

Unmanned maneuvers

Sea drones see expanded role in deployments, tricky rescues
Page 3



A Saronic Corsair speedboat drone was sent to rescue two Army aviators who survived an Iranian attack on their AH-64 Apache helicopter on June 8.

Saronic Technologies

Naples hospital
pivots, won't change
appointment policy
Page 5



US doesn't seek
withdrawal from Italy,
defense minister says
Page 5



Japanese specialty
finds its way to
land of pizza, pasta
Page 14



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COVER STORY

Sea drones see bigger role in deployments

Unmanned vessels becoming force multiplier as sailors are stretched thin

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy's use of unmanned sea surface drones has been on the rise even before one of the vessels helped rescue the crew of a downed U.S. Army AH-64 Apache helicopter earlier this month off the coast of Oman.

Capt. Tim Hawkins, a U.S. Central Command spokesman, said the 24-foot Corsair drone was part of Task Force 59, the leading team for fielding unmanned vessels within the Navy.

"The Task Force began fielding these drones in theater in late March," Hawkins said.

The Navy has also announced that a Seahawk unmanned surface vessel would be part of the upcoming deployment of USS Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group. The move comes after a successful 2023 deployment of the Seahawk on autonomous missions in the Pacific.

The choice of which kind of sea surface drone to send with crewed ships is expanding through the Navy's new marketplace for medium-sized unmanned ships.

Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, said integrating sea drones into deployed forces could enable longer-range surveillance and intelligence.

"It can mainly act as a forward sensor node — like a helicopter does, but with more persistence," Clark said. "The MUSV has cameras in addition to radar and electronic sensors, so it can give the commander visual information that radar alone cannot provide. That can be useful in dealing with threats like Chinese Maritime Militia ships that look like fishing boats on radar but are in fact intelligence gathering platforms that might interfere with the carrier's operations."

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle has highlighted the role of unmanned vessels — on the surface, below the sea and in the air — as giving the Navy more options for "tailored forces" to respond to operational demands.

Instead of sending a carrier strike force to respond to a flash point, Navy leaders could

mix and match responses to a pre-selected menu of options.

"What a hedge strategy avoids is a brittle, single-purpose force that is either overbuilt for the high-end fight and underused day to day or optimized for low-end crises and over-matched," Caudle said in February.

That flexibility could help the Navy avoid long deployments, such as the record-setting deployment of USS Gerald R. Ford, which moved from Europe to the Caribbean and then the Middle East in response to force demands.

Unmanned vessels are a force multiplier at a time when crewed ships and the number of sailors are stretched thin. Autonomous vessels that can carry cargo and perform re-supply and refueling operations can take the place of a crewed ship, which can be assigned other duties or other locations.

The Navy is attempting to accelerate the selection process by instituting a marketplace approach to the design and potential purchase of certain unmanned vessels.

Last month, the Navy named seven companies that will submit design prototypes for a Medium Unmanned Surface Vessel. The seven companies include Saronic, maker of the Corsair used in the rescue operation, and Leidos, whose Seahawk is deploying with USS Theodore Roosevelt.

Unlike other procurement programs, companies pay for and build the prototype to a set of basic standards: a vessel that can carry up to 25 metric tons at 25 knots in moderately rough seas for at least 2,500 nautical miles.

Every entrant that meets the requirements will receive \$15 million and be eligible for a production contract. The Navy could choose all or none of the vessels.

Having a slew of one-off designs in the past would have been seen as a confusing collection of mismatched pieces. But Clark said a variety of responses to the specifications could yield new ideas and uses for the vessels, rather than trying to shape competing designs into a single prototype.

"The Navy needs MUSVs with different characteristics depending on the mission,"



SHANNON RENFROE/U.S. Navy

A Seahawk medium displacement unmanned surface vessel during an exercise with U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Clark said. "For example, sensing and deception/electronic warfare need long endurance but not as much speed. But being an adjunct magazine to a surface action group requires higher speed but does not require as much endurance."

What might have been seen as confusion under earlier procurement systems has a flip side in a variety of choices.

"It's a strength," Clark said.

The use of drones in missions such as the rescue of the downed helicopter crew also underlines an important upside of unmanned vessels — they do not put crew members in harm's way.

When an Air Force F-15 was shot down in April in southern Iran, manned helicopters and planes were used to find and extract the crew. During the operation, an A-10 Thunderbolt II was hit by Iranian anti-aircraft fire and limped back to friendly airspace before the pilot ejected.

During the rescue of the helicopter crew, the unmanned Corsair drone was guided to the incident site, located the soldiers and then carried them to safer waters before a helicopter was dispatched to complete the res-

cue.

Mark Cancian, a former Marine who is now an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said pilot rescues are among the most difficult operations, putting more personnel in danger, in addition to those who need rescuing. While a drone was able to find and extract the two AH-64 crew, in World War II, a similar mission would have likely required a submarine.

"Thus endangering 80 personnel and tying up a valuable warfighting asset," Cancian said. "It therefore makes sense to put unmanned surface drones in dangerous places where pilots might need rescue. This produces the same capability but at less risk than sending a crewed platform."

More than 40 aircraft had been lost or damaged by mid-May since the start of the war in Iran, according to a congressional report.

Cancian said that while many Navy roles likely can't be replaced by uncrewed ships, finding roles for them is a good strategy and potentially life-saving.

"Drones have long been envisioned as doing work that is too dirty, dangerous, or dull for human operators," Cancian said.

Drone rescue of aviators downed in Mideast offers glimpse of future

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

A speedboat drone that helped rescue two U.S. service members this month marked a milestone for a Navy task force that has spent five years experimenting with crewless vessels in the Middle East, offering a glimpse of how robotics will transform future rescue missions.

The two rescued crew members were retrieved some two hours after their Apache helicopter went down June 8 near the Strait of Hormuz, U.S. Central Command said.

A U.S. Navy Corsair drone boat was dispatched to the scene, where it picked up the personnel and carried them to another location where they were then hoisted onto a helicopter for onward movement, officials said.

U.S. officials say the operation marked the first time the Navy successfully used an unmanned vessel to carry out a rescue at sea. The mission also demonstrated how drones and robotic systems, long used primarily for surveillance and combat operations, could take on a growing role in rescuing and recovering personnel.

The mission was conducted by the U.S. 5th Fleet's Task Force 59, based out of Bahrain, which was formed five years ago to boost Navy efforts to monitor Iranian vessels and

other ships transiting the region.

The task force has used a variety of systems to sail across waters in the Middle East. Corsairs, which can carry up to 1,000 pounds and travel around 1,000 miles, are among the recent additions to the task force's fleet.

The multi-purpose vessels can do everything from reconnaissance and maritime domain awareness operations to search and rescue.

The Navy's approach follows the lead of Ukraine, which has put drones and robotics to innovative use during its war with Russia.

Small and affordable drones have been used by Ukraine to penetrate deep into Russian territory, destroying everything from energy production infrastructure to multimillion-dollar long-range bombers.

Meanwhile, persistent Russian drone surveillance inside Ukraine has made rescue operations exceedingly dangerous. To operate under those conditions, Ukrainian forces have developed armored robotic vehicles to extract injured troops. In some cases, the vehicles have survived mine blasts and drone attacks while getting soldiers to safety.

Like the Navy, the U.S. Army has been experimenting with unmanned systems that could factor in future conflicts.

Much of the Army's training and testing has centered on using drones to do reconnais-



Saronic Technologies

A Saronic Corsair speedboat drone traverses the ocean. A Corsair drone was sent to rescue two Army pilots who survived an Iranian attack on their AH-64 Apache helicopter on June 8.

sance, launch attacks and defend forward based forces. But military planners are also exploring how unmanned systems could help move supplies — including blood bags and other lifesaving medical equipment — to assist the recovery and treatment of wounded troops.

Last month, a drone was used to carry a test dummy strapped onto Flowcopter's FC-100 aircraft during an exercise involving the Vilseck, Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment. Such systems would likely play a role in a future battlefield where contested airspace would put manned air crews at great risk.

