

# STARS AND STRIPES®



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## ITALY EDITION

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DECEMBER 25, 2025

## Lost lifetime

Navy's destroyers will lose roughly 25% of service lives to maintenance, report says **Page 3**



Riggers with Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility prepare to undock the destroyer USS Hopper from Dry Dock 4 at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in March.

Claudia LaMantia/U.S. Navy

Young US swimmers flock to Italian town  
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Savor slow-food delights near Aviano  
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## COVER STORY

# Report: Delays reduce destroyer service

Chronic problems with maintenance affect readiness of fleet, CBO says

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

Navy destroyers will spend considerably less time projecting American sea power than planned, with chronic delays and labor overruns cutting nearly a decade off their operational lifespans, according to a new analysis.

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers will spend nine years, or up to 27% of their planned 35-year or 40-year service lives, in overhauls and other maintenance, the Congressional Budget Office estimated in a report released Dec. 10.

That's more than double the Navy's estimate of about four years, or up to 12% of service life, in its 2012 class maintenance plans, the CBO said.

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are the workhorses of the fleet, with anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine capabilities. There are about 73 of them in the service, making the class the Navy's largest.

Five are homeported at Naval Station Rota in Spain, forming the backbone of NATO's ballistic missile defense.

At some points in recent years, only one-third of the ships were available for operations, the CBO found.

"If maintenance events often take longer than planned, the Navy has fewer ships that it can deploy — and thus, in effect, a smaller fleet," the report said.

Meanwhile, the service spent an average of \$28 million per destroyer on maintenance in 2024, an increase of 300% since 2009, the CBO said. The report noted that the number of destroyers in the fleet had grown by about 25% since then.

That increased spending is partially due to longer durations and greater labor use in destroy-



DANIELLE LOFTON/U.S. Navy

**The Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Ross returns from sea trials in May 2024, marking completion of an extensive over-haul of the ship. Destroyers in the class will spend on average nine years, or up to 27% of their planned service lives, in over-hauls and other maintenance, the Congressional Budget Office estimated in a recent report.**

er overhauls. Higher costs also were caused by the need for additional maintenance on ships, according to the report.

Overhauls that take longer than expected can disrupt training and deployment schedules not only for the ship involved but also for others, the CBO said.

The Navy has faced a steady challenge in sustaining its surface fleet, chiefly due to problems obtaining spare parts, a lack of qualified maintenance personnel and a near-constant need to defer maintenance, among other issues, the Government Accountability Office said in January.

From 2020 to 2023, nearly \$25.9 billion was

appropriated for the maintenance of combat surface ships, about \$1 billion more than the Navy requested, according to the GAO.

The new CBO report analyzed overhauls and other maintenance events for Navy destroyers and amphibious warships from October 2010 to September 2024.

Among the findings was that maintenance time for overhauls often was 20% to 100% longer than estimated. Delays have continued to increase, especially for older ships that have longer scheduled overhauls, even though the Navy revised its estimates, the CBO found.

Aging ships, unexpected additional work, late

inspections and contract awards, and waits for parts and materials were among the factors in the longer maintenance times, the report said.

A Navy approach to contracting work that seems to incentivize shipbuilders to keep costs low rather than perform tasks on time also may be to blame, the CBO said.

Some Navy officials and industry representatives said the contracting method could be behind the delays but others disagreed, according to the report.

It also said that some factors behind delays and labor overruns are temporary or outside the Navy's control, such as supply-chain disruptions.

## Navy embracing AI at shipyards

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy is investing \$448 million in AI and autonomy to speed up use of the technologies across the shipbuilding industry as part of efforts to revitalize it and encourage innovation, the service announced.

The investment in the Navy's Shipbuilding Operating System will use software from American technology giant Palantir to offer shipbuilders, shipyards and suppliers the resources needed to modernize their operations, Secretary of the Navy John Phelan said Dec. 9 in a statement.

"By enabling industry to adopt AI and autonomy tools at scale, we're helping the shipbuilding industry improve schedules, increase capacity, and reduce costs," Phelan said. He added that the initiative was about "doing business smarter and building the industrial capability our Navy and nation require."

The initiative will aggregate data from planning systems and databases, among other sources, to eliminate bottlenecks, streamline workflows and

mitigate risk, allowing for quicker, more informed decisions, the Navy said. For example, using AI helped one shipbuilder reduce submarine schedule planning from 160 manual hours to under 10 minutes while another was able to cut material review times from weeks to under one hour, according to the statement.

The initial effort will focus on submarine shipbuilders, shipyards and suppliers with expansion to surface ship programs as the Navy validates and refines the approach, according to the statement.

Phelan has promised to reshape how the Navy builds and fields ships with a focus on cutting costs and getting vessels out to sea faster.

In November, he announced that the Navy was canceling the bulk of the \$22 billion Constellation-class frigate program that had been beset with delays and cost overruns.

Just two of the ships, already under construction, will be completed.

The move would free up money and shipyard space for other projects, Phelan said in a video posted to his X account on Nov. 25.



**The Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine USS New Hampshire arrives at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Virginia in September for a depot modernization period.**

A little more than a week later, in another video, Phelan said the Navy had selected the design for its medium landing ships, calling the choice a second step in overhauling the service's shipbuilding efforts.

The roughly 4,000-ton vessels, designed by Dutch shipbuilder Damen, can carry cargo and Marines more than 3,400 miles, offering "the right balance

of capability, affordability and speed to field," Phelan said in the Dec. 5 post that was made to his X account.

Its crane, berthing, helicopter and cargo capacities make "it an excellent choice for the Marine Corps requirement of no less than 35 medium landing ships to support naval expeditionary forces," Gen. Eric Smith, Marine Corps commandant, said in the posted

video.

The ship offers Marines the agility and flexibility needed in austere environments where there are no ports, Smith added.

