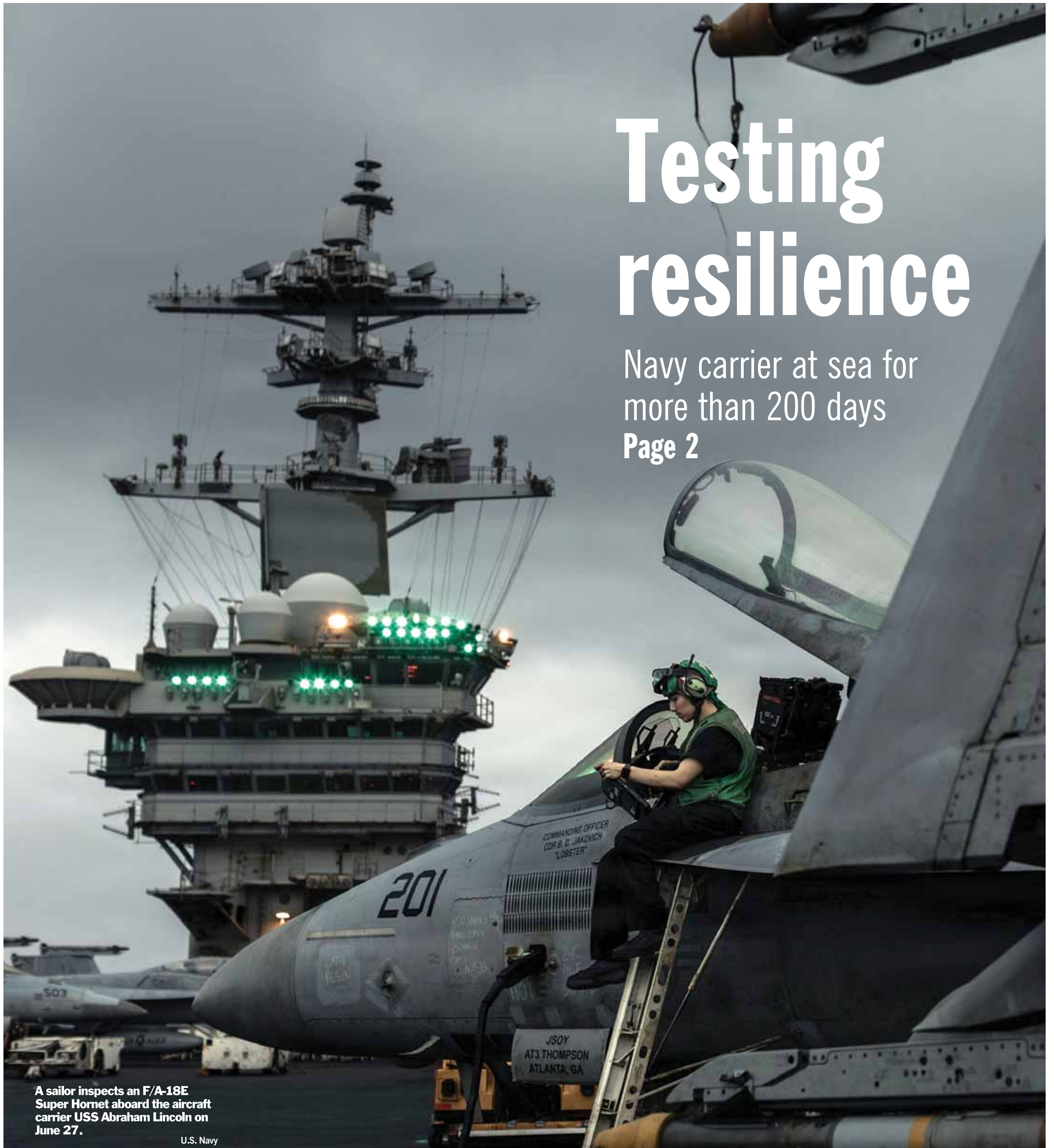


Testing resilience

Navy carrier at sea for
more than 200 days
Page 2



A sailor inspects an F/A-18E Super Hornet aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on June 27.

U.S. Navy

Army releases
new standards
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Air Force plans to
give its newest
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At Aviano, one gate
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COVER STORY

Carrier's long time at sea tests resilience

Lincoln has spent nearly 7 months without port call

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The USS Abraham Lincoln has spent nearly seven months at sea, a grueling pace of operations that has kept the aircraft carrier and its crew on duty in the Middle East since January with no clear end in sight.

On July 6, Lincoln reached its 207th consecutive day at sea, breaking a previous record set by the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The only port call Lincoln has made during its current deployment was a brief stop in Guam on Dec. 11-12, according to the Navy.

The carrier departed San Diego on Nov. 21 for routine operations, the service said.

Lincoln and its crew of about 5,000 personnel have spent months on station in the Arabian Sea supporting U.S. military operations aimed at compelling Iran to release its stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz and abandon its nuclear ambitions.

The U.S. operations have included air strikes against military facilities and other sites in Iran, protecting ships in the strait and, until last month, maintaining a naval blockade against Iranian ports.

There are signs that the operational tempo may be taking a toll on sailors' physical and mental well-being after months of limited contact with their families and little respite from 24/7 operations.

"Our mental health and physical health is in danger," one Lincoln sailor recently wrote to family members. "We need help."

The family shared the message with Stars and Stripes on the condition of anonymity out of concerns of retaliation.

That plea was especially worrisome for one family member who is concerned that their sailor may be among those potentially facing a mental health crisis.

"It's worrisome and it's kind of heartbreaking," the family member said. "... You can't do anything."

Other sailors aboard the carrier have acknowledged the strain and its impact on mental health but also credited the crew's fortitude.

"We are tired," Lt. Cmdr. Alexis Travis wrote in a public post to Instagram on June 16. "This crew has shown grit, grace, resilience, flexibility, kindness, and unmatched ability to do the darn thing."

The well-being of U.S. forces at sea and on land in the Middle East is a priority, Capt. Tim Hawkins, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command, said in a statement on July 9. He added that service members were receiving the best resources, logistical support, and care possible in a forward-operating environment.

"We firmly believe that every operational success begins and ends with our people," Hawkins said. "There is no military on earth that globally supports its warfighters like the U.S. military."

Lincoln is among more than 20 Navy ships and thousands of sailors and Marines in the Middle East. That contingent includes the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush and the Boxer Amphibious Ready Group.

In all, there are more than 50,000 American troops in the Middle East, according to CENTCOM.

Typically, Navy ships on deployment make regular port calls that not only provide an opportunity for vessel maintenance, repairs and resupply but also give sailors and Marines a much-needed break from their jobs.

For example, deployed aircraft carriers usually make a port call every 30 to 45 days,



Photos by U.S. Navy

Sailors taxi an F/A-18F Super Hornet on the flight deck of aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on June 4. The Lincoln is deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations.



Sailors conduct maintenance on an MH-60S Seahawk helicopter on the Lincoln on June 26.



A sailor stands watch in primary flight control during flight operations aboard the Lincoln on June 26.

giving sailors the chance to get off the ship, sightsee, dine out and relax.

But operational needs can disrupt those plans. The crew of Eisenhower spent more than five months in the Red Sea in 2024 without a port call defending against attacks on shipping by Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen.

Previously, Eisenhower accrued 206 days at sea in 2020 due to COVID-19 mitigation procedures, according to the Navy. In 2002, the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt spent 160 consecutive days at sea as part of the post-9/11 response, the service said.

