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ITALY EDITION

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Canine comrade

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Army Spc. Logan Knight, a dog handler with the 131st Military Working Dog Detachment, conducts bite training with Edzsi.

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COVER STORY

Building bonds to accomplish the mission

Handlers, military working dogs must learn to 'flow together'

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — Some partnerships are built over time, others through shared service. But for a military working dog and its handler, the bond is both.

Sgt. Brianna Plush and her canine companion MWD Edzsi initially struggled to build a rapport when they were paired with each other more than four years ago at Fort Polk, La.

"She was a spitfire," Plush said of her Belgian Malinois. "I would say last year was really when we started to click together."

During routine training April 16, the pair, assigned to the 131st Military Working Dog Detachment in Grafenwoehr, surveyed a motor pool with practiced ease, searching for staged contraband among the vehicles.

Working off-leash, Edzsi deftly moved through the inspection, shifting between focused precision and brief moments of playful energy as Plush guided her.

"Being a dog handler is like dancing," Plush said, adding that she and Edzsi would sometimes "step on each other's toes and butt heads."

"Now, we actually have a flow together," she said. "So that was really hard but so worth the process."

Military working dogs at Grafenwoehr are housed in a newly constructed facility on the outskirts of the installation's main post. There, the small detachment of soldiers and canines train daily to help safeguard the base in Bavaria.

The unit's dogs are a mix of German shepherds, Belgian Malinois or crosses between the two. They receive around-the-clock care year round and are trained to detect explosives, narcotics and other illegal contraband.

Spc. Logan Knight said the unit's current focus is primarily law enforcement, but also maintaining the ability to deploy and operate in a combat capacity.

"It's really amazing how much of a psychological deterrent they are," Knight said.

He has been training with his dog, MWD Mario, for only a few months. His previous partner is heading into retirement.

On average, military working dogs typically serve until they're about 8 to 10 years old, depending on their health, according to the nonprofit Mission K9 Rescue.

A typical day for military police and their canine partners at Grafenwoehr includes patrolling the installation, inspecting the gate area and sweeping facilities.

While handlers often develop strong bonds with their four-legged companions, Plush said the job is not "playing with puppies all day."

Every day is different, and she enjoys the lack of repetition that comes with being a dog handler.

Handlers have the option to adopt their dogs after retirement. Edzsi is about two or three years away from that point, but she has already decided to maintain the relationship beyond her dog's service life.

She said she'll begin the adoption process once Edzsi retires.



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes
Army Sgt. Brianna Plush, a dog handler, and military working dog Edzsi prepare to demonstrate how military dogs take down an aggressive assailant in Grafenwoehr, Germany, on April 16.



Military working dog Lucky searches military vehicles for contraband during training.



Pfc. Zane Basic of the 131st Military Working Dog Detachment rewards Lucky for positively identifying contraband during training in Grafenwoehr.