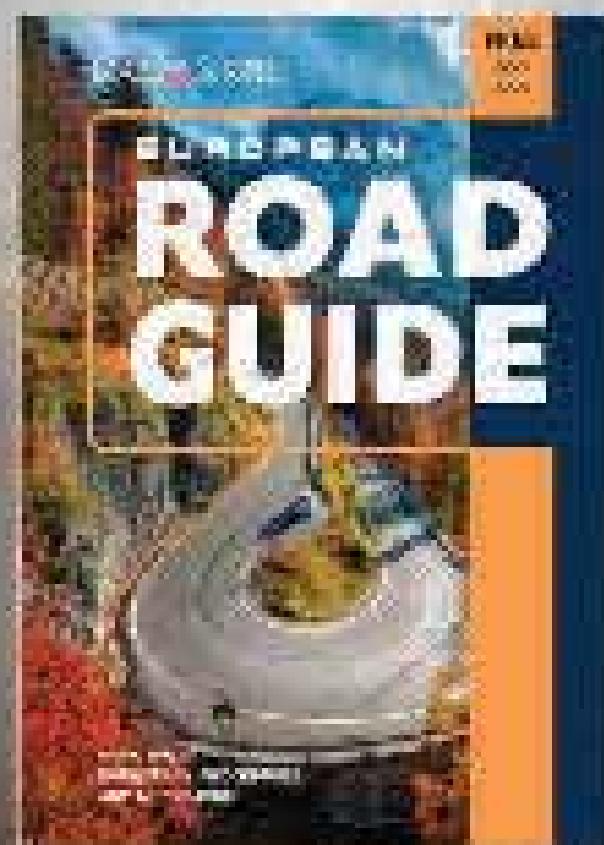
Under a Trump administration working plan dubbed "The Golden Fleet," the Navy could potentially grow from its current 287 ships to as many as 300 crewed vessels.

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## MILITARY

# The rise of robochef

BY ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP WALKER, South Korea — A robotic kitchen that cooks, portions and serves fresh meals with almost no human involvement is now operating at Market 19, the Army's first autonomous dining facility.

The fully automated system at the 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command works like a compact industrial kitchen, using refrigerated storage, eight induction stoves and two robotic arms to move raw ingredients through the cooking process.

Meals are prepared in a matter of minutes before the robot places them into heated pickup lockers, said Hendrik Susemihl, CEO and co-founder of goodBytz, the Germany-based company that built the system.

"It's basically designed like a physical kitchen, but the robot takes over the handling between fridges, induction stoves and dishwashing," he said during a tour of the kitchen at Camp Walker. "It takes three to five minutes to cook a fresh dish."

Unlike equipment that reheats precooked items, the robot — called eric — starts with raw ingredients, following a digital recipe sequence.

"Any ingredient that goes in the robot is still handled by humans," the command's culinary adviser, Chief Warrant Officer 3 River Mitchell, said during the tour. "If carrots come in from a vendor, we still wash them, peel them, dice them, but that's really it. The robot takes care of the cooking process."

Soldiers load the raw items into the system and the robot does the rest.

"You don't just warm up convenience food," Susemihl said. "It's real cooking, and creativity is the limit because the robot can be freely programmed with recipes."

Culinary soldiers supporting the six-month pilot program, which began Nov. 13, said the automated process also ensures accurate portioning, reducing food waste during busy periods.

"Everything here is weighed out in grams," said Spc. Brandon Williams, a culinary specialist with the 541st Field Feeding Company. "The robot's hoppers and baskets are tied to a scale, so we have complete control of portion sizes, and we can see which dishes are more popular and adjust prep."

A rotating menu offers several options throughout the week. On the day after Thanksgiving, the system served three holiday dishes.

"For the Thanksgiving meal, we have three staples — a ham dish, a roasted turkey that we



PHOTOS BY ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL/Stars and Stripes

**A new autonomous kitchen prepares a Thanksgiving meal at Camp Walker, South Korea, in November.**

smoked on the Traeger pellet grill, and then a vegetarian dish," Mitchell said.

Pfc. Elliott Reyes-Miranda, a member of the command who chose the roasted turkey, said the dish exceeded his expectations.

"The turkey was seasoned, the stuffing was pretty good, and considering a robot made it, it's

pretty cool," he said.

The system also allows kitchens to operate with fewer personnel while maintaining production.

"On the weekends, we can run this with one cook," Williams said. "I can set up the robot, do my checks, serve customers and still take care of paperwork and cleaning."

Susemihl said a containerized version of the kitchen designed for field operations can operate with no cook on site.

"It can store roughly five to six hundred portions," he said. "You load it on a truck or even a helicopter, keep everything cooled, and then serve troops fully automatically in minutes."



**A soldier with the 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command is served a meal prepared by the new autonomous kitchen at Camp Walker, South Korea.**



**A new autonomous kitchen, goodBytz, prepares food at Camp Walker.**



**Soldiers dine on Thanksgiving meals prepared by the new autonomous kitchen at Camp Walker, South Korea, Nov. 28**

## MILITARY

# Better sharing of Osprey safety info urged

## Watchdog says services should improve process on reporting data

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The military services that fly V-22 Osprey variants must work more closely to share safety and maintenance concerns and best practices after an uptick in recent years of deadly crashes involving the tilt-rotor aircraft, a government watchdog report found.

The Government Accountability Office found rates of the most serious, non-combat incidents involving Osprey aircraft in fiscal 2023 and 2024 were between 36% and 88% higher than each of the prior eight fiscal years, in a Dec. 8 report. Four fatal Osprey crashes since 2022 have killed 20 U.S. service members and led to a three-month grounding of the Pentagon's entire fleet of V-22s at the end of 2023.

GAO analysts found the most "serious accidents related to materiel failure of airframe or engine components and human error during aircraft operations or maintenance." But they warned that the military branches that fly Ospreys — and the Pentagon's joint office which oversees the program — "have not routinely shared information" with each other including "hazard and accident reports," emergency procedures and general knowledge about the aircraft, and maintenance data for components and parts shared by the three versions of the aircraft.

V-22 Ospreys are tiltrotor aircraft that combine the vertical takeoff and landing capabilities of a helicopter with the speed and long range of a turboprop airplane, according to its manufacturer, Boeing. The Pentagon's Osprey inventory includes the MV-22 flown by the Marines, the CV-22 flown by the Air Force and the CMV-22B flown by the Navy.

The Marines own the vast majority of the Defense Department's Osprey fleet with some 348 aircraft, as of June 2025. The Air Force owns 52 Ospreys, and the Navy has 29. The Marine Corps has flown the aircraft since 2007, the Air Force



A U.S. Marine Corps MV-22B Osprey takes off from the flight deck of Wasp-class amphibious assault ship USS Boxer in the Pacific Ocean on Dec. 5.

has had them since 2009 and the Navy first began flying Ospreys in 2021.

Though the Osprey program has faced past concerns about safety, the uptick of fatal incidents in the last two years — including the 2023 crash of an Air Force CV-22 Osprey near Japan that killed eight airmen — led the House Armed Services Committee's readiness subpanel to request the new GAO probe.

The GAO probe did not explore the reasons behind the Osprey crashes, but it found that the Osprey's troubles could be partially attributed to its status as the military's first generation of tiltrotor aircraft, its "complex engineering" and

its "complex and expensive components" that are maintenance intensive.