In the case of Eisenhower's Red Sea deployment, officials worked to improve the

"We are tired. This crew has shown grit, grace, resilience, flexibility, kindness, and unmatched ability to do the darn thing."

Lt. Cmdr. Alexis Travis
USS Abraham Lincoln

quality of life for sailors by adding onboard Wi-Fi to improve communication with family and friends.

Special attention also was given to ensuring sailors received adequate rest, and the ship held hundreds of events, such as art sessions, bingo and a singing competition, to help ease the pain of high-stress operations.

Recent social media posts and messages to family are not the first indications from Lincoln sailors highlighting potential quality of life issues during the ship's current deployment.

A USA Today story published in April highlighted concerns of unidentified families worried their sailors were not getting enough to eat.

The article "grossly mischaracterized" food service aboard the ships and the accompanying photos were not taken on a Navy vessel but rather at an ashore dining facility, Adm. Darryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, said at the time.

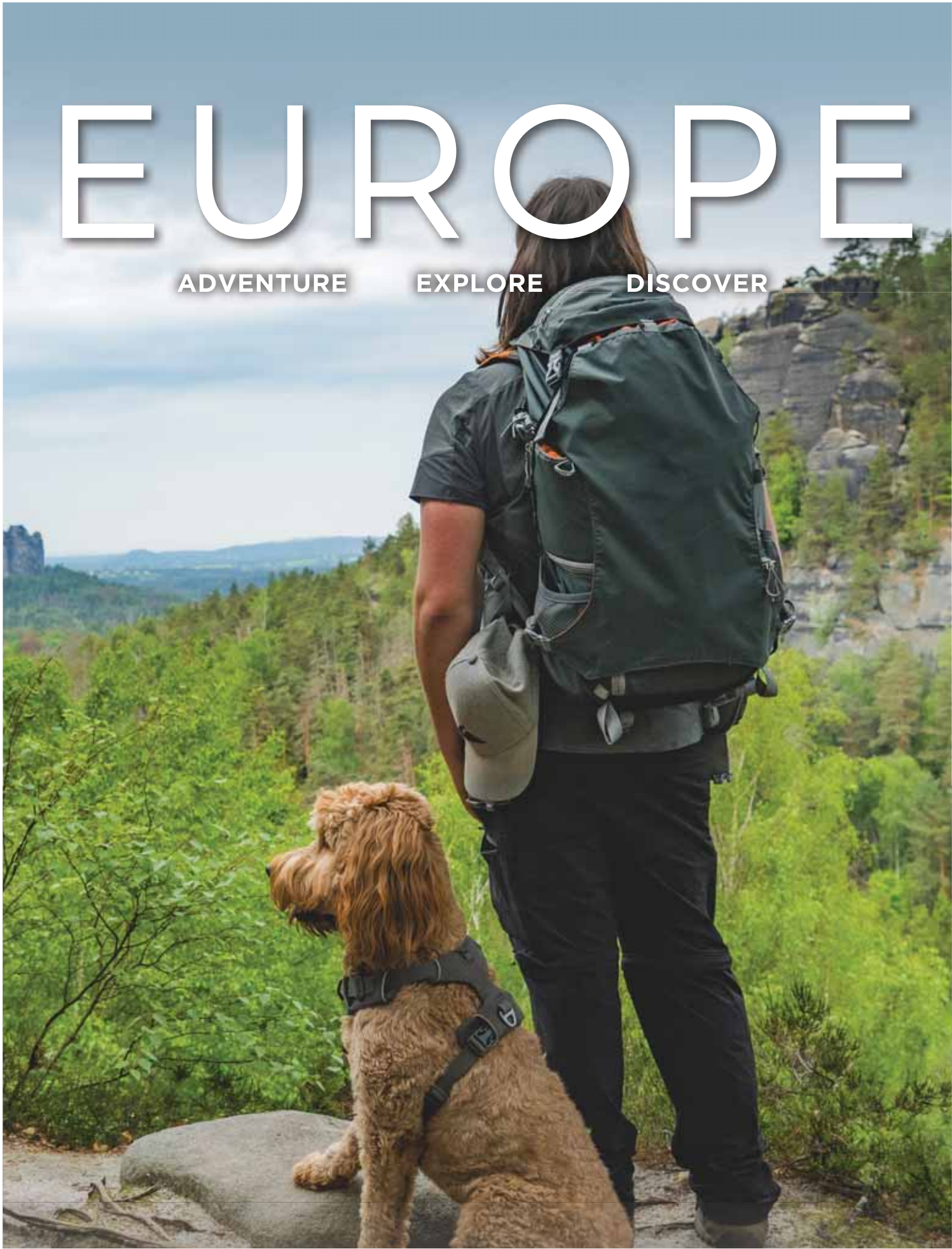
Travis also pushed back on Instagram comments suggesting that sailors commiserating about quality of life during long deployments knew what they signed up for and that the conditions were not as difficult of those previously faced by other sailors.

"Actually literally no one signed up for this and yet here we are, still doing it safely and successfully," Travis, a mental health advocate, wrote in a June 17 Instagram post.

The difficulties and struggles of one crew do not diminish the fight against the same issues faced by other crews, she added.

"If we were all on the same team a little more, I bet we'd have fewer problems building community, connecting with civilians and advocating for veterans," she wrote.

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MILITARY



Photos by U.S. Air Force

One of two B-21 Raider bombers at Edwards Air Force Base in California takes off from the base in December.

B-21 Raider slated to have 2-person crew

Move maintains configuration of B-2 bomber, which is fewer than personnel aboard B-1, B-52

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Air Force's new B-21 Raider intercontinental stealth strategic bomber will operate with a two-person crew, the Air Force announced.

"Following careful analysis of the B-21's advanced capabilities, Air Force leadership determined that a two-pilot configuration optimally supports the aircraft's mission profile," the Air Force said on July 9. No additional information on the criteria for the decision was released.

It will maintain the two-person crew configuration of the B-2 bomber, which includes a pilot and a mission commander, who handles weapons and countermeasures. The mission commander is also capable of flying the plane.

The Air Force also flies the B-1 Lancer, with a four-person crew, and the B-52H Stratofortress, with a five-person crew.

The Air Force also said that it is establishing a "pilot transition program for select weapons system officers and combat systems officers who will be chosen to attend pilot training with a follow-on assignment to the B-21."

Eligible officers will be provided information on how to apply, the Air Force said.

"It is imperative to retain the deep tactical and combat experience currently residing within the WSO and CSO communities," the Air Force said.

The first two B-21 bombers are undergoing test flights at Edwards Air Force Base in California.



The second B-21 Raider test aircraft arrives at Edwards AFB in September. The addition of the second test aircraft expands mission systems and weapons integration testing, advancing the program toward operational readiness.

The Air Force plans to buy 100 of the stealth bombers built by Northrop Grumman Corp. The Air Force has projected an acquisition rate of seven to nine bombers per year once production ramps up.

The first operational bomber is scheduled to be delivered to Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., in 2027. The Air Force has announced

plans to phase out the B-1 and B-2 as it receives new B-21 bombers over the coming decades.

The B-1 Lancer's crew includes an aircraft commander, co-pilot, offensive systems officer and defensive systems officer.

The Air Force has said it plans to continue to operate the B-52H Stratofortress until 2050

and beyond. While the B-21 will be the primary bomber in the future, the B-52 will be used as a long-range weapons platform capable of launching ordnance far from intended targets.

The B-52 first flew in 1952. The approximately 73 B-52 airframes in the Air Force inventory are from the H series, built in the early 1960s, making the aircraft over 60 years old.