Still, there likely will be limits to their utility in rescue missions. For example, in

cases with severe injuries and no support personnel on hand, robotics would have limited value without medics. Some rescues also may require substantial forces to secure an area and protect those being recovered.

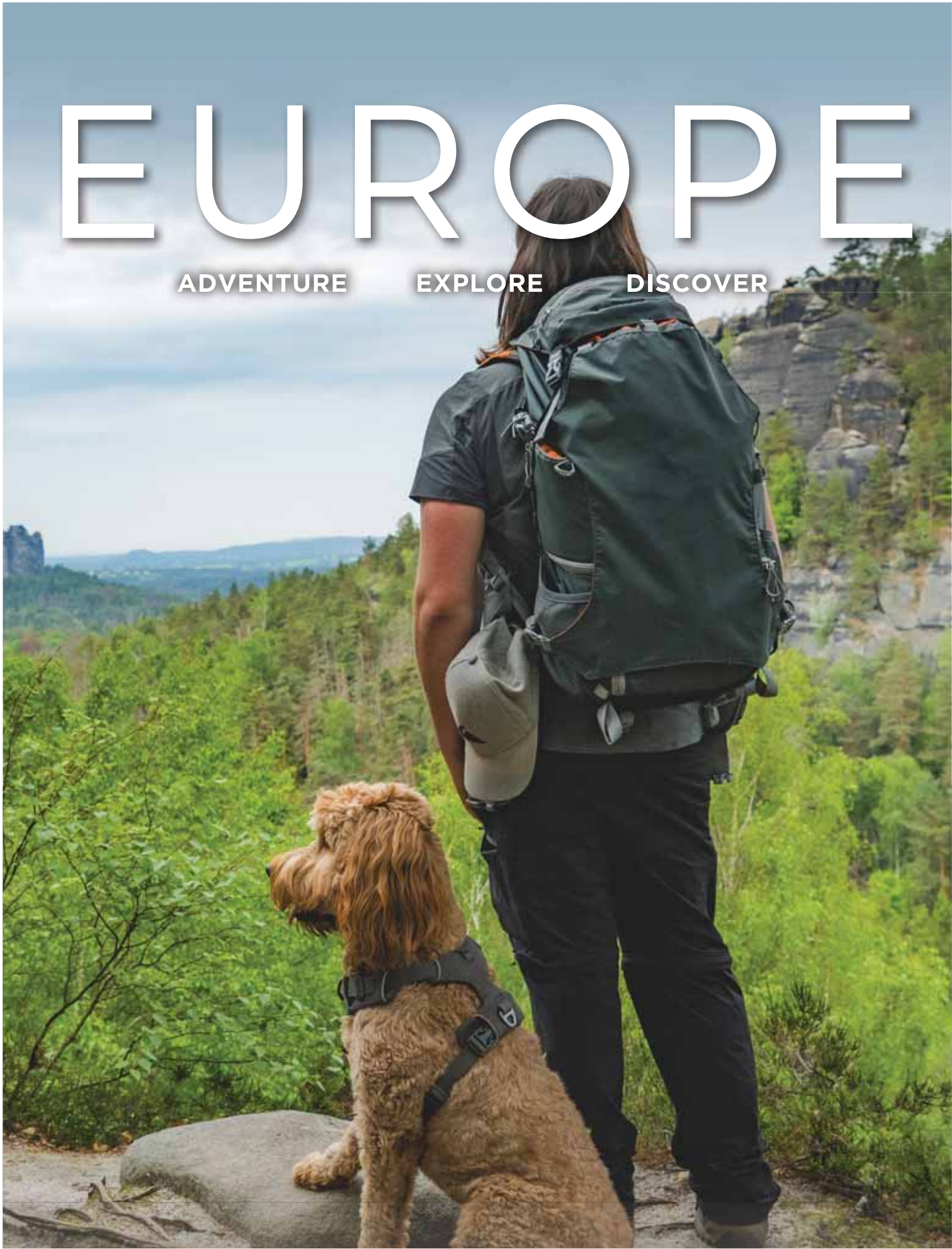
The conflict with Iran has highlighted those limitations. Earlier this year, after a U.S. fighter jet was shot down over Iranian territory, American forces mounted a complex manned rescue mission involving dozens of aircraft and hundreds of personnel operating in a heavily defended environment to recover the two-person crew.

But the rescue at sea off the coast of Oman, much like the war in Ukraine, underscores how battlefield commanders will need more drone options to deal with future threats.

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MILITARY

Italian official: US doesn't seek withdrawal

Defense minister positive on troops after Hegseth visit

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Pentagon officials gave no sign that they want to withdraw troops from bases in Italy, the country's defense minister said after meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in Washington.

Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto met June 15 with Hegseth and other U.S. officials, including acting Navy Secretary Hung Cao, for discussions that both sides say reinforced the partnership between the two countries.

"From a bilateral and NATO perspective, cooperation with us is in some ways very important for the United States," Crosetto told reporters afterward, according to Italy's National Associated Press Agency.

Speculation about a possible withdrawal of U.S. troops from Italy has swirled in the media for weeks. The reports were fueled by President Donald Trump's calls to remove about 5,000 service members from Europe.

Trump repeatedly criticized NATO allies for what he deemed a lack of support from European member countries following U.S. and Israeli airstrikes on Iran.

The cuts ultimately affected troop deployments to Poland and Germany, but Trump had suggested Italy and Spain might face a similar fate.



U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, right, and Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto listen to the playing of national anthems at the Pentagon on June 15. After meeting with Hegseth, Crosetto said he did not perceive any desire for the U.S. to exit its bases in Italy.

U.S. officials had criticized Italy's refusal to let Iran-bound U.S. warplanes land at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. Italian officials, though, said they had not been notified or consulted about its use for operations outside the scope of existing agreements, which they said would require parliamentary approval.

But a chill in U.S.-Italy relations appears to be thawing.

Following news of the agreement with Iran, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said her country was ready to commit to providing a naval presence to help reopen the Strait of

Hormuz, pending parliamentary approval.

But Trump appeared to still harbor some resentment when chatting with Meloni this month during a G7 summit in France. He chided her after she told him "we've always been friends," Italian media reported.

In remarks at the outset of the Pentagon meeting with his Italian counterpart, however, Hegseth thanked Italy for its "steadfast support" in hosting U.S. troops for over 80 years, saying the long-standing partnership is "more important than ever."

Hegseth also credited Meloni and Crosetto

for what he described as a growing role for Italy in Europe's defense, according to a transcript of his and Crosetto's opening remarks.

"We seek partners and Italy is certainly one of them," Hegseth said. "And you're leaning forward in that aspect."

Some 30,000 U.S. service members, civilian personnel and family members are stationed at military bases throughout the country, the Pentagon said.

But while the U.S. did not announce any cuts to those forces in the wake of tensions over the Iran campaign, recent moves by the U.S. to reduce its NATO commitments have grabbed headlines in Italy.

For example, a senior Pentagon official last month notified NATO allies of U.S. plans to shrink the pool of military warplanes, warships and other assets and capabilities the military would make available to European member countries.

The shift in commitments to NATO is something his U.S. counterparts have been discussing for years, Crosetto told reporters after meeting with Hegseth.

"These are assets that they could withdraw from Europe and easily replace with European ones," he said.

NATO officials have long anticipated the scaling back of U.S. commitments, which are part of an effort to prod allies to shoulder more of the burden for Europe's defense as the U.S. refocuses its force posture on deterring China in the Pacific region.

Hegseth specifically credited Italy for its leadership of NATO's multinational battle-group in Bulgaria, formed in 2022 to strengthen the alliance's eastern flank. The battle-group is composed of about 1,000 soldiers and equipment from several allies.

Naples hospital reverses limitations on civilians, retirees

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — U.S. Naval Hospital Naples has backtracked a decision that would have kept Defense Department civilians and retirees from scheduling appointments with their family medicine providers for months.