GAO also found that the services that fly Ospreys have no formal method of sharing timely safety information and no clear oversight structure to ensure such materials are shared broadly across the Osprey community.

"Without refining the joint program's process for identifying, analyzing and responding to Osprey safety risks to incorporate and prioritize system and non-system safety risks, program stakeholders cannot adequately mitigate risks that can contribute to death, injury, or loss of mission capability and resources," GAO analysts wrote.

They suggested the Pentagon oversee a process to ensure Osprey-flying military services refine their processes for "identifying, analyzing and responding to all Osprey safety risks"; develop a new oversight structure to ensure safety issues are addressed; and establish "safety sharing agreements."

GAO also suggested the Pentagon "conduct a comprehensive review of maintenance guidance and inspection procedures and update them as needed to ensure that Osprey units are using the system for tracking serialized aircraft components."

Pentagon officials agreed with their recommendations, according to the report.

## Air Force marks delivery of its 100th KC-46A tanker

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

With top brass at the controls, the Air Force last week marked delivery of the 100th new KC-46A Pegasus aerial tanker built by Boeing.

Air Force Lt. Gen. John Healy, chief of the Air Force Reserve, landed the 99th KC-46A at Travis Air Force Base in Northern California on Dec. 3, followed closely by the 100th, piloted by Air Mobility Command's top commander, Gen. John D. Lamontagne.

"Our combined total force ensures we can reach any spot in the world whenever and wherever our nation calls," Healy told the audience gathered for the delivery milestone.

Originally derived from the Boeing 767 twin-engine commercial airliner, the KC-46A can carry up to 212,299 pounds of fuel. It can also be used for cargo, troop transport and medical evacuation roles.

The Air Force has operated the KC-46A since 2022 and expects the aircraft to remain in service into the 2070s. The plane is built at the Boeing plant in Everett, Wash.

The KC-46A replaced the KC-10 Extender, a trijet tanker based on the Douglas DC-10 airliner design, which served with the Air Force from 1981 to 2024.

Plans call for 263 aircraft by 2030, with 88 planes from the original order under production and another 75 planned for the "Tanker Produc-

tion Extension" plan.

The KC-46A is currently assigned to squadrons at eight bases across the country, and two other bases are involved in testing and training.

The Air Force's active-duty, reserve and National Guard forces continue to operate more than 350 KC-135 Stratotankers, a design based on the original 707 jet airliner from 1955. With a Service Life Extension Program in place, the KC-135 is expected to remain in service until at least the 2050s.

The KC-46A represents "the continued strengthening of our nation's global reach and readiness," Lamontagne told the audience.

The Air Force said the KC-46A has "improved refueling systems, enhanced defensive features and expanded cargo capacity to meet modern mission demands."

The KC-46A design has run into some operational problems; some aircraft receiving in-flight refueling from a KC-46 have been damaged by what the Air Force determined was an overly stiff aerial boom and by limitations on remote controls used by the refueling crews. The shortcomings have led to a redesign of the boom actuator system, according to the Air Force.

The Air Force says the KC-46A is capable of in-flight refueling of a variety of Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and U.S.-allied aircraft, ranging from smaller fighter jets such as the F-16 Fighting Falcon to larger aircraft, such as the B-52 Stratofortress bomber.



A KC-46A Pegasus taxis on the flight line during the arrival ceremony for the delivery of the Air Force's 100th KC-46 at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., on Dec. 2. The KC-46 delivers improved refueling systems, enhanced defensive features and expanded cargo capacity to meet modern mission demands.

## MILITARY

# Air Force long-term medical shaving waivers ending soon

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Airmen and guardians who've been allowed to keep a beard for more than nine months for nonreligious reasons may want to add a new razor to their holiday wish list.

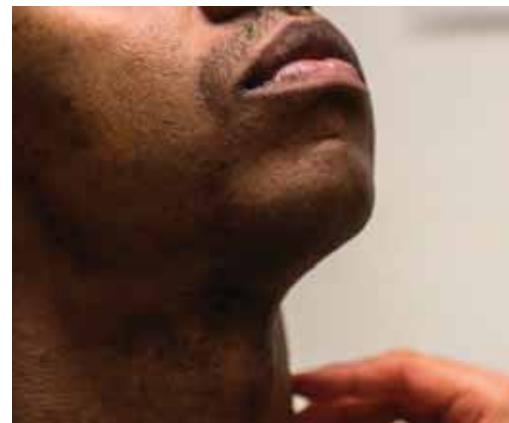
All medical shaving waivers issued prior to March 1 will expire at the end of next month, the Air Force Surgeon General's office said in a statement.

To stay in regulation, Air Force and Space Force members on a long-term shaving profile will have to make an appointment with a military health care provider by Jan. 31, 2026, for further evaluation, the statement said, citing a memo signed by Lt. Gen. John DeGoes, the Air Force surgeon general.

Going forward, no single profile can exceed six months, and airmen and guardians accruing more than 12 months of profiles within a two-year period will be referred to their commander, the memo states.

As a result, some members of either service may need preventive education on proper shaving hygiene or even be recommended for laser hair removal, says the new guidance, which revises a January predecessor.

Ultimately, it will be up to unit commanders rather than a military health professional whether to approve a shaving profile for medical reasons,



COLVILLE McFEE/U.S. Air Force

**An airman's neck and face are inspected during a shaving waiver course at Beale Air Force Base, Calif.**

according to the new guidance.

The directive does not apply to religious accommodation shaving waivers, DeGoes said.

The previous guidance noted that extended-duration shaving profiles were generally reserved for severe cases of pseudofolliculitis barbae, or razor bumps, a skin condition caused by ingrown hairs that can make shaving painful and lead to scarring if skin is not given a chance to heal.

The condition, caused by curly hairs growing

back into the skin, disproportionately affects Black men and is associated with frequent shaving, according to a study by the Society of Federal Health Professionals.

The previous guidance was intended to differentiate razor bumps from "shaving irritation," according to the surgeon general's statement.

But in September, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth directed the Pentagon "to revert to pre-2020 standards" and do away with permanent shaving profiles for medical conditions, such as razor bumps.