The Air Force has added updated avionics and other components to the Cold War-era bomber. A plan to switch its power plants to eight Rolls-Royce engines and upgrade the radar would result in the aircraft being designated B-52J once converted.

The first B-52H with the upgraded radar package crashed on takeoff from Edwards AFB on June 15, killing eight people on board, including Air Force officers, Air Force civilian workers and two contractors for Boeing, the builder of the original aircraft.

The cause of the crash is under investigation. The Air Force has said it is moving ahead with the radar upgrade program and will send another B-52H to Edwards once the system has been installed.

The bomber force is one "leg" of the U.S. nuclear "triad," which also includes 400 land-based Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles and 14 Ohio-class submarines each carrying 20 Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

In addition to the B-21, the U.S. plans to modernize the nuclear triad with the next-generation LGM-35A Sentinel ICBM and the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine.

Error forces Air Force to cancel promotions for 135 sergeants

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

More than 100 Air Force staff sergeants who thought they had been promoted won't advance after officials uncovered a scoring error on a key advancement test.

The Air Force announced July 7 that 135 security forces airmen will be removed from the 2026 technical sergeant promotion list after an enlisted promotions team member discovered an outdated scoring key had been used for the Specialty Knowledge Test. The error caused 27 test questions to be graded incorrectly.

The promotion team then recalculated the scores of more than 2,000 security forces

airmen who competed for promotion. After the re-score, officials determined that a different group of 135 staff sergeants should have been promoted. Those airmen are expected to be notified this month.

The security forces career field had 586 promotion slots this cycle.

"We owe it to those affected to address it immediately," Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force David R. Wolfe said in a statement. "This is going to be hard for everyone impacted."

The Air Force said no artificial intelligence products were involved in the error, which it attributed to human error.

The service recently promoted more than

6,500 staff sergeants to technical sergeant in the 2026 promotion cycle. The mistake affected only the security forces career field.

Air Education and Training Command and Air Force Personnel Center have strengthened their internal processes, according to the Air Force. A review is underway.

"We owe it to our airmen to own the mistake and to take the necessary actions to not only make it right today, but to prevent future issues," Wolfe said.

Security forces serves as the Air Force's military police. They are responsible for base defense, law enforcement and the protection of high-value assets, including aircraft and nuclear weapons.



MARK HERLIHY/U.S. Air Force

The Air Force will remove 135 security forces airmen from the 2026 technical sergeant promotion list.

MILITARY

Army releases new standards for body fat

Service is last to drop height-weight tables

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Army on July 7 released its new waist-to-height ratio requirements and ordered troops to get measured on the new standards within the next three months.

The service is the last to replace height-and-weight tables with the waist-to-height ratio after the Pentagon in December called for the change. The Army matched the 0.55 ratio called for in the Defense Department's memo — as did the Navy and Air Force. The Marine Corps chose to go slimmer with a 0.52 ratio.

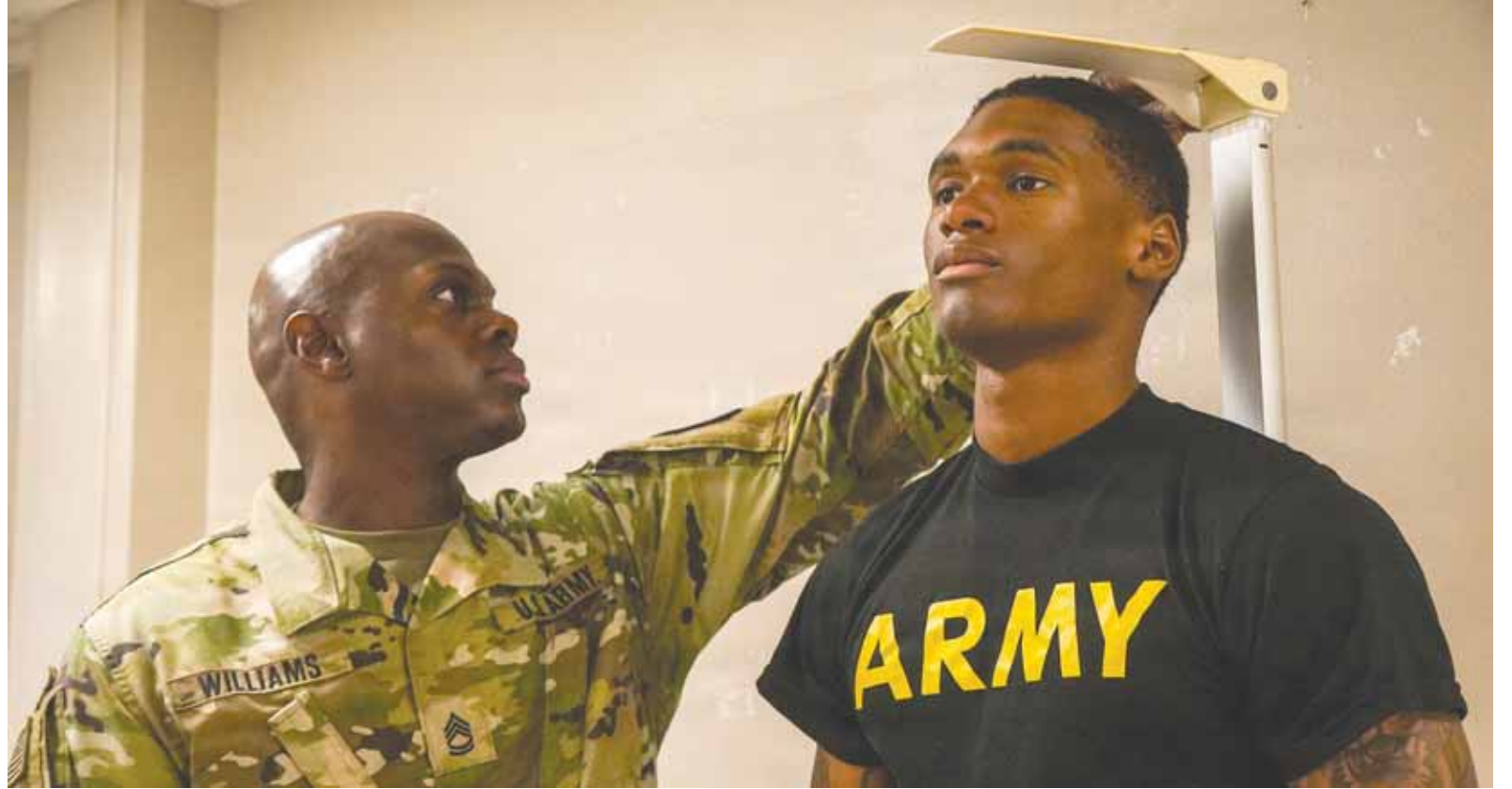
"This is about lethality and health," said Sgt. Maj. Edgar Monsanto, deputy chief of staff in the Army personnel office's Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness, in a statement. "We are adopting new metrics to ensure our soldiers are healthy and physically fit to fight and win."

The new Army directive also removed past workarounds to body fat standards, such as the ability to score high enough on the physical fitness test to be exempt, and the ability to use alternative methods to assess body fat.

Troops will be measured twice a year, and meeting the ratio should keep them within the allotted body-fat standards between 18% and 26% for men and between 26% and 36% for women, as described in the Defense Department's memo.

Any ratio above 0.55 will send the soldier to a new team for measuring within the same duty day.