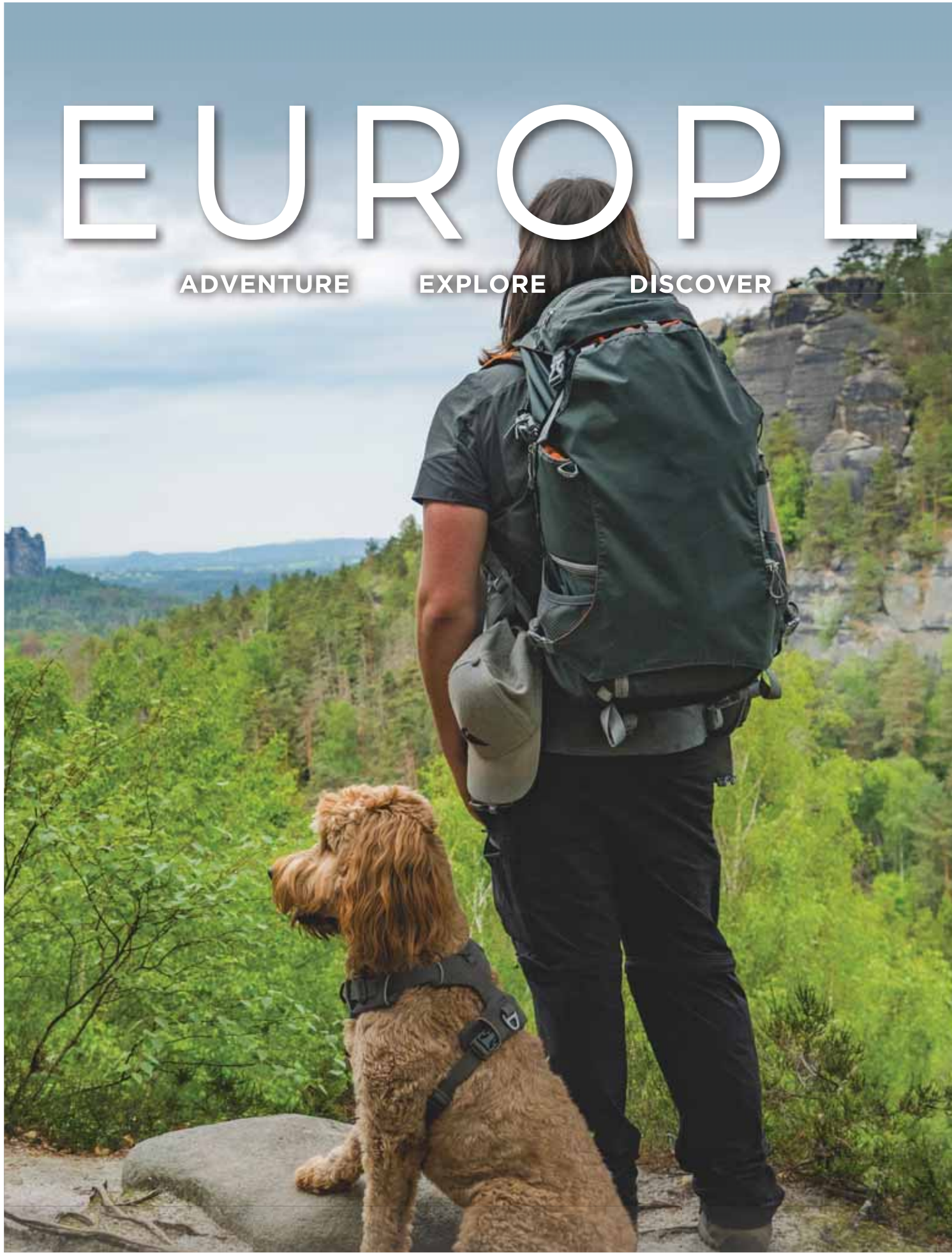


Lucky retrieves a chew toy from his handler, Basic, after training in contraband detection.

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MILITARY

Army honors woman who parachuted into history

Italian woman, now 102, delivered key documents to allies

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — U.S. personnel from an Army base named for an Italian resistance fighter slain during World War II paid a recent visit to his 102-year-old sister's home to recognize her contributions to airborne operations.

Paola Del Din was awarded the Order of Saint Michael-Airborne by visiting members of the Army's Southern European Task Force, Africa, in a small ceremony in northern Italy on April 9. The Americans traveled from their headquarters at Caserma Del Din in Vicenza.

"Her service, her bravery and her lifelong dedication to the ideals we defend continue to inspire generations of paratroopers on both sides of the Atlantic," Command Sgt. Maj. Chad Harness said in an Army statement.

The diminutive gray-haired woman, wearing a cardigan nearly the same maroon as the medal's ribbon, gripped a wooden cane in one hand as Harness draped the award around her neck.

More than 80 years earlier, she carried out a mission in the far northeastern corner of Italy to bring important documents to Allied troops in the final days of the war.

She parachuted into the Nazi-occupied area, becoming the first Italian woman to make a combat jump.

The medal is awarded by the National Infantry Association and honors those who have made significant contributions while serving on airborne, air assault or special operations status.

It is inscribed with a scene of the sword-wielding archangel and patron saint of airborne operations, his sandaled foot on Satan's neck.

"It is an honor to receive this award," Del Din said. "I fondly remember the great kindness of the American aviators when I flew with them, and I'm grateful to still be involved with the greater airborne community."

After graduating from university during World War II, Paola Del Din joined the resistance fighting Italy's Fascist government and Nazi occupiers alongside her older brother Renato, according to biographies on the National Association of Italian Partisans website.

Her brother was killed a few months later while conducting a nighttime attack on a Fascist barracks in Tolmezzo.

Taking the code name Renata in his honor, Del Din would take part in many dangerous assignments herself as a courier and informant,



PHOTOS BY CATESSA PALONE/U.S. Army

U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Chad Harness presents a medal to Paola Del Din, the first Italian female parachutist to jump into combat, at her home in Italy, on April 9.



The Order of Saint Michael Award, which was presented to Paola Del Din.

ant, eventually crossing on foot into territory held by the Allies in Florence.

Once there, she lobbied to attend a four-day paratrooper course at San Vito dei Normanni

in the Puglia region, located in the boot heel of Italy, so she could more quickly return to the occupied North to continue her work.

In September 1944, she attended the course, run by the British Special Operations Executive, an outfit that trained partisans in sabotage and subversion during the war. She went on to take part in 11 flights, according to her biography.

In the fateful jump of April 9, 1945, the 20-year-old broke her ankle in a hard landing but managed to reach the partisans and deliver the documents.

Still limping throughout the remaining days of the war, she repeatedly crossed the battle lines to deliver messages to advancing Allied forces.

For their courage, both siblings were individually awarded Italy's Gold Medal for Military Valor, the country's highest honor for combat heroism. She received it in 1957.

"My hope is that even in some small way, others are inspired to do something positive for their country," Del Din said. "It takes regular people to stand up and fight for what they believe in. That's what my family did back then, and that's what we need to ensure

a brighter future."

After the war, Del Din earned a scholarship to study in the U.S. and completed a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania before returning to Italy to teach middle school. She continues to serve as honorary president of the National Association of Italian Paratroopers.

"It was my country and my brotherhood that liberated us," she said. "I am free; that is the point."

Though the U.S. Army's first official parachute jump came less than five years before Del Din's feat, it would be almost three decades before American female soldiers were allowed to match her.

In 1973, Joyce Kutsch and Rita Johnson became the first women to graduate from the Army's Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga.

Six years earlier, French journalist Catherine Leroy became notable for parachuting into Vietnam with the 173rd Airborne Brigade during Operation Junction City.

That unit has been primarily based at Caserma Del Din since 2013. Paola Del Din attended its opening ceremony and has visited for other events since.



KYLER HEMBREE/U.S. Army

Children from the Milam Child Development Center participate in a parade celebrating Month of the Military Child on Fort Bliss, Texas, on April 1.

Army to boost pay, benefits for child care providers

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Army this month launched a new pay model for its child care workers to try to get staffing at all service-run child development centers above 90% to reduce wait times for families.

This includes raising pay for direct-care providers and offering discounts for child care for workers' own children, said Christopher Surridge, an Army spokesman.

"Through a more-robust compensatory, hiring and employee benefits strategy, we will ensure that our [child development centers] are sufficiently staffed to better benefit our Army families," Surridge said.