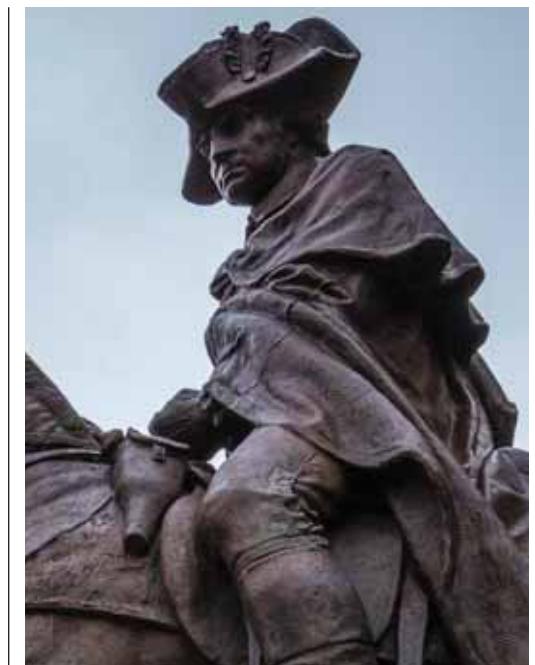
It's not clear, however, whether permanent conditions will result in automatic administrative separation.

Primary care managers are to evaluate members for medical conditions, recommend profiles and submit their recommendations to a medical profile officer.

Beginning Feb. 1, 2026, airmen and guardians who accumulate more than 12 months of a shaving profile within a 24-month period will be referred to their commander.

Commanders may request an evaluation for an airman or guardian "due to operational concerns stemming from a medical condition," according to the new guidance.

Military medical officers were previously the final authority on medical shaving waivers.



**MARK OLSEN/New Jersey National Guard**  
**During the French and Indian War, George Washington as afflicted with diarrhea, a long-standing problem for troops in combat.**

## Poll: Americans back larger military, NATO

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. support for NATO, Ukraine and a larger American military is on the rise, according to a new survey that also found strong public backing for bombing suspected drug traffickers in the Caribbean.

Earlier this month, the Ronald Reagan Institute released its annual survey on security issues, which also showed growing bipartisan support for the United States playing a central role on the international stage.

A record 64% of Americans want the United States to take the lead in international affairs, including 79% of self-described MAGA Republicans and 57% of Democrats, according to the survey's findings.

A large majority of those polled said American influence should be backed by hard power, with 87% saying it was important for the U.S. to have the most powerful military in the world.

"Across demographics and party lines, the American people want the U.S. military to remain the most powerful fighting force in the world," the institute said in a statement.

But while there was broad bipartisan support for a strong U.S. military and corresponding favorability for long-standing alliances such as NATO, there was a sharp partisan divide on social issues and other hot button topics related to the military.

For example, 59% of those polled disapproved of renaming the Defense Department the Department of War. But the partisan division was severe, with 58% of Republicans supporting the name change compared to only 17% of Democrats.

On eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion programs, known as DEI, 76% of Republicans were in support and 69% of Democrats opposed the move. Similar partisan splits were found on restrictions for transgender military service and halting transition-related treatments through the military health care system.

One social issue that had majority support on both political sides related to gender-neutral fitness standards for combat roles with 73% of Republicans and 53% of Democrats in favor.

But on security matters, both sides showed signs of coming together.

For example, NATO favorability reached its highest level, with 68% of those polled supporting the bloc. The upswing was largely thanks to an in-



CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS/U.S. Army

**A line of U.S. Army M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles from the 3rd Infantry Division drive to their objective point near Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, in July. An annual poll by the Ronald Reagan Institute found that support for NATO, Ukraine and a larger U.S. military is on the rise by Americans.**

crease in Republican support for the organization, which jumped from 50% in June to 60% when the poll was taken between October and November, according to the survey's findings.

The shift could be related to President Donald Trump's more favorable public statements about the alliance, which has responded to Trump's demands that members increase their defense spending. Among those who initially favored an American withdrawal from NATO, learning about the allies' recent defense spending commitments moved 18% to change their minds about quitting the alliance, the survey showed.

Meanwhile, a majority (62%) want Ukraine to prevail in its war with Russia, with 64% supporting the delivery of U.S. weapons to the country, up 9 points from last year.

The Pentagon's campaign against suspected drug traffickers in Latin America and the Caribbean also has broad support, with 62% in favor of using military force.

Also, if China invaded Taiwan, 60% of those polled would support committing U.S. forces to its defense — up from 48% last year.

Being able to face down Russia and China simultaneously also was a priority for a majority of those polled, with 64% saying the U.S. military should be sized to fight and win two wars at once. "This year's survey underscores a clear message: Americans believe U.S. leadership is indispensable to global security and peace," said Roger Zakheim, director of the Ronald Reagan Institute, in a statement Wednesday. "From record-high support for international engagement and NATO to growing backing for defending partners like Taiwan and Ukraine, the public understands that American strength—military, technological, and industrial—is the foundation of security in an era of rising authoritarian threats."

The institute's poll was conducted between Oct. 23 and Nov. 3 by a bipartisan research team at Beacon Research and Shaw & Company Research.

## Navy team in Djibouti takes aim at diarrhea

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The runs couldn't hide from a medical research team that visited the U.S. military's Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti in search of ways to bolster troop combat readiness in Djibouti through better diarrhea treatment.

Navy personnel are working with Defense Department partners in the African country on methods related to the surveillance of infectious diarrheal diseases, a persistent threat to the health of forces in combat, the Naval Medical Research Command said in a statement.

During their stop, the researchers investigated a more streamlined approach for helping troops get their intestines back on track.

Typically, traveler's diarrhea involves a five-day antibiotic regimen. But Navy researchers said the old-school approach runs up against the military's priority of lighter loads for troops.

The traditional treatment requires "service members to carry a large amount of medication" and creates "logistical challenges for deployed units," Naval Medical Research Command said.

In collaboration with other military researchers, the naval team is now focused on developing a single, low-dose treatment alternative, Navy Medical Research Command said.

The intent is to reduce the logistical burden of carrying treatments and cut down on the number of duty days lost due to diarrheal illness, the command's statement said.

Diarrhea can cause serious disruptions for deployed military units, especially when cases quickly spread among troops living in close quarters.

The problem has plagued militaries ever since they've been fighting, afflicting grunts and generals alike.

George Washington's case during the French and Indian War in the 1750s was so agonizing that he needed a pillow to soften the rectal pain while riding his horse. While modern medicine has improved matters, diarrhea remains a scourge.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, citing work by U.S. military researchers in 2023, said bacterial diarrhea is the No. 1 infectious disease threat to U.S. military operations.

"Infectious diarrhea is more than a medical issue; it's a readiness issue," Capt. Michael Prouty, commander of Naval Medical Research Unit EURAFCENT, said in the statement.