If the soldier still fails, the unit will place them into the Army's remedial program and



Spc. Kumar Ramsarup receives a height and weight assessment at Fort Polk, La., on May 3. The Army on Tuesday released its new waist-to-height ratio rules.

KAI SERVANCE-SMITH/U.S. Army

order a medical assessment.

Medical exemptions for pregnant and postpartum soldiers do remain in effect.

Army Secretary Dan Driscoll signed the new directive July 1, and it is effective immediately upon its publication on July 7.

Troops have 90 days to record their measurements on the new standard.

"Units may initiate separation actions for a

soldier flagged due to failure of the [Army Body Composition Program], but no soldier will be separated until an 180-day assessment is completed by [Department of the Army Headquarters] and further guidance is disseminated," according to an explainer posted on the Army's website.

The directive also removed the requirement to designate a noncommissioned officer

to run the program and called on commanders to directly oversee its execution and quality control.

The Army did not immediately respond to questions about the new directive. However, an explainer of the changes stated the ratio is a "more accurate health predictor."

The single calculation improves fairness and is simpler, according to the Army.

Navy ends permanent shaving waivers

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Sailors with shaving-related conditions will get one year of medical treatment to meet the Navy's clean-shaven face standard or they will be removed from the service, according to new guidance.

The Navy will no longer issue permanent shaving waivers to sailors who suffer from skin conditions caused by shaving, including pseudofolliculitis barbae, according to a Navy memorandum published this week. The updated policy brings the service into line with guidance issued last year by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth banning most shaving accommodations for service members.

The Navy's July directive instructs all sailors with skin irritation or other conditions caused by shaving — including those with current medical shaving waivers — to report the issue to their supervisors and seek medical evaluation.

If recommended for treatment, their commanding officer may issue a temporary shaving waiver, allowing them to maintain a beard up to ¼ inch in length.

Commanders may grant temporary waivers for up to 90 days, according to the guidance. Those waivers must "align with prescribed treatment." Commanders may only grant a 90-day shaving waiver four times before they must recommend a sailor for administrative separation.

Sailors who cannot meet shaving standards after one year of treatment shall be deemed to



ERNESTO HERNANDEZ FONTE/U.S. Navy

A sailor shaves during an exercise in 2012 at Camp Shelby, Miss.

have "an unmanageable permanent condition" and recommended for "separation due to failure to comply with grooming standards," according to the memo.

"The operational success of the U.S. Navy demands the readiness of all sailors. Mission accomplishment hinges on stringent compliance with standards and ensuring implementing policies are clear, unambiguous and compliant with law and regulation," the memo reads. "Grooming standards add to sailor and mission safety and ensure the safe and proper utilization of protective equipment in all naval environments and operational conditions."

The policy says the Navy will not grant temporary medical waivers to recruits or others entering or reentering the service.

Pseudofolliculitis barbae, commonly known as razor bumps, is a condition that can cause a person to experience painful inflammation after shaving. The condition disproportionately affects Black men, some 60% of whom may

experience it, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology.

Hegseth has lamented the increase in recent years of bearded troops, who he has said do not meet military standards. His September 2025 memorandum also instructed the military services to reevaluate religious beard waivers.

The Navy last month ordered sailors with religious-based accommodations, including for facial hair, to reapply for a grooming standard exemption and outlined its more stringent evaluation process.

The July memo allows sailors to continue to wear mustaches. It also allows certain special operators to don beards in certain operational environments when they are deemed "mission essential." Those forces — including Navy SEALs — however must "be clean shaven" when deployed in areas with a threat of a chemical, biological, radiation or nuclear attack, the memo said.

Navy reaches its recruiting goal early

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

The Navy surpassed its annual recruiting goal of signing 45,000 new recruits three months ahead of schedule, the service announced July 2.

"Today's Navy is stronger because tens of thousands of Americans chose to answer the call to serve," Rear Adm. Jim Waters, commander of Navy Recruiting Command, said in a statement. "Reaching this milestone is not simply about achieving a recruiting objective — it's about delivering the talented sailors our Fleet needs to maintain readiness in an increasingly complex security environment."

The fiscal year ends Sept. 30.

In June 2025, the Navy met its 2025 recruiting goal three months early, with 40,600 future sailors enlisted. By the close of the fiscal year, it had brought that final number to 44,096 — a figure the Navy hasn't seen since the early 2000s, Waters said at the time.

The Navy missed its recruiting goal in 2023, as did the Army and Air Force, and took steps to reimagine how it brings in new sailors.

Changes included modernizing marketing campaigns, streamlining administrative processes, tripling its medical waiver review staff, expanding age eligibility and opening a preparatory course to improve test scores for entry.

"Our recruiters never lost sight of what matters most — people," Waters said. "Behind every accession is a recruiter who set the foundation for success and a future sailor preparing to stand the watch, support the Fleet and contribute to our nation's security."

The Air Force and Space Force each reached their recruiting goals in April. The Army achieved its recruiting goal in May.

MILITARY

At Aviano, one gate opens, another closes

By KENT HARRIS
Stars and Stripes

AVIANO AIR BASE, Italy — The morning commute to the home of the 31st Fighter Wing just got a bit better for some drivers and worse for others.

The long-awaited gate for Area 1 — where schools, medical facilities and the base chapel are located — opened on July 6. It had been closed for more than a year as part of a \$6.1 million project handled by Italian firm SKE Srl to improve security and ease morning traffic.

Three entry lanes now greet visitors after they enter the exterior gate, with the goal of reducing the dozens of cars that often lined up to get in.

Traffic — especially in the morning as parents drop off children for school and others head to work — has often backed up through a nearby traffic circle, creating additional disruptions to city traffic patterns.

The temporary gate located near the medical clinic has closed.

On July 7, one of three gates to the flightline area stopped allowing privately owned vehicles.

The LVIS gate, which had allowed POVs to enter for a few hours before work, will now be used exclusively by commercial vehicles until Sept. 15, according to Maj. Rachel Salpietra, a wing spokeswoman.

POVs will still be able to exit through that gate for a few hours in the afternoon.

The move was made to allow contractors to access the base earlier in the day when temperatures are cooler, Salpietra said.

There are numerous construction projects on base. Higher temperatures in the summer trigger safety measures limiting the amount of work that can be done. Previously, commercial vehicles only entered after lanes were closed to POV traffic.

Drivers who previously entered the base that way must now drive a few miles farther to enter the main gate and may face traffic delays, especially at the intersection where the SP31 ends at the SP7 (commonly known as the AP Highway).

No further information from the wing was available at press time.



TAE LANI ALLEN-LEWIS/U.S. Air Force

A new gate to Area 1 at Aviano Air Base, Italy, is seen during a grand opening ceremony on July 6.

Cost of protecting US bases against drones may reach billions

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The cost to protect Defense Department personnel and bases from drone attacks such as those faced by service members in the Middle East could run into the billions, a government watchdog agency says.

The Pentagon would need to spend as much as \$7.4 billion to purchase and install defense systems to protect 100 U.S. military installations worldwide against small aerial drones, the Congressional Budget Office estimated in a report.

Those systems would use a multilayered defense — including radar, radio frequency and kinetic systems — to detect and defeat small unmanned aircraft, the CBO said.

It would take an additional \$500 million annually to repair and maintain those systems

over their service life. Purchase costs might have to be repeated every four to five years to remain effective, depending on how rapidly the threat evolves, the report stated.

There currently are 824 military installations tracked in the Bureau of Transportation Statistics database, the CBO said.

Drones “have been used to collect intelligence and attack people, vehicles, and critical fixed locations in the Middle East and Ukraine,” the CBO said.