Securing safe child care is a significant point of stress for soldiers preparing for deployments, making it a primary focus for the service, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer told the House Committee on Appropriations' subpanel on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies in a hearing last month.

"Ninety percent staffing is proven across

our other installations that our wait times are minimal when we get there," he said.

Only 22 of the Army's 68 installations are staffed at 90% or higher, Surridge said.

To boost hiring and retention, a new compensation and staffing model will be fully implemented for direct-care staff by the end of April, he said.

It will cover all other staff by October. Installations also can offer recruitment and retention bonuses to further attract and retain employees.

Job openings posted on the government's online job board showed open positions across the country starting at about \$18 an hour.

Because many workers are also parents, the Army will cover 100% of child care fees for the first child of an employee when care is provided in an Army program, and it will provide a 25% discount for additional children, Surridge said.

This incentive was listed at the top of the Army's online job postings.

Waitlists for Army child development

centers for children under 5 years old vary by location and throughout the year, including 18 bases with no waitlist as of this month.

However, across the Army, nearly 3,000 children are waiting for space to open, Surridge said. That is down 38% from 2023.

The Army is not alone struggling to meet the demand of child care for its force. The other military services' top enlisted personnel spoke as well during last month's hearing in the House on different strategies they have tried.

The Space Force has partnered with off-base options, such as a program that provides 150 off-base spaces for children near Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado, said Chief Master Sgt. John F. Bentivegna.

Through a similar approach, the Navy has dropped its waitlist to about 1,500 children, said Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman. Using fee assistance for off-base facilities, the service added about 2,000 openings.

It also bumped staffing at its own day cares from a 63% low to nearly 90%.

MILITARY

Tears flow for Vicenza counterintelligence pro

Army veteran 'touched many hearts on many continents' before death

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — Dozens filled an auditorium at the heart of Caserma Del Din to pay their respects to an Army veteran who "touched many hearts on many continents" before his sudden death earlier this month.

Russell Evan Stephenson, 58, died unexpectedly the morning of April 7. A graduate of the Defense Language Institute's Korean course with over 35 years in counterintelligence, he was serving as a civilian employee under the director of exercises for U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa.



Stephenson

"This is a witness to his impact in this life," said Col. Benjamin Roark, SETAF-AF's G7 director, speaking at an emotional memorial service April 16 in the Sigholtz Center.

Some 150 uniformed and civilian colleagues filled the available seats and about a half-dozen more stood in the back of the room. Some bowed their heads or wiped tears from their eyes as "Ave Maria" played during a moment of silence, and some exchanged tearful hugs afterward.

"It's not just an occasion marked by tears," Roark told the audience, referencing a slideshow that played as the ceremony began.

The photos showed Stephenson on various trips or embracing family members, typically with what Roark called an "infectious smile," a sign of his characteristic joy.

"He had a way of walking into a room and lifting it up," he said. "There was an energy about him, a genuine, joyful and unmistakable good energy."

The two recently traveled to Tanzania for an exercise, where they sat in a convoy together in traffic for several hours, "navigating the chaos ... in that environment," he said.

"Like everything else, Russ made it enjoyable," Roark said.

The son of a Navy commander, Stephenson lived in various places throughout the mainland U.S. as well as in Hawaii and the Azores while growing up, but he considered Texas



Col. Benjamin Roark, G7 director for U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, escorts Patrizia Stephenson out of a memorial service on April 16, at Caserma Del Din in Vicenza, Italy. She is the widow of Russell Evan Stephenson, an Army veteran and civilian worker who died earlier this month at age 58.

his home, according to a biography in the event's program.

In his 12 years in the Army, he served in South Korea, Europe and Africa, and afterward spent nine years as a contractor, then 16 as a government civilian, all of it in counterintelligence.

But when the veteran spook arrived at SETAF-AF about 18 months ago for a position on the exercise staff rather than in the intelligence section, it raised suspicions among new colleagues, one of the speakers said.

They thought he might be there to spy on

them, said Brian Blake, a co-worker who shared a few light-hearted memories at the ceremony.

"Something prompted me to confront Russ, and I said, 'If you're a cop, you know you have to tell us,'" Blake said. "He just looked at me with a stone-cold face and said, 'No, I don't.'"

It was like a mic-drop moment, Blake said, but Stephenson later said that he'd taken the post outside the intelligence shop so he could spend his last three years before retirement in Italy, with plans to settle there with his

wife.

Though his love of life and love for people touched many around the world, "his greatest love was reserved for his wife, Patrizia, his amore," said Capt. Anne Nguyen, the soldier who led the memorial service.

As the ceremony ended, Roark escorted Stephenson's grieving widow out of the auditorium.

She paused briefly, turned to the gathered crowd and, with nods of her head and a hand to her heart, quietly expressed her gratitude for their attendance.

Army accepts first delivery of new rifle from Sig Sauer

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army has accepted the first delivery of its new service rifle, the XM8 Carbine, from Sig Sauer.

The XM8 is about 3.5 inches shorter and a pound lighter than the M4A1 carbine it is replacing for soldiers in the Close Combat Force, the Army said in a news release.

The XM8 is a lightweight version of the M7,

making it easier for soldiers to move in tight spaces while using the Army's new 6.8 mm ammunition.

The Army only standardized the M7 as its primary rifle last year, but the XM8 is not intended to replace it. Instead, it would be a companion weapon. The XM8 is about 5 inches shorter and roughly 1 pound lighter than the M7 and features a fixed buttstock.



U.S. Army
The XM8 Carbine is manufactured by Sig Sauer.