# Skiing the SELLARONDA

BY KAT NICKOLA  
*Stars and Stripes*

Imagine not needing to remove your skis for an entire day of skiing and circling a small, dramatic mountain range in the process. This is the Sellaronda: A famous 40 km circuit around the Sella Massif, an iconic mountain range that resembles a huge plateau. Of course, you will end up taking off your skis because you pass five villages and numerous slopeside restaurants and huts along the way.

## Dolomiti Superski

Located in northeastern Italy, the Dolomites are part of the Italian Alps with distinctive jagged peaks, cute alpine villages and skiing galore. In the heart of this area, the Dolomiti Superski region is one of the largest interconnected ski resorts in the world. It is actually a conglomeration of 12 distinctive resorts, with a single pass usable at them all.

- Adult 1-Day pass: €86 (peak) / €77 (shoulder),
- Adult 3-Day pass: €248 (peak) / €223 (shoulder)
- Junior (ages 7–18) passes are 30% less
- Kids (under 6) passes are 50% less, or free with an adult pass

## Which Direction?

The Sellaronda circuit has a medium level

of difficulty, and includes both blue and red slopes. But there are two ways to run the circuit, with nuanced differences.

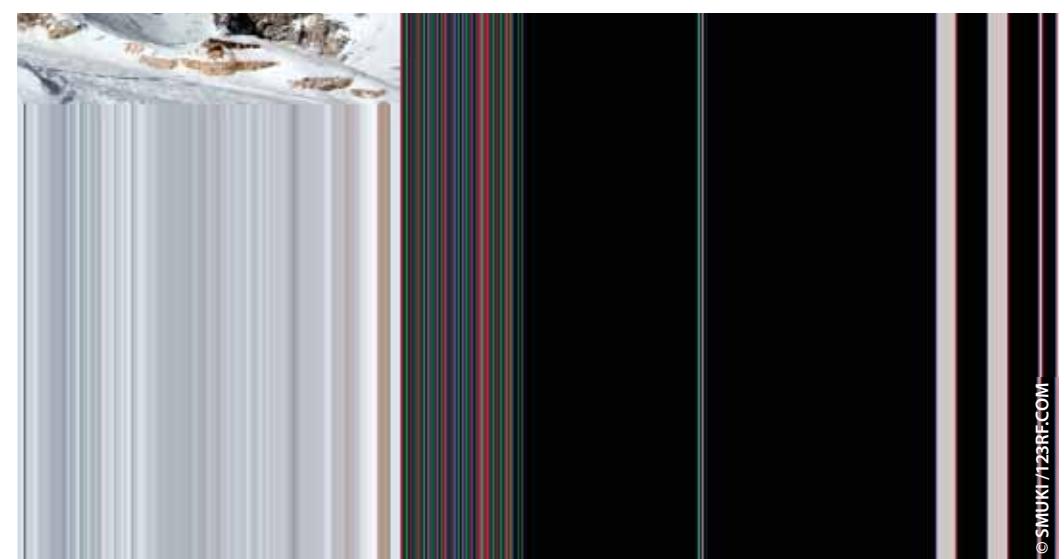
**The Green Route takes you counterclockwise around the Sellaronda.** It is made up of slightly easier slopes with more consistent snow and weather conditions. Using the Green Route is recommended on your first loop around the circuit, or if the weather and snow are bad. One downside is that there are more lifts. For fast, very experienced skiers, this route can be done nonstop in a few hours.

**The Orange Route follows a clockwise path around the Sellaronda.** There are some steep, varied red runs this direction, making it a more advanced path for skiers who enjoy a bit of challenge. However, many of the slopes are the first ones closed in bad weather, or they face the sun, which causes early snow melt and chunky, icy slopes. On the plus side, there are fewer lifts and more runs, meaning more time heading downhill.

## Starting Locations

The Sellaronda offers a tour through four Dolomiti ski resorts, which can each be used as a starting location.

- Val Gardena Ski Resort. The villages of Selva-Woklenstein and Plan De Gralba offer lifts onto the Sellaronda, while S. Cristina is only a few slopes away.



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- Alta Badia Ski Resort. The villages of Colfosco and Corvara have lifts with direct access to the Sellaronda.
- Arabba Ski Resort. The Sellaronda goes right through the small town of Arabba.
- Val di Fassa. The villages of Canazei, Alba and Campitello offer connections up to the Sellaronda via a quick gondola.

Expect to take all day, 5–6 hours, with stops for breaks or an occasional extra run. Start early, heading down your first slope by 10 a.m. Lifts open between 8:30 – 9 a.m. and close 4 – 5 p.m.



## Lodging

The highest concentration of hotels in the area is located west of the Sellaronda, in the Val Gardena (Gardena Valley) between the village of Ortisei and Selva-Wolkenstein. There are more upscale or rural options up the Val Badia (Badia Valley) north of Corvara village. South of the Sellaronda, the Val di Fassa (Fassa Valley) is another great choice with plenty of hotels and chalets.

## Après Ski

Once you've looped the Sellaronda, it is time to celebrate.

Ready for a night on the town? Selva in Val Gardena offers the liveliest bars and clubs in the area, with DJs or live music late into the night at Bar Saltos, La Stua or the Luiskeller, all within a block of each other.

A true foodie will want to make reservations in one of the many gourmet restaurants in the Alta Badia area. Try homemade local cuisine at Maso Runch Hof, an 18th-century farmhouse. Or splurge on a hearty gourmet mountain dinner at the Rifugio Col Alt, with evening access by snowcat only. For traditional alpine evenings, see if your hotel offers half-board options. When booked ahead, this includes breakfast and dinner at the hotel dining room. It can be a great deal, and gives off that rustic, cozy vibe.

To ease aching bones (or get your kids to burn the last of their energy), check out the Aquapark Vidor in the Val di Fassa. This indoor waterpark has slides, pools and hydromassage jets for soothing muscles. There is also a wellness area with saunas, hot tubs and treatments.

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# Sicily's Annual Festivals

BY ANNA DELANGE  
Contributing Writer

Sicily is filled with history and never-ending festivals. Whether there is a religious celebration, or a festival geared towards food, you will definitely find something to look forward to on this beautiful Mediterranean island. The list below is certainly not all that is available, but these are some of the local festivals you should consider putting on your calendars!

## Festa di Sant'Agata

Feb. 2-5, 2026

The Feast of Saint Agatha is held in the center of Catania. This famous celebration is for the patron saint of Catania, and these three days attract tourists, onlookers and devotees. There are traditional ceremonies, magnificent parades that flow through the streets of and, of course, fireworks. Each day has a different traditional procession and mass. 2026 marks the 900th anniversary of Saint Agatha's relics in Catania, and a special display of the relics will be on view in the cathedral Feb. 9-11.