The result is “heightened interest” in obtaining countermeasures to be put in place, it said.

Militaries have long used drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, but recent technological advancements have expanded their use, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine.

For example, innovative use of surface drones allowed Ukraine, which has few ships and no blue

water presence, to disable at least 40% of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and deny the Kremlin’s vessels access to a sizeable portion of the sea.

More recently, an Iranian drone attack killed six American service members in March at an operations center in Kuwait.

All told, Iranian missile and drone attacks since the war began have injured hundreds of U.S. military personnel, leaving many with traumatic brain injuries, the Associated Press reported.

They’ve also caused millions of dollars in damages to U.S. military facilities in the Middle East, including Naval Support Activity Bahrain, which has seen extensive destruction.

The Defense Department is working to address the evolving threat, allocating more than \$300 million each year for research, testing and development, according to the report.

In its study, the CBO assessed five options to

detect and defend against aerial drones, settling on a multilayered defense.

The option, which would include a command-and-control system, would offer the most comprehensive defense and “allow for more hostile small drones to be engaged at once,” the CBO said.

Individually, the scalable system would cost as much as \$74 million per installation to purchase and install, and as much as \$5 million annually to repair and maintain, according to the report.

Individual system purchase costs would range from \$75,000 to \$10 million. Installation costs would range from zero to \$8 million, the CBO said.

Options with fewer systems to install and integrate would cost less, while installations with site-specific requirements or irregular shapes could be more expensive, the report stated.

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Have a Bite at Dracula's Cave in Tivoli

BY KATIE WELLS
Stars and Stripes



If you happen to be near Rome, the town of Tivoli is an easy 40-minute train ride out of the city to a completely different world, geographically and architecturally. It was here, after exploring hiking trails with cascading waterfalls at Villa Gregoriana and living out my Lizzie McGuire dreams of running along the fountains in the Italian Renaissance Garden at Villa D'Este (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), that my family and I stumbled upon a rather unique restaurant called the Taverna di Dracula.

After a long warmer-than-usual morning, we popped into the restaurant, hidden away in the tan, travertine stone village. To our surprise, we had the place to ourselves. The owner came out and greeted us like friends, and he even spoke English. As he handed out menus, he explained that he and his wife cook everything fresh and that some items might take a longer time since they were all homemade dishes. Some of the recipes had even been passed down for centuries.

He shared his passion for the legend of Dracula and invited us to go down into "Dracula's cave" below the dining room, where we saw a coffin and a man stuck in the stone wall. Despite the spooky theme, the restaurant was charming and a great place to cool off. We could see the passion for Romanian culture and Dracula in the décor, including the drink coasters and lanterns.

I ordered a chopped salad which was a medley of fresh veggies and hard-boiled egg. It was lovely, though I couldn't help but sneak a few of my husband's sarmale, or Romanian stuffed cabbage rolls. They were so delicious I wished he had more to share, and he probably wished a quarter of his lunch hadn't been highjacked. We were told that if we wanted dessert, we should order about halfway through our meal so we wouldn't have to wait too long, so we ordered two papanasi, or Romanian sweet cheese donuts, in cherry and blueberry to share. Delightfully, they fit with the theme of Dracula's tavern as the berries stained the white cheese a deep satiny red.

At the end of our meal, the owner came out with free shots of palinka, a traditional Romanian plum brandy (often dubbed as Romanian moonshine), that was so strong we joked that maybe he was, in fact, Dracula, and we would be his next meal.

Since the restaurant was quiet that afternoon, we really got to chat with our host a lot. On the TV above us, he showed a slideshow of some beautiful nearby natural areas he recommended we visit. After we paid, thanked him and walked back into the daylight, a mysterious calico cat sitting guard on a stump by the tavern's door bid us farewell.

We had no idea we'd be in Italy eating Romanian food and touring Dracula's cave, but it ended up being a delicious, fun and memorable part of our trip. I've learned that when traveling, it's often the things you don't expect that end up being favorite memories.



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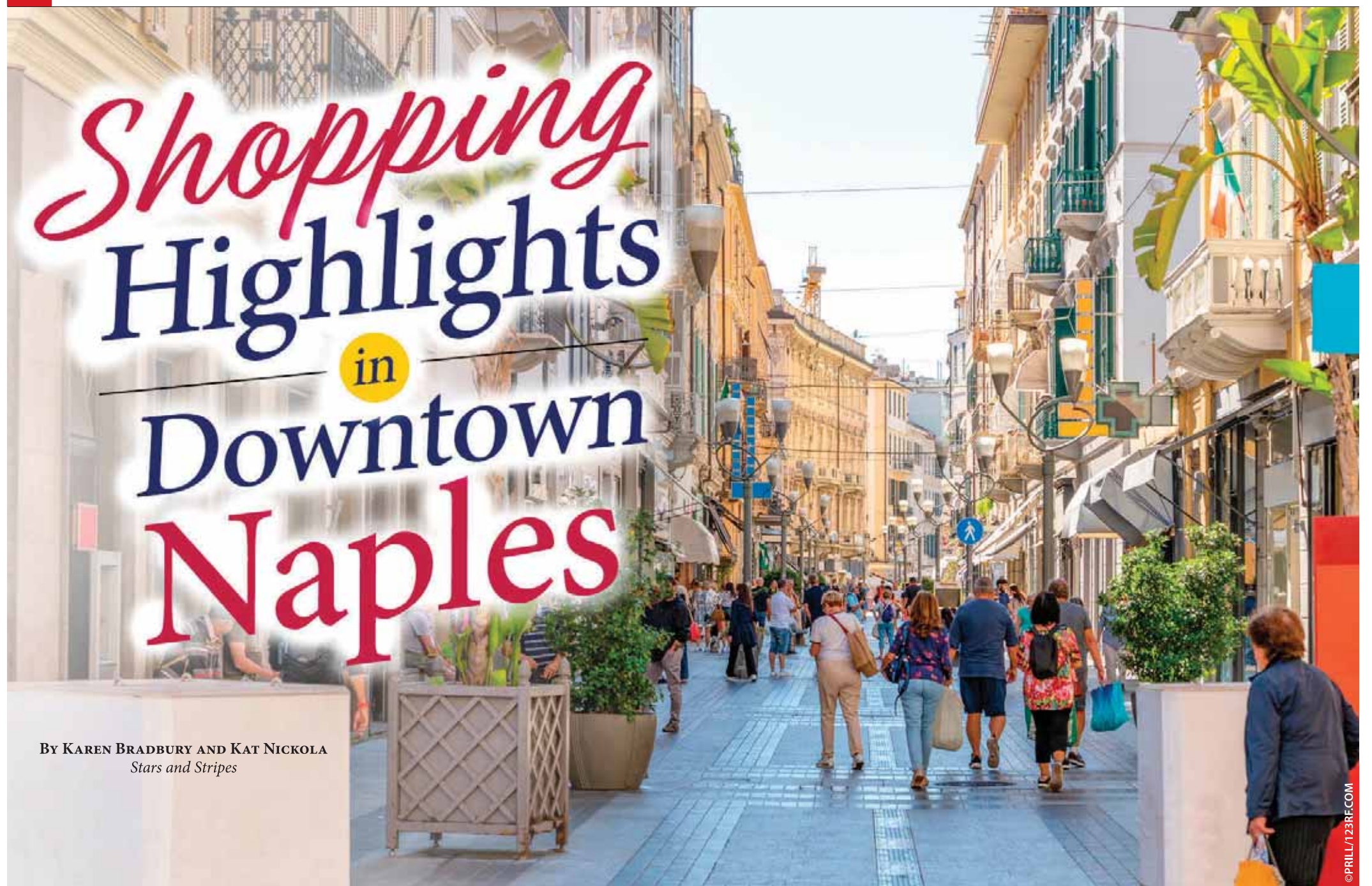
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BY KAREN BRADBURY AND KAT NICKOLA
Stars and Stripes

For those new to the Naples region, taking a trip into the city center can feel daunting. It is not known for being the most well-kept or safe Italian city, but it is the type of place that many people come to love for its authenticity. It is chaotic and gritty, pushy and real. Venturing downtown for some shopping is a great way to dive into Neapolitan culture, feel the local vibe and try some incredible food. As in any big city, always secure your items, keep your guard up and be inobtrusive; tourists are targeted, locals are not.