Since awarding a 10-year Next Generation Squad Weapon contract to Sig Sauer in early 2022, soldiers have tested the M7 — formerly the XM5 — and the M250 automatic rifle, intended to replace the M4 and M249, respectively. The "X" designation indicates the weapons were in the experimental phase

before standardization.

The program aimed to move away from decades-old 5.56 mm and 7.62 mm ammunition in favor of weapons that chamber 6.8 mm, which the Army's contract release in 2022 said would "increase accuracy and (be) more lethal against emerging threats."

Strong recruiting pushes Air, Space forces beyond goals early

By JANIQUA ROBINSON
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force and Space Force surpassed their annual recruiting goals five months ahead of schedule by signing up about 32,000 new recruits.

Since Oct. 1, 25,000 active-duty recruits have reported to the services' only basic military training hub at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas, an April 16 news release said.

Another 7,000 are scheduled to report by Sept. 30.

The Space Force reached its recruiting

goal within the first five months of fiscal year 2026, Chief Master Sgt. of the Space Force John Bentivegna told a congressional committee in February.

The Air Force has also steadily increased the number of recruits in its Delayed Entry Program over the past decade, with 18,000 awaiting ship-out dates, according to the release, enabling the service to make goal five months early.

"The Air Force and Space Force continue to set records, build momentum, and consistently exceed their recruiting goals," Secretary of the Air Force Troy Meink

said in the release. "By reaching our annual target five months early and maintaining the largest [Delayed Entry Program] in over a decade, we are seeing a truly inspiring pipeline of dedicated volunteers who are eager for their chance to serve."

The Air Force missed its 2023 recruiting goal by 2,700 recruits for the first time since 1999. The Space Force has met its goals every year since it was created in 2019, according to the release.

"Even with this progress, to confront the threats of today and tomorrow, doubling

the size of U.S. Space Force is a national security necessity," Bentivegna said in his testimony to Congress.

The Space Force must continue to grow to meet its mission, he added.

"While achieving a force of over 10,000 uniformed Guardians in 2025 was a landmark milestone, it is insufficient for the missions we have been assigned," he said. "To effectively fulfill our national mandate, we must increase our infrastructure and double our size. This critical expansion is not only necessary but entirely achievable."

MILITARY

Garden creates growth opportunity in Vicenza

Boy Scout restores planters for preschoolers at elementary school in Eagle Scout project

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — Preschoolers who are developing green thumbs in the Vicenza Elementary School garden got a big assist from a Boy Scout with a heart of gold.

The children patted black dirt in around bright green shoots and watered them with a miniature watering can, something they couldn't have done were it not for John Maximus "Max" Arteaga, a 14-year-old seeking to attain Scouting's highest rank.

For his Eagle Scout project, Max restored several planters on the school grounds. The previous wooden planters were falling apart and splintering, so he decided to use concrete block to build new ones that will last.

"The hands-on nature of it just allows for such a deeper level of learning that we wouldn't have if he hadn't done this," said preschool teacher Nancy DeCaro.

"That opportunity to have a brand new garden was a luxury," she added. "It was very generous of him."

Nearly 80 preschoolers in four classes will use the new planter near DeCaro's room for the gardening unit, which teaches skills in reading, early writing, math and science, she said. Two other restored planters will be used by higher grades.

Restoring the planters at the elementary school on the Villaggio campus near Caserma Ederle took a combined 140 hours of labor, Max estimated.

It required him to exercise various leadership skills, including managing financial resources and tools, while instructing over a dozen fellow Scouts who volunteered to help build the planting beds, made of cinder blocks.

He secured a \$499 grant to fund the bulk of the project after giving a presentation to the nonprofit Vicenza Parent Teacher Student Association.

Arteaga's is one of several Eagle Scout projects here in recent months that have benefited the U.S. military community.

A U.S. flag retirement box created through the efforts of Anna Claire Amacker was installed in February near the Caserma Ederle post office. And in a patio area on Caserma Matteo Miotto, south of Vicenza, Liam Lawson added a railing and countertop last October.

There's been a fair number of Eagle Scout projects because many of the about 45 boys and 10 girls who make up Troop 295 on Caserma Ederle are Life Scouts, the rank just below Eagle, said John Arteaga, Max's father and the troop's scoutmaster.

Arteaga, a civilian intelligence chief at the Army's Southern European Task Force, Africa, and a retired lieutenant colonel with more than 28 years in the military, was never a Scout himself.

"The Army was my Boy Scouts," he said.

Scouting has had a close relationship with the military for over a century. Eagle Scouts are heavily represented in ROTC, service academies and other military leadership programs.

But that relationship came under strain after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth threatened to end Pentagon support for scouting activities on U.S. military bases and other departmental assistance to the organization.

Long known as Boy Scouts of America, the group has rebranded following its decision several years ago to admit girls. It is now called Scouting America.

In February, Hegseth said Scouting had "lost its way," blaming efforts at diversity, equity and inclusion.

Those threats coincided with President Donald Trump's broader push to eliminate DEI programs in the federal government.

Talks with Scouting America yielded reforms to align its programs with a Trump executive order, resulting in a new partnership agreement under which the organization



PHOTOS BY NANCY DECARO
Preschoolers and staff at Vicenza Elementary School in Italy work in a new planter bed.



A preschooler waters plants in a new planter bed in Vicenza.

agreed to waive registration fees for military children.

The agreement ensures a continuation of troops like the one in Vicenza, where the scoutmaster and his son trace their connection with the organization back many years.

Max got involved as a Cub Scout while living in Belgium and stuck with it through the family's military moves and the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. He was elected senior patrol leader, the troop's top Scout.