The addition of temporary staffing assistance from military hospitals in Europe and virtual visit support from the Defense Health Agency will enable the medical facility on Naval Support Activity Naples to forgo the appointment restrictions announced earlier this month, a Facebook post on June 15 said.

"Effective immediately, the appointment limits announced on June 2 are no longer in effect and you can continue to schedule your appointments exactly as you have in the past," the hospital said in the post.

The extra support will help allay staffing challenges brought on by the departure of employees during the annual permanent change of station season, the announcement said.

The turnabout came the same day hospital

officials had said they would begin limiting civilians and retirees to same-day visits subject to appointment availability. That policy was intended to last through at least September.

The change was initially considered necessary to ensure that the hospital could care for active-duty service members and their families during the busy PCS season. That's when thousands of military personnel and their families move to their next duty location, increasing the demand for health care.

The abrupt restriction alarmed civilians and retirees who rely on the hospital for their medical needs.

Besides reducing their options, it also left them unprepared to deal with language barriers, upfront payments and other challenges associated with seeking care from Italian providers, they said.

The hospital's latest announcement drew praise from one member of the community who previously voiced concerns about the short notice.

"We really appreciate your listening and



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

A policy at the hospital at Naval Support Activity Naples, Italy, had limited family medicine appointments for civilians and retirees during the season for military moves.

reacting quickly," Emily Painter-Davis said in a comment on the hospital's June 15 post.

Painter-Davis is married to a retired soldier who spent 23 years in the Army. She said

the issue never was about prioritizing the care of active-duty military personnel but rather about the timing and communication issues.

The limitations were announced June 2, less than two weeks before they were set to take effect.

It wasn't immediately clear how temporary staff members from other military hospitals in Europe would support the hospital or what roles they would fill.

It also wasn't known how online visits with a medical professional would help the hospital continue serving civilians and retirees over the next few months.

In the Facebook post, the hospital said routine medical questions or prescription renewals can be handled through an online portal, which lets users make appointments, check test results and communicate with hospital staffers.

Tricare beneficiaries also can seek advice through a phone line connecting them with a registered nurse, according to the post. That line is open around the clock every day.

US reportedly eyes putting nukes in more European countries

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The United States is reviewing whether to deploy nuclear weapons to more European countries, according to a news report earlier this month.

Citing three people briefed on the discussions, the Financial Times said U.S. officials have indicated interest in expanding deployments beyond the six locations that are currently part of NATO's nuclear-sharing initiative.

It's unclear how far the reported conversations have progressed. The talks are "highly confidential and may not lead to any changes in nuclear-sharing arrangements," the report said.

Two of the people quoted by the newspaper said the discussions were meant to demon-

strate continued U.S. commitment to providing Europe a nuclear umbrella, even as Washington pushes allies to take on a greater share of the burden for the Continent's conventional defense.

The discussions included NATO channels — with allies closest to Russia's border, including Poland and some Baltic states — showing particular interest in hosting U.S. nuclear weapons, the report said.

If the U.S. were to shift some nuclear weapons to Poland, it could alleviate some concerns along NATO's eastern flank about U.S. security guarantees.

Those concerns have intensified, given plans to reduce the amount of conventional support the Pentagon intends to make available to Europe in the event of a future crisis.

Since the early days of the Cold War, the

United States has kept nuclear weapons at various locations in Europe. Under NATO's nuclear-sharing program, allied fighter pilots would deliver tactical nuclear bombs if a conventional conflict turned into an atomic one.

The arrangement is designed to deter Russia while ensuring that responsibility for NATO's strike mission is shared across the alliance.

The U.S. does not publicly discuss where its tactical bombs are stored in Europe, but watchdog groups have reported that roughly 100 of those weapons are stored at six bases in five NATO member countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

A NATO document inadvertently released and then deleted in 2019 listed the same locations.

In recent years, there have been calls in the alliance to add other countries to the nuclear

mix. Poland has publicly stated that it would welcome being incorporated into the nuclear program.

The conservative Heritage Foundation, in a 2023 report, also called for shifting some nuclear bombs to Poland from current positions in western Europe.

Meanwhile, Finland this month took a step toward lifting its ban on the deployment of nuclear weapons on its territory, a move that puts the country in sync with NATO's deterrent mission.

The country's parliament voted Wednesday to lift the ban, advancing the measure to President Alexander Stubb for a decision on approval. The decision paves the way for Finland to allow nuclear weapons to be positioned in the country should they be required for defense purposes.

MILITARY

Navy galleys try new approaches to meals

By JONATHAN BAEZ
Stars and Stripes

Sailors who skip the base galley aren't just passing up a meal, they're leaving money on the table, and the Navy wants to change that, according to Navy Installations Command.

The command on May 27 announced the Navy Food Service Transformation initiative, aiming to improve the daily lives of sailors and maximize the service's ability to field a battle-ready force, according to a news release that day.

The initiative starts with pilot programs created to motivate sailors to eat more often at galleys at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, Wash., and Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport, Miss.

"By providing our Sailors with high-quality, nutritious food and top-tier wellness resources, we are directly investing in their physical and mental resilience," Vice Adm. Scott Gray, head of Navy Installations Command, said in the release. "A well-supported, healthy, and focused Sailor is a more lethal warfighter, and these pilot programs are a critical step toward ensuring our force is always ready to meet any challenge."

At Kitsap, the program aims to increase sailors' use of their meal entitlement from 30% to 50% within the pilot's 16-month run, base spokesman Christopher Stanis said by email.

The program officially launched on June 3 with a ceremony attended by Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle and will run until September 2027.

During that time, Kitsap sailors may use their meal entitlements at the Warrior Eatery and other Morale, Welfare and Recreation-branded restaurants on base.

Early results have already surpassed expectations, Stanis said.

Foot traffic and sales have increased daily since the soft opening, with the Warrior Eatery's cook-to-order stations, specifically Better Burgers and Uptown Pizzas and Calzones, emerging as the clear favorites, he said.

Demand has been so high that just one week into the soft opening, the installation identified an immediate need to double staffing levels to keep up, Stanis said.

Sailor feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Kitsap base officials. Many sailors said they are making a point to try something different every day.

"The Food Service Transformation pilot at Naval Base Kitsap marks a shift in how the Navy delivers quality-of-life services on our installations," Kitsap base commander Capt. Alexander Baerg said in Stanis' email. "The soft opening exceeded expectations, as foot traffic and enthusiasm outpaced projections."

At Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport, the approach is to improve sailors'



PHOTOS BY BRITTNEY KINSEY/U.S. Navy
Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Travis Nardine, a culinary specialist with Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport, Miss., prepares vegan meals for sailors at Colmer Dining Facility in May.

experience at the galley, according to the release.

Gulfport is home to the Navy Shore Enterprise's newest galley, designed to accommodate rotating food stations offering diverse cuisines and made-to-order fare, Destiny Sibert, spokeswoman for Naval Installations Command, said by email.

In March, Gulfport sailors sampled potential menu items and provided feedback through surveys and comment cards, directly shaping the final menu, according to a May 29 post on the Defense Visual Information Distribution System.

The Navy plans to evaluate the pilots' performance based on increased use of sailor meal entitlements and overall satisfaction ratings.

"The Navy is evaluating both pilots as complementary approaches rather than competing ones. Because installations vary in size, mission, and infrastructure, the Navy may deploy one, both, or a hybrid model depending on specific local needs," Sibert said.



Nardine prepares vegan meals for sailors at Colmer Dining Facility.

Navy planning to 'reevaluate' religious shaving waivers

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

Active-duty and reserve sailors who are permitted to forgo shaving on religious grounds must soon tell their commands they will reapply for the grooming standards waiver, the Navy said.

They also will have to undergo a reevaluation of their shaving waivers, which includes explaining their religious beliefs, practices and commitment to those beliefs to a chaplain, according to a Navy administrative message published June 10. They also will have to detail how those beliefs are "burdened" by the service's grooming requirements.