Markets

With around 60 street markets in Naples, it's easy to visit one of these loud, colorful places where deals await those skilled at bargaining.

Selling everything from fruit and vegetables to clothes and shoes, the La Pignasecca street market is open daily. Snag some local olives, cheese or pasta at one of the many stands. Local shops also line the market route along the Piazza Carita where you can find all kinds of unique things like arts and crafts, hidden treasures and electronics.

To see expert shoppers in action, visit Naples' famous Poggioreale Market. Open only on the weekends, this is the place to go for good deals on anything from high-end fashions to small collectibles and housewares. It is the largest market in Naples and famous for its huge shoe collection. It is a popular place so it can get crowded. Join the bustle to find a treasure of your own.

The covered Toretta Market is a great option if the weather isn't cooperating. Best known for the large number of eateries and cafes, it's a great place to spend a whole day. There are farmers' market stalls selling local produce and an area with a flea-market feel where you can find just about anything. It is only closed on Sundays.

Pizzerias

Margherita pizza, the simple but scrumptious pie topped with tomato sauce, basil and mozzarella is Naples' gift to the world. A plaque noting its birthplace in 1889 hangs next to the Pizzeria Brandi in the Chiaia district.

However, the must-try old pizzerias in Naples are located along the Via dei Tribunali. Naples has more than 800 pizzerias, roughly 100 of which are certified by the Associazione

Verace Pizza Napoletana (AVPN), a regulatory body tasked with assuring makers adhere to the city's traditions. Look for the AVPN logo, or better yet, look for long lines leading out the door.

Designer Boutiques

Well-heeled Neapolitans splash out in the boutiques and designer shops in the Chiaia district where famous fashion houses purvey their coveted labels. Shop for stiletto heels in the city of their creation or seek out silk ties and artisanal leather handbags. This affluent area lies west of the old town and extends to the beautiful waterfront park called the Villa Comunale. Wander the designer brand shops that line the via Chiaia during the day or visit one of the many cocktail bars that make evenings here a mainstay of Naples nightlife.

Christmas Alley

Deep in the heart of the city, on a pedestrian-only street, is Via San Gregorio Armeno. Dubbed Christmas Alley, this narrow, cobblestoned street is festive all year and is filled with old storefronts with ornate window displays of presepio, or Nativity scenes. In a country where 78 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, the presepio is a highly coveted and revered part of the holiday season.

A presepio is designed to be expanded every year. While there are plenty of pre-made sets, in Christmas Alley you can tailor the Nativity scene to your liking. If you feel like adding a figure of King Charles or Cristiano Ronaldo next to baby Jesus, you can. Many shops along the street have been passed down through generations spanning five centuries and still make the figurines by hand.



HIKING AT LAGO DI SORAPIS IN ITALY'S DOLOMITES

BY KIMBERLY KEPHART
Contributing Writer

I'd seen photos of the impossibly turquoise lake nestled high in the Dolomites, framed by jagged peaks that look straight out of a storybook. But nothing compares to seeing Lago di Sorapis in person.

As a military spouse living in Italy, I'm always on the lookout for weekend getaways that don't just tick a box but leave an imprint. Hiking to Sorapis became exactly that.

I began the hike late in the day, around 3:30 p.m., with the goal of catching sunset over the lake. The trail starts off gently through pine forest before climbing gradually into more exposed terrain. About halfway through, I encountered narrow ledges and rocky scree paths.

Some sections are equipped with cables for one to hold on to and stay close to the cliffside. This is not a hike for those uncomfortable with heights. If hiking with children, please know that there are steep drops. Hiking with your furry friends? You'll want to keep your dogs on a leash.

I was hiking solo, which added a layer of mental challenge, especially as daylight began to fade. But I came prepared: I brought headlamps, layers, snacks and plenty of water. The moment the lake

came into view, I actually gasped. The water is a surreal, milky-turquoise color, backed by towering cliffs and snow-dusted ridges.

I stayed for about 45 minutes, soaking it all in. Hiking back as the sun dipped below the peaks was both eerie and magical. Off in the distance, I could see the famous Cadini di Misurina. The Dolomites feel ancient in those twilight hours, like something out of a Tolkien novel.

Making my way back in the dark with only a headlamp was such a surreal experience. There were only a few other people on the trail, and I was greeted by the occasional sound of a bird.

Was it worth it? Absolutely. If you're looking for an unforgettable weekend adventure, this is it. The Lago di Sorapis hike offers a blend of effort and reward that few trails can match. Just come prepared, respect the trail and give yourself time to truly enjoy it.



Logistics

This trail near Cortina d'Ampezzo offers challenge, beauty and a deep sense of awe. It's not the easiest hike; it's also not the hardest, but it is one of the most rewarding.

If you are hiking this in the summer, please note that the path does get busy. You'll be around quite a few people and parking can be challenging to find.

From Vicenza, it's about a three-hour drive north into the Dolomites. If you're starting from Aviano, the drive is a bit shorter at just over two hours. The trail begins at Passo Tre Croci, a scenic mountain pass with limited roadside parking. Arrive early if you're hiking during the summer. You'll know you are there when you pass B&B Tre Croci.

Public transport is also an option via the Dolomiti Bus system from Cortina d'Ampezzo, though return schedules can be infrequent, especially in the late afternoon. Be sure to check timetables or consider staying overnight nearby.

- **DISTANCE**
11 km round trip (6.8 miles)
- **Elevation Gain**
300 meters
- **TIME**
4–5 hours
- **DIFFICULTY**
Moderate (rocky terrain and exposed ledges)
- **BEST SEASON**
Late June to early October
- **TRAILHEAD LOCATION**
Passo Tre Croci (about 15 minutes from Cortina)
- **WATER SOURCE**
Rifugio Vandelli (seasonal)



MILITARY

Navy testing new suit for deep diving

Gear has sea-level atmosphere, even at extreme depths

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is testing a prototype diving suit designed to protect deep-sea divers from crushing pressure and decompression sickness while reducing the suit's weight, increasing visibility and mobility, and allowing divers longer periods underwater than older systems.

"It allows divers to descend without restrictions and not worry about bottom time and air limitations," said Petty Officer 1st Class Onofre Lopez, one of the first Navy divers to test the suit in open water. "Bottom time is at a premium when you're on surface-supplied air."

The Gen 0 Deep Sea Expeditionary with No Decompression (DSEND) suit maintains a sea-level atmosphere, even at extreme depths, according to a Navy news release.

It's an advancement on the older Atmospheric Diving Suit — which also keeps divers at sea-level atmosphere, but is heavy, cumbersome, lacks mobility and requires a large support group for each diver.