Some of his favorite experiences are learning leadership skills, including at National Youth Leadership Training last summer at Camp Freedom near Ansbach, Germany, where his patrol learned to navigate by GPS. The old kind, "not like Google Maps," he said.

"You have to get to know different skills (and) get to know all your Scouts," he said. "And at the end, you become like a family almost."

The next step on his path to Eagle Scout is going before a board to present his project, hopefully at Camp Alpine, a summer camp in Switzerland.

For fairness reasons, he'll be mentored by an adult other than his father, who has helped about four other troop members earn the top rank since he became scoutmaster.

But he downplayed the role he and other adults have, saying the Scouts shoulder much of the load.

"I'm just a gardener, no pun intended," he said. "Making sure they grow."



MARCELA ARTEAGA
Max Arteaga, a 14-year-old Boy Scout, supervises a volunteer helping him lay a concrete block wall for his Eagle Scout project of restoring several decaying planter beds at the Department of Defense Education Activity elementary school in Vicenza, Italy.



CHAD GARLAND/Stars and Stripes
Arteaga, left, and his scoutmaster and father, John Arteaga, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, review plans for Troop 295 on Caserma Ederle in Vicenza.

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Lilla Morris from Vicenza High School Awarded First Place in Essay Contest

By Stars and Stripes Staff

First place winner in the high school category of the Stars and Stripes America 250 youth essay contest is Lilla Morris. She is a senior at DoWEA's Vicenza High School in USAG Italy. The essay prompt was: "How has being part of a military (or military-affiliated) family shaped how you think about America?"

First place essay by Lilla Morris:

I am an anomaly. I am an American who has never lived in America. While most define their country by geography, my America has never been a place, but an identity I am forced to hold, a liminal space, where I cross worlds simply by scanning a little plastic ID card at a gate. Growing up on a military installation in Italy, I have lived in a state of unique irony. We are told to pledge allegiance to a flag we have never truly lived under and to represent a country that doesn't recognize me. Inside the concrete walls of the base, I see U.S. flags, eat American food, and speak English; yet, I know that I am not in the States. I am told to carry the American identity as if it's a travel-sized culture.

When I first arrived in Italy, I remember looking at new houses, filled with excitement at the prospect of discovering somewhere new. Standing outside of the school I was going to be attending, I remember asking, "How long are we going to be here?" My mom jokingly said, "Until you graduate high school." I was going into first grade then. At six, the idea of staying anywhere until graduation felt impossible, but now, standing at the end of that journey, I see how much the move shaped my life as I am graduating from that very same school.

In a typical American town, communities are often stationary. In my America, "PCS season" shuffled the board like a playlist on Spotify, changing the people I was exposed to every year. Most students are always coming and going, while I remain a constant presence.

Being the constant allowed me to view America through a fusion of perspectives. My classmates came from all over the world: Asia, the United States, Latin America, and Europe. Each person brought their own share of experiences and way of seeing the world. Because I knew how daunting it felt to be new, I reluctantly accepted the role of a greeter, a new friend, a tour guide, and a recommender of delicious food. This role can take on many forms; sometimes it means walking newcomers to their classes, helping them navigate

the maze that is their new school, and sitting with them at lunch when they haven't found a group of friends yet.

These moments, though they feel small, are truly what help someone feel at home in a new place. These experiences have fundamentally changed how I think about America. I used to feel like an outsider in my own culture because I didn't have a "hometown," but watching new students flourish taught me that America is less about the "where" and more about the "who."

By serving as a stable surface for those who were passing through, I realized that my America

didn't need to be a location on the map to be genuine. I have become friends with many of the kids who have moved here, and even when they eventually move to a new school, and the friendship fades, the impact stays. Knowing that they were able to feel stable within this liminal space makes me feel accomplished because it reminds me of when I first moved. What started as a nervous question on my first day in Italy has grown into a definition of citizenship based on service rather than location. I may be an American who has never truly met America, but I have found that my citizenship is not defined by a place, rather the community that I've become a constant in.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY LILLA MORRIS



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Two Long Weekend Discoveries in Sicily

By ANNA DELANGE
Contributing Writer



Living in Sicily has been an amazing experience and I tirelessly advocate for traveling while in Europe. Here are two suggestions for long weekend trips that are easily accessible to those stationed at NAS Sigonella.

Around Palermo

Visiting the capital of Sicily should definitely be up there on your list of places to visit on the island. Palermo is about two and a half hours away from NAS Sigonella, making it, in my opinion, a pretty easy drive. You can definitely spend a full weekend roaming around the capital, or you can quickly visit in a day and move onto another town on this side of the island.

Downtown Palermo, be sure to visit the Teatro Massimo. This is the largest opera house in Italy and the third largest in Europe. There is also an abundance of churches in Palermo that are worth stepping inside. One of the best churches to check out is the Santa Maria dell Ammiraglio. It was built in the 12th-century and is now a UNESCO heritage site.



For a full weekend, tack on a day in Cefalu. This sleepy seaside town is about an hour away from Palermo and offers a picturesque visit. Be sure to build in time for relaxing on the beach in addition to taking in some of the sites. The Piazza del Duomo hosts the Cathedral of Cefalu, which is one of the many UNESCO sites that exist in Sicily. While in town, find an outdoor cafe and check out the local specialty of Pasta a Taianu.

To get beautiful views overlooking the town, hike up to Cefalu Rock. The hike is about two miles and can take an hour or two depending on your speed. I recommend going early in the day because the hike is mostly unshaded.



Around Trapani

Western Sicily is another region that deserves a few days of discovery. Drive three-and-a-half hours away from NAS Sigonella and you can find yourself in the town of Trapani. Trapani was once a large port that was based around salt production and tuna fishing. Unfortunately, a lot of the old town suffered bombing from World War II. It is still worth visiting and spending a day.