Sailors with existing or pending waivers have 10 business days to let their commands know they will file an updated request, according to the message. It wasn't clear in the message how soon that request needed to be submitted.

But the reevaluation process for sailors

with approved waivers is expected to be completed within 30 days of filing the updated request, the Navy said.

"Commanding officers must objectively weigh the fundamental value of accommodating religious practices against the compelling, life-or-death interest of maintaining an absolute protective posture and ensuring the operational viability of our Fleet," the message said.

It added that already approved religious accommodations related to grooming standards for facial hair must be reevaluated "using standardized procedures that ensure consistent, lawful, and equitable outcomes."

The message also outlined policies and procedures for religious exceptions to the Navy's facial hair grooming standards, which generally require that sailors be clean-shaven but allow mustaches and sideburns that meet specific criteria.

The policy rollout follows a similar announcement by the Army last month, both of

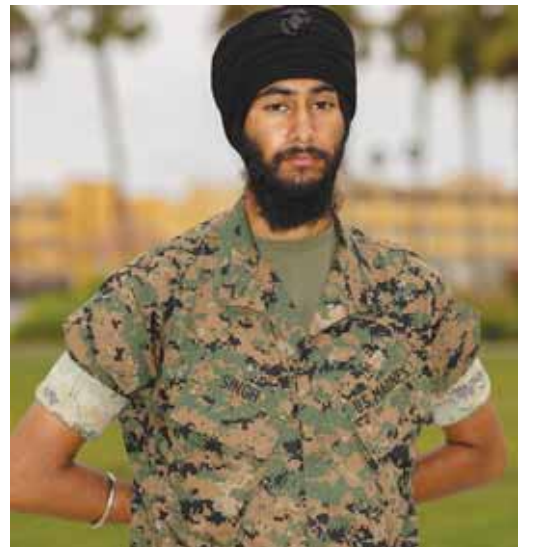
which fall in line with a broader Pentagon crackdown on grooming standards.

In a September memo, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth banned permanent medical shaving exemptions such as those for service members who have a painful skin condition called pseudofolliculitis barbae, or razor bumps.

The memo also ended most of the same exemptions based on religious grounds, saying service members who had been granted such waivers would face individual review and be required to document the sincerity of their beliefs.

Last year, the service granted 313 religious accommodations, which in addition to facial hair could include head coverings, dietary needs, clothing, immunizations or other religious requirements. Nine other accommodation requests that same year were rejected, according to the Navy.

As of early February, 22 religious waivers had been granted and none rejected this year.



JESSE LORA/U.S. Marine Corps

Now-Lance Cpl. Jaskirat Singh made history as the first Sikh Marine to complete recruit training while maintaining his articles of faith.

MILITARY

In-flight refueling issues draw scrutiny

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force faced questions from a government watchdog agency and a Senate panel about its in-flight refueling aircraft.

The Air Force has not accurately recorded the mission-ready status of in-flight refueling aircraft, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office, released June 10.

“The tanker fleet did not meet the Air Force’s availability and capability standards from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2025,” the GAO report said.

The Air Force has 470 refueling tankers, according to GAO. About 370 are KC-135 Stratotankers and the rest are the KC-46 Pegasus.

The report says the rate of refuelers reported as fully mission-capable “decreased substantially” during the seven-year period covered by the report.

“The critical fleet has consistently fallen below availability and capability standards in recent years,” the GAO said.

Problems include not enough spare parts, inadequate training for maintenance crews, insufficient hangar space for the KC-46 and availability of manuals.

“The Air Force needs a healthy fleet of refueling tankers to support missions around the globe,” said Diana Maurer, a director in GAO’s defense capabilities and management team. The issues are discussed further in a GAO video accompanying the report.

“Tankers can actually perform other missions,” Maurer said.

The Air Force data include not only refueling, but moving personnel, cargo and medical evacuation missions.

“Only tankers can perform the refueling mission,” Maurer said.

According to the GAO report, Air Force officials said the performance reports exclude aircraft not rated as “fully mission capable,” even though they may be able to meet the refueling mission but not other missions.

“Without metrics and standards focused on the aerial refueling mission specifically, the Air Force risks not having a clear understanding of the fleet’s ability to meet key operational requirements,” the GAO said.

The GAO report was released a day after Air Force Secretary Troy Meink told Congress the Air Force believes it has fixed a long-running problem with the KC-46.

Meink told a Senate defense appropriations subcommittee that the remote vision system in the KC-46, which allows an operator to deploy the refueling boom, has been fixed.

On the KC-135, boom operators face the tail of the plane and can see the boom deploying to the aircraft it is trying to refuel.

The KC-46 positions the boom operator facing forward and employs a camera system to position the refueling probe.

Problems with the system date back five years, Meink said. The boom system has also had issues with leaks.

“I think the good news is that we believe we’ve fixed and have tested the new 2.0 vision system and that we should start rolling that into the production line in ’28,” Meink said.

The Air Force has received 100 of 188 KC-46 ordered from Boeing and is considering plans to purchase another 75.

Boeing has lost \$7 billion on the contract, according to Reuters. Fixing the problem in all Air Force KC-46 aircraft would take seven years.



AIDAN MARTÍNEZ ROSIERE/U.S. Air Force

An Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker assigned to the 100th Air Refueling Wing provides fuel to a F-35 Lightning II assigned to the 48th Fighter Wing, during a refueling mission as part of Ramstein Flag 26 over Sweden on June 10.

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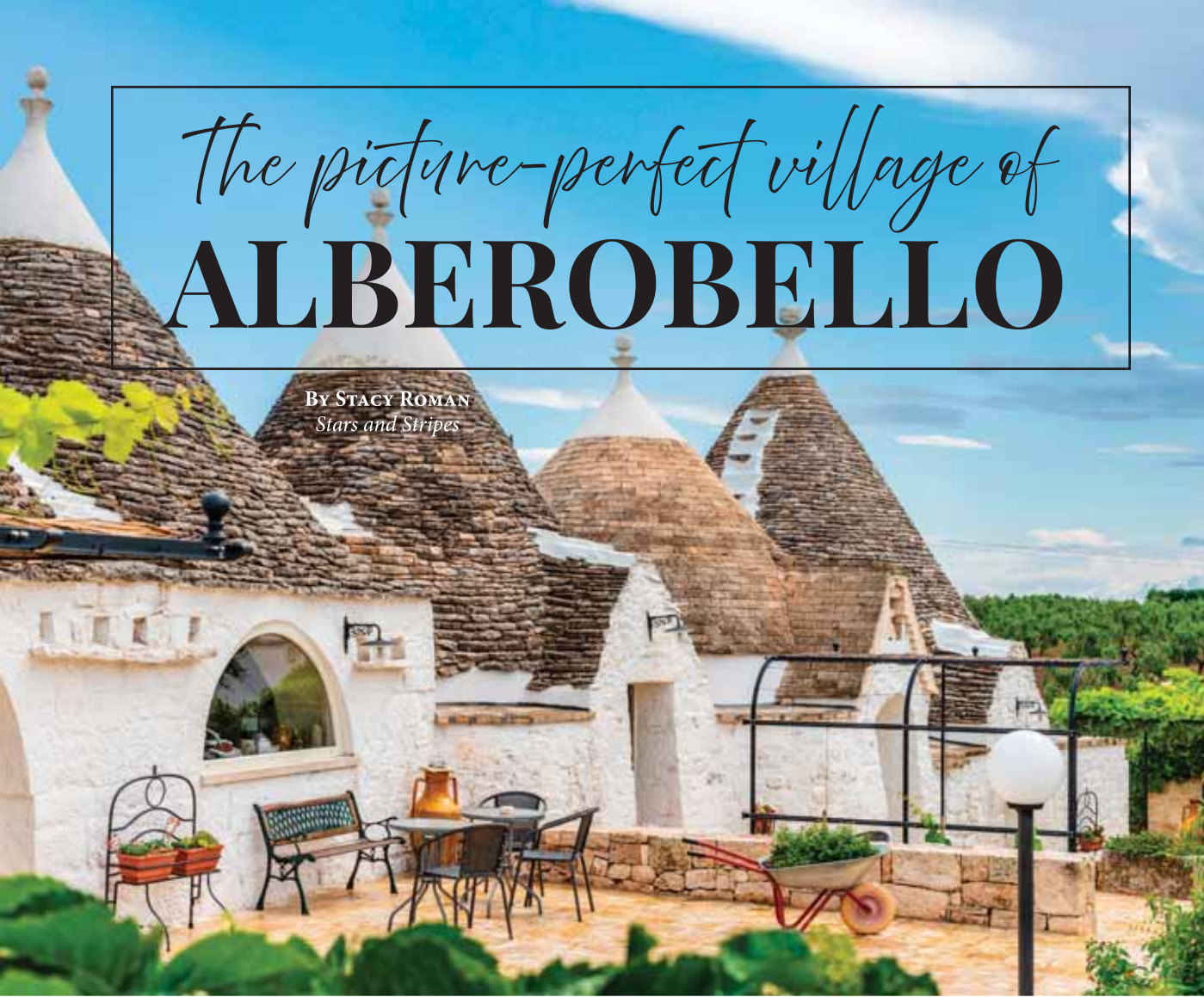
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The picture-perfect village of