According to the Navy and commercial diving catalogs, currently used diving suits can weigh more than 1,000 pounds with the lightest weight about 800 pounds. They require outfitting the diver, then using a winch from a boat or on shore to lower the diver into the water.

The new DSEND is considered a "light-weight" deep diving suit, according to the Office of Naval Research. But the DSEND still weighs in at under 500 pounds. While the diver must still be winched into the water, the relative lighter weight allows the diver to swim and move more easily using buoyancy devices when working at or near the seabed.

The Navy took the DSEND Gen 0 prototype to its top underwater warfare center, Naval Base Kitsap-Keyport, Wash., for evaluation last month. After tests in a pool at the University of Maryland, the suit was subjected to the open-water environment of Puget Sound, west of Seattle.

Sponsored by the Office of Naval Research in partnership with Naval Sea Systems Command, the evaluation moved the suit from a controlled facility into a realistic, unpredictable saltwater environment.

Three Navy divers piloted the prototype to the ocean floor to simulate real-world missions such as underwater rescues, salvage, explosive ordnance disposal and hull maintenance.

The tests at Keyport included recovering an unmanned underwater vehicle that the Navy sank for the exercise. The divers, working in tandem with remotely operated "top-side" engineers, successfully located the UUV, rigged a lifting device using the suit's mechanical grippers and secured the vehicle for recovery.

"The rigorous testing exposed the suit to factors like variable visibility, limited traction and a silty/muddy seafloor, allowing the divers to assess its maneuverability," the Navy release said.

Divers using standard scuba gear can usually operate down to about 130 feet below the ocean's surface. The DSEND suit allows divers to work in pressure equal to sea level at depth down to 600 feet.

Older deep-sea Navy diving suits use a mixture of oxygen and inert gases such as helium and nitrogen, so divers can work several hundred feet below the surface.

But deep underwater work can increase nitrogen narcosis — known as "rapture of the deep" — in which the pressurized nitrogen can cause altered states of consciousness similar to alcohol intoxication. Divers must also lower and raise themselves back to the



MICHAEL WALLS/U.S. Navy

Prior to the tests at Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division, Keyport, Wash., the Deep Sea Expeditionary with No Decompression suit was tested by the Navy at the University of Maryland in College Park.



SCOTT PITTMAN/U.S. Navy

Casteñeda is lowered into Liberty Bay near Seattle.

surface, using frequent stops to fend off decompression sickness, known as "the bends."

Divers sometimes must be put inside decompression chambers after surfacing in order to smooth their adaption to sea-level air pressure.

"The overall goal of the program is to be able to do one-atmospheric diving, to reduce and eliminate the risk of decompression sick-

ness, and reduce the effects of bottom time on the diver," Navy Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chris Lansford said.

The lightweight atmospheric suit, which has been in development since 2017, looks more like one worn for missions in outer space than the traditional heavy-metal deep-sea diving outfit. It has rotating joints that allow for better mobility than older suits and



SCOTT PITTMAN/U.S. Navy

Navy Diver 2nd Class Giovanni Casteñeda prepares to enter a DSEND suit at Keyport.

is fitted with a self-contained life support system.

To ensure divers can perform complex tasks, the team evaluated mechanical gripper dexterity, rotational-joint durability in high-particulate environments and fine motor skills. Divers successfully adapted hand pods for underwater tool usage, demonstrating the physical versatility required for salvage operations.

Divers can use a prototype thruster pack that enhances speed and buoyancy to counter the suction of heavy boots on muddy seafloor terrain.

Lopez said the suit's buoyancy created minor challenges but was just a "little bit of a growing pain" for divers getting used to balancing it.

"But other than that, It allows us to stay comfortable essentially indefinitely," he said.

MILITARY

Ford in maintenance after lengthy deployment

Navy's newest carrier was out 326 days

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford moved to Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, Va., on July 7 for its first maintenance break since a record 326-day deployment that ended in May.

The first of a new carrier class, Ford was launched in 2013 and commissioned in 2017. It had prior maintenance in Virginia at HII Newport News Shipbuilding in 2021. The Planned Incremental Availability maintenance will be the ship's first at a Navy shipyard.

"A PIA is a scheduled period for an aircraft carrier to undergo extensive maintenance, repairs and modernization to meet future operational demands, spanning a wide array of overhauls and inspections," the Navy said in a statement. "Additionally, a concurrent availability will be conducted to restore spaces damaged during a fire aboard the then-deployed carrier in March 2026."

At the time of the fire, Ford was in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of the U.S. forces attacking Iran during Operation Epic Fury. Preliminary work on the damage was done at facilities in Croatia.

PIA maintenance normally takes several months. USS Dwight D. Eisenhower underwent PIA work at Norfolk in January 2026 after a combat deployment and returned to the fleet in April.

The Navy said July 8 that a team from Norfolk Naval Shipyard had started a "continuum" of work on the carrier while it was still at Naval Station Norfolk.

Advance work included "early testing, preparations for temporary service installation, and jet blast deflector overhaul," the Navy statement said.

Project Superintendent George "BJ" Baker said the continuum allows for work before and after the window of opportunity (WOO) before and after Ford's allocated time in the shipyard.

"Capitalizing on these WOO periods is the single most important key to returning carriers to their strict maintenance timelines," Baker said.

The Navy's four shipyards have been criticized by Congress and defense experts for backlogs on maintenance schedules.



Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, Va., welcomed the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford on July 7 in advance of its "Planned Incremental Availability" following the carrier's historic 326-day deployment, including operations in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Red seas.



Sailors man the rails on the Ford flight deck as the aircraft carrier returns to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., on May 16.

Ford's arrival at Norfolk follows the early PIA completions for Nimitz-class aircraft carriers Eisenhower in April and USS George H.W. Bush in November 2024, the Navy said.

"USS Gerald R. Ford is positioned to become the third consecutive early finish of an aircraft carrier availability at 'America's Shipyard,'" said Rear Adm. Kavon Hakimzadeh, Norfolk Naval Shipyard's command-

ing officer.

Ford deployed from June 2025 to May 2026, steaming across the Atlantic four times as it moved from Norfolk to exercises in the North Sea before it was ordered to the Caribbean to take part in the Jan. 3 capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The carrier then moved to the eastern Mediterranean to launch attacks on Feb. 28 against Iran. It returned to Norfolk on May 16.

Ford is the lead ship in the first newly designed aircraft carrier class in more than 40 years, beginning the phased replacement of Nimitz-class carriers that will stretch past 2050.

The 100,000-ton carrier is the first of 10 planned ships of the class to be built. The Ford class incorporates many advancements over the Nimitz class, including electromagnetic-powered aircraft catapults and elevators.

USS John F. Kennedy, the second Ford-class carrier, is scheduled to be commissioned in March 2017. Two other carriers, USS Enterprise and USS Doris Miller are under construction at HII Newport News Shipbuilding, with projected launching dates in 2031 and 2034. Two additional Ford-class carriers, USS William J. Clinton and USS George W. Bush, were announced in January 2025.

IG: Army falling short in 155 mm production

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

A push to put the U.S. artillery industry on a war footing has fallen far short of its goals, according to a new watchdog agency report that says the gap could undermine readiness for combat in the years ahead.

The Defense Department's aim was to produce 100,000 rounds a month of 155 mm shells by October 2025. But as of March, the Army was producing only about 36,000 rounds per month, the DOD inspector general said in a new report.

The current shortfall stems largely from the failure of a \$469 million contractor-operated plant in Mesquite, Texas, to produce a single shell meeting Army specifications, the IG said.