Venture down Corso Vittorio Emanuele, and you will find yourself among the important monuments of town. Cavarretta Palace, built in the 1600s is now Trapani's town hall. The Church of the College Jesuits is a beautiful Baroque building next to a former monastery. Eventually, down the road you will get to Trapani Cathedral which was first built during the Norman era.

Since Trapani is a seaside town, catch the sunset around the lungomare (waterfront promenade.) You can also venture over to the Ligny Tower, which houses museum and has a great view from its vantage point and previous purpose as a watchtower.

The village of Erice is 2,460 ft. above sea level and looks down on the town of Trapani.



Erice is a medieval town and has some amazing views of western Sicily. If you are staying in Trapani, consider taking the funicular up so you don't have to worry about driving up and down. If you do choose to drive, be prepared for the winding road up to the town. In Erice, visit the Castle of Venus for impeccable views of the coast. For a sweet treat, make sure to check out Maria Grammatico Pasticceria and leave with the shop's famous Genovese, a custard-filled pastry. This pastry shop has an amazing history and prides itself on using locally produced ingredients and Sicilian almonds from Avola.

For a great day out while staying in Trapani, take the 30-minute ferry out to the beautiful island of Favignana. The island isn't big enough for you to need to take your car. Instead, hop on the passenger ferry and walk or bike around Favignana. You can rent e-bikes and traditional bikes on the island, but arrive early if you have a preference as biking on the island is getting popular.

Favignana also has many famous and popular beaches that you can check out on your visit. Many people spend the full day in Favignana and catch the ferry back to Trapani in the evening. But, if you want to live it up, book a room for an extra day here and relax.



TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE | stripeseurope.com



BY ELIZABETH JONES
Stars and Stripes

Tuscany is a dream destination for anyone who craves beautiful scenery paired with incredible food and wine. Stretching from the Apennines to the Tyrrhenian Sea, this is the heart of Italy.

The major cities of Florence, Pisa and Siena have their own merits, but there is so much more to this region. To see the true nature of Tuscany visit a few of the area's quaint villages. Travelers to these smaller places will find rolling green hills, sunflower fields, olive groves, medieval architecture, welcoming locals, delectable gastronomy, prestigious wineries and contagious Tuscan charm.

Casale Marittimo

Located on a hill only 12 kilometers from the sea, this medieval town is known for being one of the most beautiful in all of Italy. Dating back to the year 1000, tourists will adore the old, yet unspoiled, architecture found throughout Casale Marittimo. Must-see sights include ancient castle ruins, the 18th-century chapel of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the Church of Sant'Andrea which was built upon the previous church's ruins.

Castellina in Chianti

Underneath the city walls of this town resides a tunnel called Via della Volte that wraps around the city from underground. In the tunnel, travelers will find a wide array of small family-owned shops showcasing local goods as well as fabulous restaurants. Other places to visit in Castellina in Chianti are the Palazzo Banciardi, Palazzo Squarcialupi and Church of San Salvatore.

When in the Chianti region, you must try some of the local wines. All Chianti wines are required to be made with at least 80% Sangiovese grapes. Some wine producers also like to blend with Cabernet, Merlot or Syrah.

Cortona

Cortona is a common bucket list village for many. This hilltop town provides astonishing views from its walls overlooking the Chiana Valley. Even on a clear, sunny day—which is very common in Italy—Lake Trasimeno can be seen from Cortona. Make a stop at the art-filled Diocesan Museum, picturesque Santa Margherita Sanctuary and historic Girifalco Fortress.

Lucca

Lucca is a tourist favorite and at the top of everyone's list when visiting Tuscany. The picturesque town, known as "the city of a hundred churches" due to its vast number of religious buildings, is best explored by foot or bike to embrace its beauty. Walk the city walls, experience the buzzing atmosphere in the city center and visit Amphitheatre Square—a perfect architectural illustration of Roman times filled with cafes, restaurants and live music.

Vinci

Does Leonardo di Vinci ring any bells when seeing this town's name? It should since this is the birthplace of the great polymath. Just around almost every corner, this Tuscan town pays tribute to di Vinci featuring his childhood home and church where his baptism took place, as well as a museum and library dedicated to him and his works.

Pienza

Perched upon a hill overlooking the Val d'Orcia Valley, Pienza is a must when in Tuscany. Known as the "ideal city of the Renaissance," this town is an architecture lover's dream filled with gorgeous 15th-century buildings including the striking cathedral, Piccolomini Palace, Town Hall, and the bustling central square of Piazza Pio II. Pienza is also known for cheese—specifically, the Pecorino of Pienza! This delicacy is made from sheep's milk and varies from subtle to strong in taste depending on how aged it is.



CASALE MARITTIMO



CASTELLINA IN CHIANTI



SANTA MARGHERITA



AMPHITHEATRE SQUARE



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VINCI



PICCOLIMINI PALACE

MILITARY



The V-280 Valor, prototype of the Army's planned MV-75 Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft that's designed to replace the UH-60 Black Hawk.

Bell

Army names tilt-rotor aircraft Cheyenne II

MV-75 has cruise speed of 320 mph — much faster than the Black Hawk's operating speed

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

The Army's next-generation, multirole, vertical-lift aircraft will carry the name Cheyenne II, the service announced April 15.

The name was unveiled at the Army Aviation Association of America's annual conference in Nashville, Tenn., a year after revealing the 101st Airborne Division would be the service's first unit to receive the MV-75.