## Festival del Mandorlo in Fiore di Agrigento

March 7-15, 2026

This Almond Blossom Festival is another highly anticipated event that occurs in the region of Agrigento. This festival is dedicated to the beauty of the almond blossoms that are blooming after winter, a celebration of spring. The trees typically bloom in early February and dust Agrigento with beautiful white and pink petals. The festival has also merged in recent years with the International Folklore Festival, making this week-long celebration come alive with traditional costumes and dances accompanied with local delicacies.



## Infiorata di Noto

May 15-19, 2026

The Noto Flower Festival happens annually around the third Sunday in May in the town of Noto. There is a huge temporary art installation that is dedicated to one singular staircase decorated mostly with flowers. The floral artists also use different colored soils, seeds and even kernels. You can come to this festival each year and see new designs that align with each year's theme. It has gotten so popular in recent years that they have extended the visiting period from a single day to a five-day event.

## Taormina Film Festival

June 2026

2026 marks 72 years of this annual summer celebration in Messina. The festival has been through many name changes; however, that hasn't stopped famous international stars from appearing. Nowadays, the festival runs for nine days and has screenings at three locations in Taormina. The Ancient Theatre is used to screen new films while the other two locations typically screen shorts or tributes to filmmakers of the past. Tickets go quickly for this famous festival.

## Cous Cous Fest

Sept. 2026

Located in San Vito Lo Capo, the Cous Cous Festival is a relatively new event, and yet it is already internationally renowned. This festival started in 1998 and celebrates cultural integration and diversity by honoring the symbolic dish of the Mediterranean. The festival's program has broadened from chefs sharing and challenging each other with recipes to now including cultural, musical and entertainment events as well.

## Sagra del Pistacchio

Oct. 2026

The Pistachio Festival is in the town of Bronte. Pistachios grown in this town are protected by a Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP) label, which guarantees that these world-famous pistachios are produced, processed and packaged in a specific zone. The festival is definitely the spot for you to try pistachio-flavored gelato or granita, cakes, pasta and arancini. The festival is not just based around food, it also features exhibitions from local artists.

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# THE ANCIENT SITE OF Conza, Italy



BY ERICA FOWLER AND KAT NICKOLA  
*Stars and Stripes*

**M**ost people are familiar with the deadly volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD. It left the wealthy Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, near modern-day Naples, destroyed but unusually preserved for archaeologists to explore later. But, did you know that the region has another ancient Roman archaeological wonder that as also plagued by destructive natural forces?

Only an hour-and-a-half drive from Pompeii, the city of Conza hosts the Archaeological Park of Compsa, a multi-age village occupied since at least the third century BC. In November of 1980, a deadly earthquake struck modern Conza, destroying modern buildings and exposing significant archaeology below. Now layers of history are present all together, which makes for a surreal environment.

The welcoming modern village of Conza della Campania has been rebuilt down the hillside from the archaeological area. However, visitors who trek upward, past the walled cemetery with miniature roofs, will find themselves in bizarre place where it's easy imagine Roman sandals shuffling past the incongruous modern houses. Nature has reclaimed much of the remaining homes that were still standing after the 1980 quake; their ivy and dark windows seem to frame the perimeter of the lower, ancient sites. Steps, walkways and railings have been restored so visitors can walk through the archaeological park.

The Roman layers reveal extensive architec-

ture. The pre-Roman inhabitants, living there since at least the 6th century BC, were especially resistant to Roman rule. So, when the community was finally defeated and absorbed into the Roman Empire, it was made into an example of the empire's might by building at least two temples, a forum and an amphitheater.

Throughout medieval times, homes, a cathedral and businesses were built over the ancient infrastructure, sometimes right on top of Roman pavestones. Repetitive earthquakes made rebuilding efforts constant and necessary.

In the more modern homes, belongings are eerily strewn about amongst the falling plaster. A homemade baby jumper has been lovingly rehung on a hook and unbroken cups have been intentionally placed back in the cupboard. It is obvious that this is also a memorial site where vigils are held and families still come to remember lives once lived here. If you get the chance to visit, tread carefully and respectfully.

## HOW TO VISIT CONZA

Visiting Conza can be a great day trip from Naples and gives you a taste of Italian rural life that may be missed by staying in busy tourist hubs along the Amalfi coast.

The Archaeological Park of Compsa can only be visited with prior arrangement. Email the preservation organization, Pro Loco Compsa at [prolococompsa@libero.it](mailto:prolococompsa@libero.it) or call +39 082739013 to make reservations.



# Bologna's Best Pastry

BY KAT NICKOLA  
*Stars and Stripes*

**C**onsidered by many to be the culinary capital of Italy, Bologna is a food-lover's destination. Visit a salumeria, or Italian deli, along the Via Pescherie Vecchia where the medieval market vibe is still strong. Many delis offer small seating areas and plates for sampling meats and cheeses. Later, be sure to try some of the local Tagliatella a Ragù, whose meat-filled tomato sauce is known around the world as the eponymous Bolognese sauce.

Bologna also offers many pastry shops perfect for an afternoon break, or aperitivo, to sample the sweets and sip a glass of local Pignoletto wine. One must-try experience is enjoying an "aurora nel bosco" at Caffé Zanarini in the Piazza Galvini. This incredible dessert is primarily a rich dark chocolate bavarois custard with a tangy, fruity jelly center made from forest berries.



PHOTO BY KAREN KEARBY

## MILITARY

# DOD aims to buy 300K drones by 2028

## Increase in use of unmanned aircraft seen across globe

BY LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon is rushing to catch up with modern warfare — and spending big to do so.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Dec. 2 announced a \$1 billion initiative intended to deliver 300,000 one-way attack drones to U.S. service members over the next two years.

"We now find ourselves in a new era," Hegseth said in a Defense Department statement, adding that "we cannot be left behind."

The initiative is meant to kick-start industrial capacity and reduce prices so the military can adequately budget for unmanned weapons, according to the Pentagon.

The program will be broken down into four phases. Each begins with a "gauntlet" challenge, in which service members will test vendors' products and select the highest-scoring ones for orders from the Pentagon.

With each new phase, DOD will increase the number of drones it purchases while at the same time narrowing the number of vendors and decreasing the per-unit cost, according to a request for information.

The first phase is set to run from February to July 2026 and will include 30,000 drones purchased from a maximum of 12 vendors for \$5,000 apiece. The Pentagon expects to invite 25 vendors to compete in the first challenge, according to the department's "Drone Dominance" webpage.

By the final phase of the program, which will conclude around the start of 2028, the Pentagon plans to purchase 150,000 drones from five vendors at a price of \$2,300 per unit.