ALBEROBELLO

By Stacy Roman
Stars and Stripes

Tucked along the southern heel of Italy’s boot in the Puglia region is the charming village of Alberobello. Filled with one-of-a-kind buildings straight out of a fantasy novel and amazing food, you’ll want to put this one on your bucket list.

Just a mere hour south of the nearest airport in Bari, Alberobello is nestled in the rolling hills of southern Italy. As you enter town, bask in the striking view of narrow cobblestone streets lined with gleaming white limestone dwellings, each topped with a curiously conical roof known as a trulli. These unique hut-type buildings date back to the 14th century and were often used as storehouses or shelters for nearby farmers. Today, there are nearly 1,500 trulli in the

village. Most are used as private residences, museums, restaurants and boutique hotels. The impressive Church of St. Anthony of Padua was constructed in the same fashion. The largest trullo in town is Trullo Sovrano. Boasting two levels, it recreates a living history of what life was like centuries ago and was designated an Italian National Monument in 1930.

Walking through the town, you’ll find fabulous vintage markets selling a wide array of famous Puglia ceramics, locally produced handmade linens and, on occasion, filet lace. The village is known for colorful textile work. You can find vibrant tablecloths, towels and sheets draped on racks outside shops. The filet lace is more of

a rarity these days. The trade has all but disappeared because of the time-consuming, intricate needlework required to produce the delicate designs. For beautiful fabrics and relatively inexpensive Italian souvenirs, head to Donna Lia. In one of the quieter alleys, this shop is located in an authentic trullo. The friendly owners are happy to strike up a conversation and impart the rich history of their town.

If exploring this rustic fairy-tale village has left you feeling hungry, there are a plethora of local spots to whet your appetite. Many trattorias and ristoranti serve up freshly made Puglia pasta dishes. Made with locally grown Cappelli wheat, the protein-rich dough is a specialty in the region. Just remember dinner begins late in Italy, with many restaurants in Alberobello opening at 7 p.m. or later.

When planning your next Italian getaway, put southeastern Italy on your list. Alberobello is a unique and fascinating village you won’t find anywhere else. With fewer tourists and breathtaking, picture-perfect vistas, you won’t regret the choice to visit.



Five of Italy's BEST UNKNOWN National Parks

By Stacy Roman
Stars and Stripes

Home to sun-drenched coastlines, dramatic cliffs, sapphire-blue lakes and an abundance of mountains, Italy boasts fantastic nature spots.

While most people have heard of the ever-popular Cinque Terre or ventured into the mighty Dolomites, there is no shortage of outdoor discovery and adventure outside of the well-known parks. Italy’s national parks are all-encompassing — ancient ruins, beautiful scenery and charming villages. With a broad choice of 24 national parks to choose from, here are five unsung heroes with incredible landscapes and fewer crowds.

Arcipelago di La Maddalena National Park

The spectacular Arcipelago di La Maddalena National Park is comprised of seven small islands off the northern coast of Sardinia. Accessible by

ferry from Citavecchia’s port, the craggy granite coastline offers a vast array of unique wildlife, quiet sandy beaches and crystal-clear water. Spaggia Rosa (Pink Beach) gets its delicate hue from microorganisms and shells of marine life. While visitors are not allowed on the beach itself, you can hike along the edge and drink in the stunning views.

Aspromonte National Park

Located near the tip of Italy’s boot in the southern Apennines mountains, the landscape at Aspromonte National Park is a juxtaposition of wind-swept desert chaparral and lush vineyards and orchards. Tall, pine trees line picturesque hiking trails to dramatic waterfalls. History buffs can wander through the ghost village of Pentedattilo and other archeological sites dotted throughout the park.



ASPRMONTE

Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park

Nestled in the middle of the country, the massive peak of Gran Sasso dominates the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park. The ample network of walking paths transforms into snow sport opportunities in the winter. In the summer, biking and rock climbing are popular activities. Visitors can also explore the ancient Roman ruins and crumbling castles and abbeys dating to the Renaissance period.



GRAN SASSO AND MONTI DELLA LAGA

Pollino National Park

One of Italy’s largest environmentally protected areas, Pollino National Park is close to Aspromonte in southern Italy. The park is popular with long-distance hikers, offering mountain treks along bubbling streams and rivers. The thermal pool of Grotte Delle Ninfe is a popular destination, as well as the Grotte del Romito where

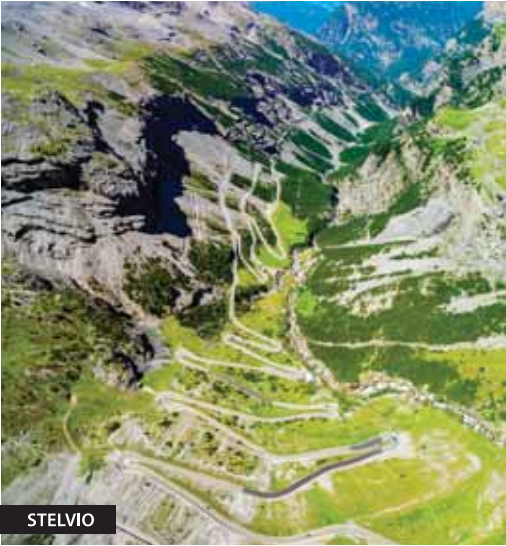
prehistoric rock drawings have been excavated. At more than 1,200 years old, the oldest tree on the continent is located in the park. Local villages are rich in Albanian-Italian culture and lore.



POLLINO

Stelvio National Park

Stelvio National Park is a hidden gem along the northern border near the intersection of Switzerland and Austria in the north-central Italian Alps. Known for razor-sharp switchbacks and hairpin turns, the Passo dello Stelvio presents a challenge for cyclists in the summer. Alpine villages reminiscent of their Bavarian and Tyrolean counterparts with tumbling glacial waterfalls provide picture-perfect backdrops.



STELVIO

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POTTERY AND ANTIQUE SHOPPING IN NOVE

BY KRISTEN THOENNES
Stars and Stripes

I ADORE POTTERY SHOPPING IN EUROPE, SO LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO THE POTTERY VILLAGE OF NOVE, ITALY. ASIDE FROM MY SPOUSES' CLUB FRIENDS, NOT MANY PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THIS SEEMINGLY SLEEPY TOWN NOT FAR FROM AVIANO OR VICENZA.

For people that decide to stay overnight in Nove, I recommend Le Nove hotel. It's conveniently located near all the pottery shops, has a nice breakfast spread and has A/C. When visiting last August, the air conditioning was a must!