Between February 2022 and September 2025, the Army spent \$4.5 billion on production of 155 mm shells, according to the report.

The munition is the Army's standard artillery round, which is fired from howitzers and used across NATO.

The drive to rebuild U.S. stockpiles of the shells came after more than 3 million of the

rounds were sent to Ukraine because of high demand in that country's ongoing war with Russia.

The lack of production could increase the "risk of not meeting the operational needs of the United States, allies, and partner nations in potential future conflicts," the report said.

While the Army has boosted monthly production well above the 14,000 rounds per month it was producing before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, contractor problems have stymied efforts to ramp up even faster, the IG said.

The Mesquite plant was supposed to operate three production lines capable of turning out a combined 30,000 projectile metal parts a month.

But problems emerged at the facility, with various production difficulties connected to a decision to adapt older equipment to produce newer-model projectile rounds, the IG said.

Army ammunition officials described the project as a "high-risk, high-reward opportunity" that was expected to be a faster way to increase production, the IG said.

Instead, the unproven manufacturing process led to significant production challenges,



Pfc. Chad Averill carries a 155 mm artillery round ahead of a live-fire exercise at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany. The Army awarded a \$635 million contract for an artillery complex at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant to manufacture 155 mm rounds.

the report said.

Without the Mesquite factory output, the Army expects three other projectile-body plants to reach a combined capacity of only 71,000 parts a month by September.

The report did not state when the Army was expected to reach the 100,000-round-per-month threshold.

The IG recommended that the Army review the contract with the Mesquite plant,

examine whether it can recoup funds and find alternatives for making up for the shell shortfall.

The Army largely accepted the findings and said it was shifting some of the work away from the Texas facility.

Inspectors, however, said that the Army's plans lacked sufficient detail and that uncertainty remains over how the service would achieve Pentagon production goals.

MILITARY

'Like a God-gun'

Armor unit trains with Switchblade 600, US Army's new one-way attack drones

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT IRWIN, Calif. — In the first two days of its battle against Fort Irwin's dedicated opposing force, Army 1st Lt. William Kaiser's launched effects platoon had already destroyed 60 enemy vehicles.

It was the first time the platoon had employed its new one-way attack drones in a major training environment, and Kaiser said it was quickly clear how useful those drones — Switchblade 600s — would be in combat.

"It can kind of feel like a God-gun, you know," Kaiser said as his platoon rested between missions on the third day of its fight last month against the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, known as Blackhorse, at the Army's National Training Center. "We're just killing people left and right."

The 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division established Kaiser's launched effects platoon last year inside its 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment to experiment with one-way attack and first-person-view attack drones as part of the Army's Transformation in Contact initiative.

That program seeks to incorporate the latest battlefield technology and new tactics into Army brigades to prepare them to fight an enemy with similar warfighting capabilities, such as China or Russia.

At NTC, where 2nd Brigade spent much of June training, the Switchblades proved among the most effective new tech the unit employed, according to Lt. Col. J.P. Steadman, the commander of 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment.

The Switchblade 600 is a GPS-guided loitering munition with an anti-armor warhead built by AeroVironment. It launches from a mortar-like tube and its blade-like wings expand in the air, inspiring its Switchblade moniker. Switchblade 600 can fly for about 45 minutes and reach about 25 miles, according to AeroVironment.

"Think of it like a Javelin or a Hellfire missile with a camera and wings, and I can move it wherever I want to as I'm looking for a target," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chris Radtke, one of the brigade's drone experts.

During the force-on-force fight, Steadman's squadron controlled all the brigade's Switch-

blades.

He prioritized using them to strike critical enemy infrastructure, such as command and control nodes, and to attack armored vehicles in areas where his front-line troops were operating.

"As long as I can find a target within 40 minutes of flight time, I can maneuver that thing wherever I want. That has helped me immensely as it enables both my [troops to] maneuver and it also enables [attacks against objectives on] the brigade's high priority target list," Steadman said. "It really expands my capability as a squadron commander."

While the unit had access to about 30 Switchblades per day during the force-on-force fight, it also had access to the traditional M109 Paladin self-propelled howitzers that armored brigades have long employed.

At times during the fight against Blackhorse, Steadman and others debated using a Switchblade or Paladin 155 mm artillery against targets.

The Switchblades gave Steadman more reach beyond the front lines than the traditional artillery pieces, which can strike targets about 19 miles away. But he had far fewer Switchblades, which at an estimated \$70,000-\$100,000 per drone, are much costlier than employing a 155 mm round, which costs around \$3,000.

The launched effects platoon has worked with the Switchblade 600 since November, when it used them in a live-fire exercise for the first time.

At NTC, during the force-on-force fight, the Switchblades were virtual. Soldiers simulated launching the drones, mapped their course on their tablet controllers and guided an imaginary Switchblade toward an enemy position where the soldiers acting as referees for the training fight would determine if the drone attack was successful.

Kaiser said his platoon was busy at the start of the fight and when forward units ran into Blackhorse, sometimes launching more than a handful of Switchblades back-to-back. He said his soldiers were typically able to get a virtual drone in the air within seven minutes of receiving orders to attack. Switchblades, he said, were often arriving at their target within about 15 minutes.

Kaiser, an armor officer, said he was im-



KEVIN STERLING PAYNE/U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers set up a Switchblade 600, a Low Altitude Stalking and Striking Ordnance weapons system, during a live fire exercise at the 7th Army Training Command's Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, on Feb. 25, 2025.

pressed with how easily his soldiers were mastering the one-way attack drones.

The U.S. has provided Switchblades to Ukrainian forces since 2022, where they have been used against Russian forces. The one-way attack drones have proven useful in that fight, but they have faced some issues with Russian jamming. AeroVironment has said it has improved anti-jamming capabilities.

In addition to the 65-pound Switchblade 600, AeroVironment also builds two smaller versions: the 300, which weighs about 7 pounds; and the 400, which weighs about 39 pounds, according to the company. It has received Army contracts for more than \$1 billion in recent years to produce Switchblades for the service.

The Army has not said precisely how many Switchblades it will order or how many it wants for each of its combat brigades. Currently,

AeroVironment can produce about 240 Switchblade 600s a month in its Los Angeles plant. But the company hopes to produce up to 1,200 per month after opening a second assembly line in Salt Lake City by next year, AeroVironment officials have said.

Steadman said he would recommend that armor brigades outfit all their combat battalions with Switchblades.

Army Spc. Lathan Thomley, a cavalry scout who has trained to operate the Switchblade, said the one-way attack drone has made his job easier and was "super simple" to employ.

"You send it up there and let it loiter," Thomley said, pointing out toward a mountain range about 10 miles away from his position at 6-8 Cavalry's Switchblade Launching Area. "Then when you see something you want — Boom. That's it."



AeroVironment Inc

The Switchblade 600, built by AeroVironment, is GPS-guided and has an anti-armor warhead.

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HECTOR TINOCO/U.S. National Guard

Indiana National Guard soldiers operate a laptop connected to the Switchblade 600, a loitering munition system, during training at Camp Atterbury, near Edinburg, Ind., on May 15.

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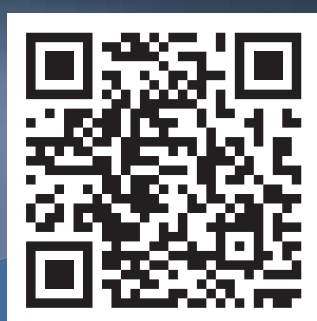
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