Hegseth called it a "stable demand signal to expand the U.S. drone industrial base."

Small, inexpensive drones are estimated to account for about 70% of all casualties in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Such aircraft have also increasingly become a favorite tool of Iran and its proxies, including the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have used them in recent years to target commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

The technological shift has presented a quandary for U.S. forces, who find themselves expending costly air defense munitions to defend against swarms of the disposable aircraft.

"We cannot afford to shoot down cheap



JOSE NUNEZ/U.S. Army

**Pfc. Mason Davis, a drone operator in the 25th Infantry Division, watches a Ghost-X drone take off for a mission at Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii on Nov. 13. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced a \$1 billion initiative that seeks to result in the addition of 300,000 drones to U.S. military stocks.**

drones with \$2 million missiles," Hegseth said. "And we ourselves must be able to field large quantities of capable attack drones."

In addition to shoring up its own supplies, the Pentagon is investing in anti-drone technology, fielding tools like lasers, signal jammers and artificial intelligence software.

Since taking office, Hegseth has moved to streamline the acquisition program for unmanned aerial vehicles and catch up with U.S. adversaries, who are producing "millions of cheap drones each year," he wrote in a July memo.

Part of the plan for what Hegseth has called "drone dominance" is bolstering the nascent U.S. drone manufacturing base by approving hundreds of American products for purchase by the military.



MARY JENNI/U.S. Marine Corps

**A group of first-person view drones approaches a target during a simulated attack at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., Oct. 31.**

## Army seeks bursting ammunition for grenade launchers

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army is seeking contractors capable of turning the Vietnam-era 40 mm belt-fed MK19 automatic grenade launcher into a drone killer.

The service, which posted a request notice on the government's contracting site on Nov. 18, hopes to pair proximity-sensing fuse technology with a programmable air-burst cartridge capable of knocking out small drones.

The system must fit into existing weapons platforms, fire control systems and remote weapons stations to detect, track, target and defeat enemy aerial threats, the proposal says.

The initiative is the latest Defense Department effort to create or retrofit existing platforms to counter the growing battlefield drone threat.

The MK19 launcher, fired from a tripod or vehicle mount, weighs about 75 pounds and primarily fires high-explosive M430 grenades that come in belts of 32 or 48, according to Army Training and Doctrine Command's worldwide equipment guide. The grenades can kill anyone within a 15-foot radius and wound anyone within 50 feet, the guide says.

The MK19 can also punch through 2 inches



BRANDON BRUER/U.S. Army

**A soldier from the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade uses an MK19 grenade launcher during live-fire training at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., on Sept. 16.**

of rolled homogeneous armor, which means the destruction of most infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, the guide says. It has been adapted over the years for use on Humvees, Strykers and even small attack boats.

The Army's Combat Capabilities Development Command planned to request white papers on or after Nov. 25, the contract announcement said.

The solicitation closes 30 calendar days later. The performance period is listed as up to four years, and further contracts could be awarded following a successful prototype.

Drone warfare has developed rapidly in recent years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The ability of small, off-the-shelf drones to carry munitions to strike personnel, armor and command posts has dramatically changed military strategy and tactics.

Drones have frequently been the focal point of Army exercises at the Grafenwoehr Training Area and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in the German state of Bavaria.

They've also been integrated into Army doctrine through modernization initiatives dubbed Transforming in Contact and the counter-drone Project Flytrap.

## MILITARY

# Kids across Europe go the distance

Swim league for DOD, NATO allies holds contest in Italian beach town

BY KENT HARRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*

LIGNANO SABBIADORO, Italy — Rae Colgan made the trip down from Vilseck, Germany, with her mom as the sole representative of the SeaVipers at the European Forces Swim League's Long Distance Championships.

Even if the 13-year-old's whole team had qualified for the event, though, it still wouldn't have matched the 54 swimmers the Kaiserslautern Kingfish sent to the event.

The Naples Tiger Sharks had just less than half that number with 26 entrants. But they did lead the event in a few things: sets of twins and the most siblings entered at five.

Many of the 18 teams entered feature the dependents of American active-duty military personnel stationed around Europe. But some are mostly made up of NATO allies.

There was one obvious commonality, though: These kids like to spend time in the pool.

"It's the place where I feel the most comfortable," said Colgan, who also swims for a German team off base.

She wasn't feeling alone. Her mother, Erin, was in the stands.

"And I have friends on other teams," she said.

The eighth-grader will have some more options for sports in high school next year. For now, though, she's not interested.

"I'm sticking with swimming," she said.

Others are already involved in other sports as well. Seven-year-old twins Charlie and Henry Cornwell practice swimming three times a week. They play soccer on base two other days. So do 10-year-old brother Jack and 12-year-old twin sisters Sydney and Olivia. The older twins also play volleyball.

Somehow, Rachel Cornwell also finds time to coach the team. And, yes, she's heard the jokes about the family having their own basketball team.

"It's a lot," she said. "But it's also fun."

Neither Charlie or Henry said they were told they had to be competitive swimmers. And they list different reasons why they enjoy it.

"When you win, you get a duckie," Charlie said.

"We get to travel more (than soccer)," Henry said.

Travel is something else that just about everyone has in common. The host team, the Aviano Sea Dragons, is based about an hour away from the Bella Italia Village complex that is hosting the event. The Vicenza Aqua Lions are about twice that far. Other teams had much longer drives or flew.

The Brunssum Orcas and head coach Peter Wetzels were among those who arrived by air. Wetzels first started coaching in the league in 1988 when it was composed of teams from the Benelux and many competitions were against German teams.

Wetzels said he's seen a lot of changes. But a lot hasn't as well.

"The kids are still the same," he said. "They learn sportsmanship and all get along. Adults could get learn a few things from them. We have kids from so many countries around Europe now."

"I don't care about nationalities. I love them all."