If you're like me, and Polish pottery just isn't your style (I know...gasp!), then Italian pottery

in Nove might be a great alternative to check out. In this quaint town, you will find a variety of shops selling beautiful pieces from salt and pepper shakers to large serving platters and everything in-between. I am not a big shopper, but on both of my visits to Nove I was able to find pieces that bring me joy.

There are over 100 ceramic stores in the town. Most of them sell regionally made handcrafted pottery, while some also sell big-name international brands. The local ceramicists each have their own style, so it is fun to wander the shops and find an artist whose work resonates with you.

On my last visit, one member of my carpool group suggested that we also visit a pewter store. I admit my first thought was, "pewter is for old people." But I went along because you never know what you'll discover, and I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the pewter store!

I could tell right away that it's a popular store for military units in the area. This is the place to find a variety of gifts like decanters, ornaments and more. I found the most adorable teeny-tiny greyhound and a Merano glass ornament.

A big reason my group visited Nove was to shop until we dropped at the Mercatino delle Cose d'Altri Tempi. Before my first visit, my friends tried to warn me about how large this open-air market is, but nothing could have properly prepared me for the sheer magnitude of the antique shopping potential. Shoppers can really make out with a large haul at great prices. There are a variety of food vendors, too, so we could shop all day without skipping a beat.

Being in Italy, it's no surprise that you will also eat well while visiting Nove. I am still dreaming about the wine and pizza tasting at La Dolce Vigna in Trambacche di Veggiano. The owners were so delightful and welcoming. It's another popular spot for those stationed at Aviano and Vicenza and I could taste why. A final recommendation for the wine lovers out there is a visit to Riva Grand. If you enjoy a sweet, white wine, their bottle of Loara will be your new favorite!

Take a day to visit Nove, Italy for some ceramics, pewter and an incredible antiques market.





By Kat Nickola,
Stars and Stripes Europe

It may seem challenging for some families to adjust to living in Naples. The urban environment can feel like just as much of a new experience as being immersed in Italian culture. Luckily, the Naples area has a lot to offer for families and can be a super kid-friendly place. Children are welcomed almost everywhere, from public events to long, late-night dinners at restaurants; the norm is to involve kids in most aspects of daily life. That is why you will find small playgrounds near outdoor cafes, in shopping centers and even at the racetrack. Of course, there are also some great places that are especially designed for families, here are the top spots for kids in Naples.

ATTRACTIONS

For a great day out, these two attractions offer a reasonable cost-to-fun ratio, even for large families.

Naples Zoo

This green space west of the city is full of animals in a botanical garden setting. It is compact, allowing your kids to see the 139 different species without getting too exhausted. The zoo has been voted as the Stripes Europe “Best for Kids” attraction in Naples. Bring a picnic, feed the giraffes and enjoy petting the farm animals.

Liberty City Fun

Roughly 30 minutes from the Support Site, this place has a lot going on. A local favorite, there are outdoor spaces and air-conditioned indoor areas full of small rides and arcade games. With reasonable rates, you can load up a card with credits and let the kids choose how to spend it. Great for birthday parties.



INDOOR PLAY SPACES

During the heat of the summer, an air-conditioned indoor play space is ideal for helping your kids burn off some energy. It's also good to know that some shopping destinations like Medi have soft play areas where you can pay to drop-off your child while you shop.

Jump & Fly Trampoline park

Not far from the Support Site, this place is great for kids and adults alike. There are trampolines for tricks, an obstacle course and drop zones with foam blocks. Entry tickets are for 55 minutes and they offer party packages.

Crazy Dreams

Roughly 15 minutes form Support Site, this kid's play cafe offers a safe space for toddlers and preschoolers to play supervised by employees while parents can have drinks or a meal.



BEACH TIME

You are in Italy, which means there is a passionate beach culture. It's good to know that there are two kinds of beach. First are free beaches, which don't typically have infrastructure like rental lifeguards, rental loungers or toilets; they can get very crowded during summer holidays or may be empty on a random warm spring weekday. Next up are lidos, or beach clubs, which require you to hire loungers to offset the costs of lifeguards, showers, toilets and the proximity to a bar and restaurant. Note that some lidos have memberships, so if you are turned away because it's full, but you see empty loungers, they are reserved for members all season. Many Naples lidos allow you to book ahead on websites, so you won't be disappointed when you show up.

Seven Beach Sunset

This beach club is a favorite with NSA Naples families and won the Stripes Europe “Best Lido” title. Near the Allied Joint Force Command NATO installation and not far from Carney Park, the lido sits beside numerous others on a long stretch of sand in Lago Patria.



CARNEY PARK

A 96-acre MWR-managed facility, Carney Park is a green space located inside an extinct volcanic crater. For NSA Naples residents, there are multiple, new playgrounds and this is where many youth and team sporting events occur. It also has a 9-hole golf course and a pool with water slides. For visitors, or a fun staycation, there are campsites, yurts and cabins to rent.



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MILITARY

Army aims to reduce moves by soldiers

Reduction intended to increase stability for families, units

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Army will cut thousands of permanent change of station relocations this year in a move aimed at providing more stability to military families and unit formations.

Elimination of 12,000 such relocations will occur by October, and an additional 13,600 PCS moves will be cut in the next fiscal year, the service said in a statement.

“By stabilizing these units, the Army aims to build more lethal, cohesive teams, boost overall readiness, and provide much-needed predictability for Soldiers and their families,” the statement said.

Frequent moves have been a part of military life for generations. However, packing up for new locations every couple of years comes at a significant financial cost and is a long-standing source of stress for many families.

A Defense Department active-duty spouse survey released in 2025 showed that the largest source of dissatisfaction with military life was related to frequent PCS moves, which often create employment challenges for spouses.



ETHAN STEINQUEST/ U.S. Army

The Army has announced that it will cut 13,600 permanent change of station moves in 2027, part of an effort to reduce the stress frequent relocations place on military families.

Spousal dissatisfaction with military life is often a driving factor in a service member's decision to leave active duty.

“The goal of our strategy is to solve one of the biggest challenges to readiness and retention, which is instability,” Sgt. Maj. Enrique Rose, senior Army career counselor, said in the Army statement. “The efforts focus on empowering Soldiers to choose what is best for their families while not compromising readiness.”

The Army's decision follows the premature cancellation last year of a major Defense Department contract for shipment of household goods for PCS moves.

The failed \$17.9 billion deal with Home-Safe Alliance was intended to resolve wide-

spread dissatisfaction with DOD's legacy system for moving and storage of service members' possessions.

But the nine-year contract was terminated after less than four years due to the extensive failures of the company to fulfill the terms. The Pentagon spent over \$100 million before pulling the plug, a Government Accountability Office report found.

In further overhauling its PCS process, the Army says it is adapting human resources departments to bring a more flexible approach that involves assessing more carefully whether moves are needed.

More reliance on distance learning is one way to curtail moves for military education assignments, such as the Captain's Career

Course and similar programs, the Army said.

By stabilizing soldiers for two years while they attend such courses, the Army avoided more than 5,000 school-related PCS moves in 2025, the service said.

In some cases, bonuses for certain specialties — such as tankers at Fort Bliss, Texas — have been offered to soldiers for staying at their current posting, the Army said.

Meanwhile, the High School Stabilization program, which allows families to stay at one duty station through a child's senior year, also has proved popular, the Army said.

“This is more than a cost-saving measure,” the Army said. “It is a direct investment in the well-being of the force.”

Decoys may be key to shielding air defenses

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The key to protecting billion-dollar U.S. air defense systems from enemy attack could be one of the oldest tricks in warfare: decoys.

The time-tested tactic, most recently used by Ukrainian air defenders to deceive Russian forces, could be useful in protecting high-value U.S. targets in the Middle East, where expensive military radar systems have been destroyed in recent Iranian attacks, according to a new Army research report.

“These techniques have enabled Ukrainian Patriot units to survive for more than three years under constant threat of surveillance, targeting, and attack by a capable and motivated enemy,” the report published by the Modern War Institute at West Point said.

Those same methods could help protect U.S. air defenses in the Middle East, according to the report, which notes that Iran is receiving targeting support from Russian intelligence.