The MV-75 is intended to replace the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, a design that first flew in October 1974, according to the Army. It is a tilt-rotor aircraft with engine nacelles mounted on the wingtips. The rotors

can counter-rotate, allowing for a high level of maneuverability and hovering stability.

"The Cheyenne people represent a resilient warrior culture and embody the key attributes of the MV-75 — speed, reach, lethality and adaptability," Army Acquisition Executive Brent Ingraham said in a statement. "I am honored to be part of this historic occasion as we officially name our multi-mission tilt-rotor aircraft."

The Army evaluated the names of more than 500 tribes and Native American figures before selecting Cheyenne II, the statement says. The name was previously used in the late 1960s for the AH-56 Cheyenne, which

was developed to be an advanced, high-speed attack helicopter. Though the AH-56 program did not move forward, its legacy lives on in the new tilt-rotor platform.

"The MV-75 is a transformational aircraft that will provide our Joint Force with unparalleled versatility to dominate a wide array of mission sets," Col. Jeffrey Poquette, project manager for the MV-75 Cheyenne II, said in a statement. "We are honored to have the Cheyenne tribes' approval to use their name, which embodies the power of this aircraft."

The MV-75 is designed to carry 14 troops and a crew of four, according to the Army. It has a cruise speed of 320 mph — much faster

than the Black Hawk's operating speed of 183 mph. And it will boast a range of up to 920 miles, which dwarfs the Black Hawk's 367-mile top range.

Fort Campbell, Ky., officials expect to begin receiving MV-75s around 2028.

Army officials believe the new capability will allow the 101st Airborne to deploy its forces as far as Europe with just MV-75s, instead of needing to load troops and helicopters on planes or ships to reach the Continent.

The number 75 pays homage to 1775, the birth year of the U.S. Army, an Army spokesperson said.

USAF strikes \$270M deal for light, solar-powered drones for scout missions

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Air Force will purchase up to \$270 million worth of lightweight, solar-powered drones that can be launched by a two-person crew and fly extended-loitering scout missions, according to the manufacturer.

The K1000ULE built by Kraus Hamdani Aerospace has already been in limited use with U.S. Army Special Forces and the 1st Multi-Domain Task Force, KHA said.

The Emeryville, Calif.-based company said the deal is with U.S. Air Forces Central, a component of U.S. Central Command, which includes the area of Operation Epic Fury, the joint U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran.

The contract has not yet been published on Department of Defense websites, KHA spokeswoman Annie Frisch said.

"Listings on sam.gov can take up to 30 days from the award date to appear," Frisch said.

The purchase was also reported by several defense industry news sites. The Air Force did not immediately return a request for confirmation of the deal.

The fixed-wing drone operates on software that is updated with data KHA receives from Ukrainian armed forces flying drones against

Russia.

"We're learning from Ukraine constantly, because our engineers contribute the most prolific widely used autopilot in the world, which is flying in Ukraine," KHA co-founder and chief technology officer Stefan Kraus said in a statement.

The solar panels embedded in the 16-foot wing replenish a long-endurance battery and an AI directional program, KHA said. The K1000ULE set a record for an unrefueled drone flight of 75 hours in 2023. The drone can fly at up to 46 mph with a service ceiling of 20,000 feet. It weighs up to 40 pounds, depending on the payload.

The K1000ULE uses artificial intelligence to mimic the soaring flight paths and patterns of birds, KHA said. The AI can enable the drone to follow airflow currents, allowing it to turn off the propulsion system up to 80% of the time, extending its flight time.

"Across the Middle East, U.S. forces now operate in an environment where unmanned systems are no longer a supporting capability — they are a primary capability used at scale," KHA said. "Adversaries are deploying large volumes of low-cost drones to overwhelm defenses, disrupt operations and compress decision timelines. At the same time,



JACOB CRUZ/U.S. Army

Army Pfc. Jacob Langley prepares a Kraus Hamdani Aerospace K1000ULE for flight during the Ivy Sting 4 exercise at Fort Carson, Colo., on Jan. 28.

high-value remotely piloted Aircraft systems such as the MQ-9s, costing many millions of dollars, are increasingly being shot down in contested airspace."

The drone is designed with fully modular and open architecture, so new components and capabilities can be switched into the existing airframe in the future, KHA said in a statement.

KHA said the K1000ULE has been in-

tegrated into the U.S. Army's Next Generation Command and Control system. Operating as a networked node within the modern battlefield, the system is designed to allow for real-time coordination between assets in battlefield conditions.

KHA said that in addition to military applications, the K1000ULE has been used by energy exploration companies for long-duration reconnaissance.

MILITARY

CNO: SOUTHCOM doesn't need a carrier

Admiral seeks to reserve flattops for other regions

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The chief of naval operations wants to come up with an “enduring naval package” capable of responding in the U.S. Southern Command area without an aircraft carrier.

“I want to reserve the carrier ... for power projection and deterrence in the theaters that really need that kind of capability,” Adm. Daryl Caudle said March 31 at the Maritime Security Dialogue in Washington, D.C. The event was co-hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the U.S. Naval Institute.

Since President Donald Trump took office in January 2025, the Navy has at times strained under a shift in strategic priorities and military activity around the world.

Caudle said commanders in all theaters want carriers as the paramount response to outside threats. But with China and Russia operating in the Indo-Pacific, the war in Ukraine, and the Middle East conflict that stretches from the Arabian Sea north to the Mediterranean Sea, the demand for carriers outstrips the supply when maintenance periods are factored into plans.

Congress requires that the Navy maintain a minimum of 11 aircraft carriers, but at any given time about a third are in maintenance ranging from months to years. Others are training for a deployment or have just returned from months at sea.