PHOTOS BY KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

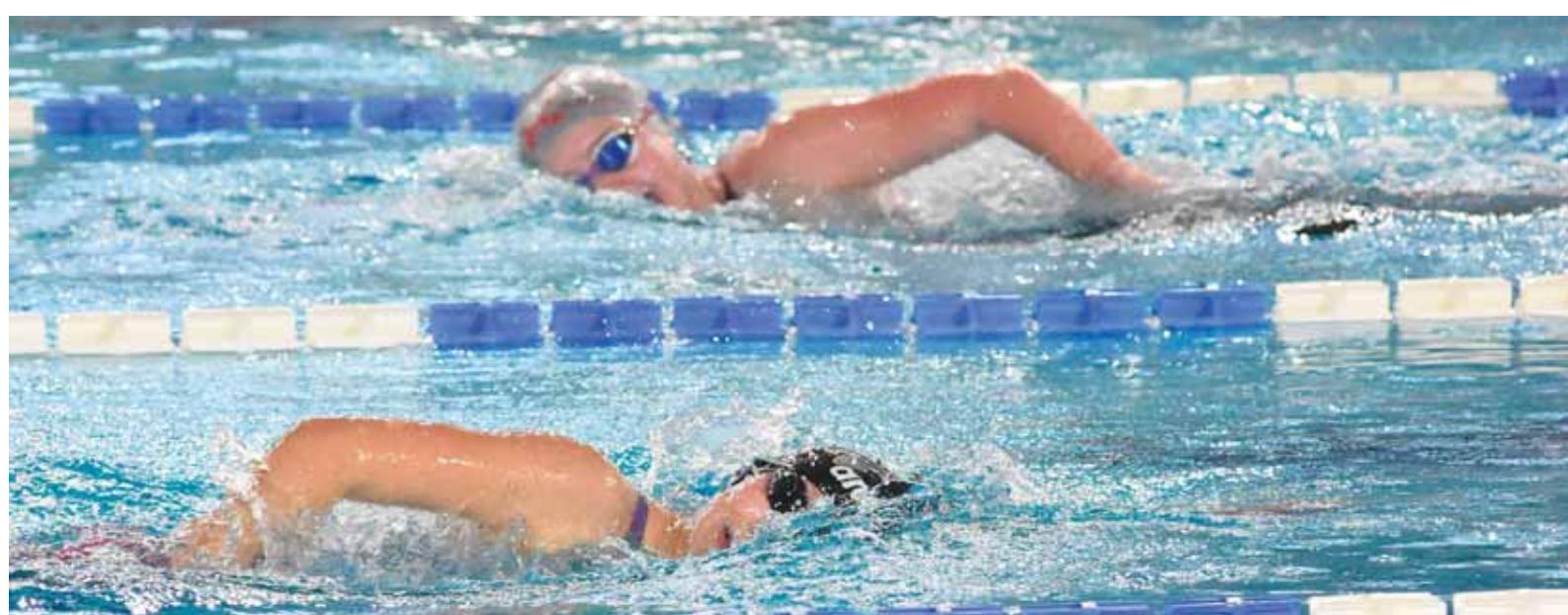
Competitors in the fastest heat of the girls 12-under 100-meter breaststroke dive towards the pool at the European Forces Swim League's Long Distance Championships in Lignano Sabbiadoro, Italy.



Seth Robinson, 8, of the Kaiserslautern Kingfish competes during the boys 12-under 100-meter breaststroke.



Participants and their supporters spent much of the day competing and watching the championships.



Kaiserslautern Kingfish Joscelin Tarpen, above, and Brunssum Orcas' Benthe de Beer cross each other's paths during the mixed 19-under 800-meter freestyle event.

## DINING

# Slow food but swift service at Turlonia

Italian couple lets patrons savor cuisine near Aviano

BY KENT HARRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*

Many fine restaurants in Italy consistently produce a particular dish that customers might order again and again, but there are other places where that's not really an option.

Osteria Turlonia, located on the edge of Fiume Veneto about a half hour's drive from Aviano Air Base, is one of those.

The husband-and-wife team of Federico and Isabella Mariutti are part of the slow-food movement, which developed as a counter to fast food.

Slow-food establishments exemplify the core principles of local sourcing, sustainable production and an emphasis on quality over quantity.

Since many local ingredients are at their best during only certain seasons of the year, menus at such eateries change. Some switch the lineup as quickly as every week. At Turlonia, the menu is reworked twice each season, so about every two months.

The two-page menu presents a handful of choices between appetizers, first courses, second courses and sides. Although most menus are entirely in Italian, some include English translations.

During my recent visit with my family, the restaurant offered traditional regional dishes such as frico — which is fried cheese made with a variety of other ingredients such as potatoes, onions or various meats or vegetables, depending on the recipe — and baccala, or preserved cod. We tried both of them.

In addition, we ordered an appetizer featuring a pumpkin and cheese torte and a first course of ravioli stuffed with pumpkin.

Our fettuccine with duck sauce and mushrooms was excellent, although that particular dish seems to be universally good across Italy.

One second-course dish that struck us as unusual was an iron skillet featuring pumpkin, cheese and walnuts. We decided to give it a go as well.

It was similar in concept to dishes we had tried in Germany oriented around meat and potatoes, but this one was definitely geared toward vegetarians. We appreciated the contrasts in textures and flavors between the soft chunks of pumpkin, the melted cheese and the crunch of the nuts.



PHOTOS BY KENT HARRIS/STARS AND STRIPES

Osteria Turlonia in Fiume Veneto, Italy, has an indoor seating area spread out over several small dining rooms. The restaurant is owned by a husband-and-wife team and serves dishes that embody the slow-food movement.



Ravioli stuffed with pumpkin as served at Osteria Turlonia.



Plated appetizer of cured trout with pomegranate seeds on top of sliced onions and fresh greens on a slate plate, accompanied by toasted bread slices.



Fettuccine with duck sauce and mushrooms was one of a handful of first-course options.



Osteria Turlonia is part of the slow-food movement that emphasizes the use of high-quality, locally sourced ingredients.

many tables were not occupied. Even so, reservations are recommended.

Parking is limited to about a dozen spaces, only one of which was available when we showed up.

Our visit has us anticipating a return trip in the winter and again in the spring and summer as well. Maybe it's possible to come up with a favorite season, since the menu variability makes it unlikely we'll have a repeat opportunity for a favorite dish.

The restaurant has room for about 50 patrons spread over several dining areas. We were there for lunch and



Osteria Turlonia is located on a busy street at the edge of Fiume Veneto, Italy, a short distance from the Azzano Decimo exit on the A28 autostrada.

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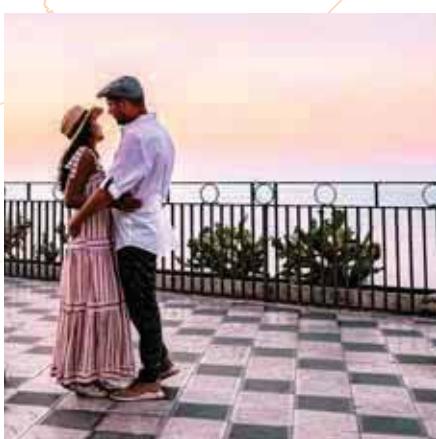


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