Decoys that have proved effective in Ukraine could therefore help thwart strikes in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, it said.

However, the report adds that U.S. air defense commanders currently lack the resources, authority and training needed to effectively employ decoys.

The report's authors, Lt. Col. Trevor Alex-

ander and Capt. Christopher Burlison, are currently attached to Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, a command based in Wiesbaden, Germany, focused on capturing and applying lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Since receiving U.S.-made Patriot air defense systems from Western countries, Ukraine has used them to defend against missile and drone attacks, making them one of Moscow's highest-priority targets.

To protect the Patriot systems, the Ukrainians have built convincing replicas using wood, metal and salvaged equipment, the report said. That has yielded decoys that look real to reconnaissance drones flying overhead.

“Although decoys can sometimes be identified upon closer inspection and review of attack footage, by the time one is identified as a decoy it has served its purpose,” the report said. “It delayed enemy targeting efforts and disrupted the targeting cycle, allowing the real unit to either conduct engagements or move to a new location.”

To add realism, Ukrainian teams will remain near a struck decoy, repositioning other elements of the system such as fake radars, launchers or life support equipment, which is intended to leave Russian forces with the impression their attack succeeded.

Russian forces have posted videos on Telegram celebrating the destruction of Patriot



BRITTON SPENCER/U.S. Army

Army Reserve soldiers set up a decoy tactical operation center, using salvaged materials, to disrupt opposition force intelligence collection during an exercise in 2024, at Fort Hunter Liggett, Calif.

systems only for closer inspection to reveal they had struck decoys, the report said.

While Alexander and Burlison focused on lessons from Ukraine, the use of decoys in warfare is hardly new.

Ahead of the D-Day invasion in 1944 during World War II, Allied forces used inflatable equipment, dummy landing craft and fake radio traffic to convince German commanders that the main assault would occur elsewhere.

The deception helped keep enemy forces away from the actual landing beaches in the Normandy region of France.

In the new Army report, the authors say military bureaucracy and regulations can slow innovation. The service needs to delegate authority to lower-level commanders when it comes to developing such equipment, the report said.

In addition, U.S. Army Materiel Command should provide resources to air defense battalion commanders to construct decoys, which also would be incorporated into training programs on passive defense tactics.

Preparing soldiers for future battlefields can be done only by addressing those issues, the report concluded.

MILITARY

Navy facing an underwater arms race

More than 40 nations are operating more than 480 submarines

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The threat and the promise of submarines played out on opposite sides of the world this year.

In early March, a U.S. Navy submarine sank the Iranian corvette IRIS Dena off Sri Lanka with a MK 48 torpedo. About 87 of the crew were killed.

Near the end of May, a South Korean submarine arrived at Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt, in British Columbia, after an 8,400-mile trip across the Pacific. South Korea is hoping to convince Canada to buy its submarines — business also sought by Germany.

The sinking and sales pitch were reminders of the tactical potency of submarines and the status of having an undersea force.

More than 480 submarines from more than 40 nations currently operate in the oceans of the world, according to a 2025 count by the international data aggregator World Population Review. The submarine forces range from the all-nuclear-powered U.S. fleet of about 67 fast-attack, ballistic-missile and guided-missile submarines to the one-sub force of Poland.

Although the U.S. exported a significant number of subs early in the Cold War, it hasn't built a conventionally powered (diesel-electric) sub since the USS Blueback was commissioned in 1959. That's left the sub market to the rest of the world.

Navy Chief of Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle said on March 30 at a Center for Strategic and International Studies event that the U.S. is committed to an all-nuclear fleet.

"We made a decision that the only true sub is one with nuclear power," Caudle said. "It's just not something we are going to turn back on."

Caudle said the Navy could, perhaps, procure large conventionally powered unmanned undersea drones.

"But as far as going to a full-scale manned diesel submarine? — It isn't happening," he said.

Mark Cancian, a Marine veteran who is an analyst at CSIS, says the U.S. couldn't build submarines for export even if it wanted.

"The United States is unable to accelerate its own submarine production until the mid-2030s because of constraints in shipyards and the labor force," he said.

While the Cold War spurred submarine building after World War II, regional conflicts now drive much of the market: China and Taiwan; India and Pakistan; North Korea and South Korea; Iran and Israel.

"Submarine proliferation impacts both regional stability and the ability of states to deliver (weapons of mass destruction)," Nuclear Threat Institute says on its website. "Since the end of the Cold War, the total number of active submarines in the world has fallen, largely as a result of large-scale decommissioning of former Soviet vessels. However, the number of countries operating submarines has increased."

The Soviet Union heavily exported its diesel-electric submarines, selling or giving allies 60 "Whiskey-class" submarines in the two decades before 1980. The submarines went to China, North Korea, Cuba, Egypt, Poland, Syria, Bulgaria and Albania, according to NTI. The modern Kilo-class went to China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Venezuela.

Russia has largely resisted transferring nuclear sub technology to other nations, with the exception of China. In 2012, for the first time, it leased an Akula-class nuclear submarine to India.

China is the third major power in the submarine sales or transfer mix. It has followed dual tracks, rapidly building conventionally



OMAR DOMINQU/U.S. Navy

Crew members assigned to Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Soryu-class submarine Shoryu stand watch as it arrives at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, on April 21.



Department of Defense

A Russian-built, Kilo-class diesel submarine purchased by Iran in 1996. The submarine type has been frequently exported by Russia.



MARIA LLANOS/U.S. Navy

South Korean Navy sailors display their country's flag aboard the diesel-electric submarine ROKS Yun Bong-gil at Naval Base Guam in 2024.

powered submarines to scale up its Navy, while adding more nuclear boats to modernize the mix.

The Pentagon, in its annual analysis of Chinese military power, reported in December that China's People's Liberation Army Navy has 60 submarines, with six attack submarines and six missile submarines powered by nuclear reactors. Taiwan has two conventional-powered submarines.

Bryan Clark, a former Navy submariner who is now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, said the best Chinese submarines use air-propulsion technology that reduces cavitation — a sound a traditional screw propeller creates when submerged.

"Chinese submarine sales could be a worrisome sign because the Type 039A Yuan-class submarine is very quiet and can employ supersonic anti-ship missiles," Clark said. "It could give a smaller country a very capable

way of threatening sea lanes or neighbors at ranges and speeds that drones cannot reach."

Much of the submarine activity is focused on the 1.4 million square-mile South China Sea. Unlike the globe-straddling zones of competition between the U.S. and Soviet Union, the focus today is on China's anti-access/area denial (known as "A2/AD") through the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

"PLA Navy submarines are central to China's strategy to deny adversary forces access to waters within the First Island Chain," the 2025 Pentagon report said.

About \$3 trillion in annual trade moves through the South China Sea each year, according to a Pentagon estimate.

The United States says it wants to balance the nuclear-powered submarine presence in the region through its AUKUS program, which will allow Australia to eventually buy

some of the Navy's older Virginia-class nuclear attack submarines and develop their nuclear-powered technology.

The biggest military in the area is Japan. It operates about 23 submarines of a domestic design, though it has purchased a Swedish air-propulsion system to use on its Soryu-class submarines. As a close ally, the United States has sold UGM-84L Harpoon Block II submarine-launched missiles to Japan.

South Korea has 22 submarines and enough shipyard capacity for an aggressive overseas sales effort on its KSS-III attack submarine it's seeking to sell Canada and other countries. It has sold submarines to Indonesia and as the trip to British Columbia showed, is eager to add Canada to its customer list.

The domestically-designed Dosan Ahn Changho class, which NTI said "represents South Korea's emergence as a highly capable manufacturer of diesel-electric submarines."

Seoul plans to launch its first nuclear-powered Jang-Bogo-N sub in the mid-2030s, with a timetable to have the boat in service by the later part of the next decade. In May, the Ministry of National Defense announced a plan calling for four 8,000-ton fast attack boats, about the size of the U.S. Virginia-class submarine.

North Korea has about 24 submarines, mostly variations of Russian or Chinese designs, and in December 2025 the country unveiled in-progress construction of what the military says is its first new nuclear-powered missile submarine. The nuclear-powered capability has not been independently verified.

Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said in November 2025 that the country was reconsidering its longtime self-imposed ban on nuclear-powered vessels.

"The environment surrounding Japan is truly becoming so severe that we must debate whether to continue with diesel as we have, or to opt for nuclear-powered submarines," Koizumi said.

The United States, Russia and China account for more than 40% of submarines, and some of the largest second-tier fleets are in the Indo-Pacific region, but subs are built, bought and sold around the world.

India and Pakistan continue to develop nuclear-powered vessels in a region with ongoing tensions. India commissioned INS Arighaat in August 2024 — a 6,000 ton submarine with a light water reactor that has test-launched a submarine launched ballistic missile from the Bay of Bengal.

In Europe, the United Kingdom and France operate nuclear-powered submarines in their navies. Germany does not, but exports its conventionally powered designs to countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Greece, India, Indonesia, Israel, Singapore, South Korea, Norway and Turkey, according to NTI.

In 2021, Norway and Germany signed a pact to produce six Type 212CD submarines — two for Germany and four for Norway. The first boat in the 5 billion EURO deal is scheduled for delivery to Norway in 2029.

France's Naval Group exports Scorpène-class diesel-electric submarine and conventionally powered versions of the French nuclear-powered Barracuda-class. Customers have included Brazil, Malaysia, India, Chile, Indonesia and the Netherlands.

The Todaro-class submarines built by the German-Italian Submarine Programme plans to sell boats to Qatar. Italy had a joint submarine project with Russia that it terminated in 2014 with the invasion of the Crimea by Moscow.

Sweden has exported three classes of submarines to Singapore, Australia and Denmark, and retrofitted Japanese subs with its air-propulsion system.

As navies seek to modernize for advantages against regional adversaries, the demand for submarines is likely to continue to rise, experts say.

"Not many countries can afford an aircraft carrier, but they can afford a submarine," said Cancian, the CSIS analyst.

DINING

Caviar wishes and California roll dreams

J-Home Sushi Experience offers Japanese specialty not too far from Vicenza

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

How I ended up at J-Home Sushi Experience has to do with a missed bus stop and the nagging sense of responsibility to scout out sushi spots for my wife before she joins me in Italy later this year.

Also, while some longtime residents of the Vicenza area kindly directed me to look for housing in one of the little villages along the Berici Hills, the walkable dining options near the home we settled on about 25 minutes south of Caserma Ederle are somewhat limited.

I mean mainly pizza and pasta from what I can tell, and I imagine that readers who've been here a bit longer than I have may be either bored of such fare or already set on their favorite purveyors of those national culinary treasures.

So I ended up stepping off the bus at the wrong stop in Ponte di Nanto the other day and happened upon J-Home Sushi Experience on my walk home, stopping briefly to admire its glass-enclosed patios jutting out on either side of the entrance.

Ah, yes, sushi, a cuisine that I, a cornfed Midwesterner, have been preparing my whole life to review. No doubt readers who've been stationed in Japan will trust my taste in this matter. After all, I've gone to Tokyo on temporary duty sometime in this century.

I returned the next day to check it out, a bit early for dinner when I entered the restaurant. The dark-walled dining room was empty. Two men were busy at work preparing sushi behind a counter, while a hurried waitress boxed up a take-out order.

It was a bit too warm and muggy inside, but a family was dining on the patio, where I noted a pleasant breeze and settled in at a table for two that the English-speaking server guided me to.

Not long after that, she returned with the tiny dishes of ginger and wasabi, a small porcelain cruet of soy sauce and, as a complimentary aperitif, a glass of chilled prosecco beaded with condensation.

Perusing the extensive menu of more than 220 numbered items, I went for the all-you-can-eat option, available for lunch or dinner. That does not include drinks, dessert or off-menu requests.

The potentially belly-busting deal costs about 16 euros at lunchtime and about 27 euros for the evening meal, with a reduced price of about 17 euros for kids under age 4 and no taller than 3-foot-11.

I didn't want to fill up on the appetizers, salads, pastas, rice, sashimi, ceviche or various Asian-style dishes on offer. I went straight for the nigiri and maki. Well, right after a longish wait for the server to return.

Overall, the service was fine, but I did feel ever so slightly underattended as one of only two parties on the patio at the time, though I was not terribly bothered by the relaxed pace.

And, silver lining: When I did place each of several rounds of sushi orders, even after the



On June 9, at J-Home Sushi Experience in the Italian hamlet of Nanto, south of Vicenza, the chef's choice plate featured standard nigiri: salmon, tuna, sea bass and red prawn, along with some specialty pieces.



J-Home Sushi Experience offers an all-you-can-eat sushi menu and other delights for approximately 16 euros at lunch and 27 euros at dinner.

patio grew busy with more patrons, I had little time to wait before the server would set before me a long, narrow dish arrayed with cuts of fish.

First came the chef's choice, omakase. It consisted of two pieces of tuna nigiri, one of salmon, one of sea bass, one of red prawn and three specialty pieces featuring seared salmon, garnishes and teriyaki- or mayonnaise-based sauces.

Maybe it was not my night, or maybe we can chalk it up to the fish's extreme freshness, but I struggled to taste the salmon or tuna, ordinarily my favorites.

The specialty pieces gave more gusto, though perhaps more because of the tangy and creamy sauces than the rice or fish.

I also ordered a California roll, mainly because I thought it could serve as a good barometer for those Americans who, unlike me, have not had the broadening experience of a sushi dinner during a weeklong trip to Japan more than two decades ago.

Not going to lie, I liked the California roll best that night — the slightly sweet flavor of



The tidy dining room at J-Home Sushi Experience. The restaurant's patio is a popular choice for patrons visiting on warm days.

the rice, the creamy avocado, the saltiness of the nori seaweed.

I briefly considered ordering a few roe-filled gunkan sushi for a rich, briny experience I had not had in years, probably since my 2001 trip to Yokota Air Base. But I really wanted to give the nigiri another chance and ordered two more salmon pieces instead.

Slowly and ever so mindfully, I bit into the silky, bright pink-orange fish, noting a faint buttery flavor. How much is a sushi chef responsible for a flavorless cut of fish? I don't know, but nevertheless, I was a bit underwhelmed.

After that letdown, I chose to shock my palate by going in a different direction, ordering an in-season specialty of crispy pieces of salmon hosomaki, the smallest type of sushi roll, topped with dollops of cream cheese and strawberry chunks.

I imagined it might be like a strawberry vinaigrette on a salty salmon bite, which intrigued me. Sadly, it did not deliver.



The namesake fruit in the strawberry hosomaki was overwhelmed by the large amounts of cream cheese.



The creamy and slightly tangy California roll stood out.



The salmon nigiri was silky but somewhat lacking in flavor.



Chopsticks pick up a crispy tempura zucchini flower sushi roll topped with salmon and sauce.

Nothing tied together the flavors, which the rich cream cheese dominated. It could have used some acidity or tanginess to cut through the fat and bring out the berries' sweetness.

On my last sips of a tall Sapporo, I ordered a roll featuring crispy zucchini blossom tempura and salmon, which may have been nearly as good of an end to the night as a second California roll.

In the end, I wasn't too full to stop for a gelato up the road and not so let down by the sushi experience that I won't return with my wife for al fresco dining and to hunt for more flavorful gems among the hundreds of menu items not named for U.S. states.

J-Home Sushi Experience
Address: Via A. Bembo 34, Nato, Italy
Hours: Daily, noon-2:30 p.m. and 7-11:30 p.m., except closed Mondays for lunch.
Price: 4 to 11 euros for appetizers, 1.50 to 3 euros per piece for sushi, 4 to 15 euros for various other dishes. Take-out orders get a 20% discount.
Information: +39 0444 183 9929, www.jhome.it

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