Southern Command — which includes the Atlantic and Pacific on either side of Central and South America, along with the Caribbean — is a possible place to look at a different kind of response, Caudle said.

The key to the Southern Command region is “maritime domain awareness,” Caudle said, essentially knowing what is going on at sea in the region in real time. Southern Command’s “main problem set” is drug interdiction, traditionally handled by the U.S. Coast Guard, Caudle said.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy promises to “provide President Trump with credible military options to use against narcoterrorists wherever they may be.”

So last summer and fall, the Pentagon surged naval assets to the western Atlantic, Caribbean and eastern Pacific, major hubs for drug trafficking.

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford and its strike group were part of the buildup. It linked up with the USS Iowa Jima Amphibious Ready Group, carrying up to 2,500 Marines as the U.S. ramped up assets for a possible invasion of Venezuela.

Instead of an invasion, U.S. Special Forces captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, who was flown to the United States to face indictment on drug and other charges.

“With Venezuela, as you know, the war was over in about 45 minutes,” Trump said during a news recent conference.

During the overall campaign against traffickers, warships — including Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers — have worked in tandem with the Coast Guard to strike more than 50 ships and sites the administration says are tied to international illicit drug trafficking. An estimated 181 people have been killed, according to the Pentagon.

But now that Maduro has been dislodged from power, the U.S. faces no significant military opponent in South America.

“They got the guy they wanted — there’s nothing left they’d need an aircraft carrier to do,” said Mark Cancian, a former Marine



ABIGAIL REYES/U.S. Navy

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford prepares to pull out of Saint Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, in the Caribbean Sea, on Jan. 26.



Caudle



ALEXANDER MERCHAK/U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers prepare to transfer UH-60L Black Hawks at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, on March 20. The Navy’s top admiral wants a U.S. Southern Command response plan that doesn’t require an aircraft carrier.



U.S. Coast Guard Atlantic Area

A U.S. Coast Guard cutter Stone joins the USS Stockdale for a patrol in the Bay of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Feb. 3.

officer who is an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Ford then returned to the Middle East, where it took up a central role in the joint Israeli-U.S. attacks on Iran that began Feb. 28.

This month, the Ford broke the consecutive days deployed record held by the USS Abraham Lincoln, which spent 281 days deployed

in 2022.

“For those that are not in the Navy, that’s an extraordinary thing to even think about something of that kind of deployment length,” Caudle said. “So my hat’s off to the Ford.”

Caudle said he was seeking ways to triage the military response in the Southern Command region so that aircraft carriers aren’t automatically dispatched again.

U.S. Army Gen. Francis L. Donovan, the SOUTHCOM commander, needs ships, aircraft and other resources to match the demands that arise in the region.

“What does Gen. Donovan need an ‘enduring package’ to look like?” Caudle said.

Options mentioned include a forward staging base. Southern Command currently operates from its headquarters in Doral, Fla.

Unlike Europe and Asia, where the U.S. has large military installations, the American presence in Central and South America is relatively small.

The U.S. operates a large base in Comayagua, in Honduras, Soto Cano Air Base. And the U.S. has retained Naval Base Guantánamo Bay, in Cuba, but it is primarily used for logistics and detention of prisoners.

Caudle said it could mean assigning a littoral combat ship — designed for coastal operations — or an amphibious transport dock that could carry a ready-response Marine unit.

“Can I put together a thing that solves his

problem?” Caudle said.

Cancian said the U.S. could redevelop and expand facilities at Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico.

Or it could work with an allied country to build a joint base, and the U.S. could pay for airport runway improvements, for instance.

The crux of the issue in the region is that operations have largely been the job of the Coast Guard.

“I would imagine there is a lot of intense conversation going on right now between the Navy and the Coast Guard, with the Navy saying these roles are for the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard saying we don’t have the personnel or equipment for the job,” Cancian said. “There’s a lot of money in the pipeline for the Coast Guard, but it will take years for major changes.”

Having aircraft carriers off Venezuela when the U.S. was threatening a major bombing campaign or full-scale invasion might have made sense, Cancian said. And, Trump may harbor a desire to topple the communist government in Cuba.

But overall, Cancian said, there aren’t the kind of threats in the region that Trump has designated as America’s top priority that require a major military response.

“Whatever the ‘enduring naval package’ that Adm. Caudle puts together, it will have to be stitched together over time if we’re seeking a long-term presence,” he said.

MILITARY

'Warthog' to stay in service through 2030

A-10 perennial target for Air Force cuts

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

In an about-face from earlier years, the Air Force announced that it will maintain the A-10 Thunderbolt II ground-attack jet to 2030.

"We will EXTEND the A-10 'Warthog' platform to 2030," Air Force Secretary Troy Meink said in an April 20 post on X. "This preserves combat power as the Defense Industrial Base works to increase combat aircraft production."

The move means that for the first time in more than a decade, the Air Force will not be attempting to cut or completely shut down the use of the twin-engine jet known best by its nickname, "Warthog."

The Pentagon released its detailed 2027 spending plan this month, and expectations were that the Air Force would attempt to cut the A-10 again.

The Air Force first tried to get rid of all the A-10s in 1984, the year production ended, according to a 2015 Congressional Research Service report. Congress has repeatedly balked at Pentagon attempts to zero out the A-10, most recently last year when it proposed a one-year phase-out of the remaining 162 jets in the Air Force inventory.

Congress said no and required the Air Force to maintain more than 100.

The Air Force seemed to be moving toward more cuts this year. The Pentagon announced that an April 3 graduation ceremony at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., marked the last class of Warthog pilots. The Air Force has also closed its A-10 specialized maintenance hub at Hill Air Force Base, Utah.

But the A-10 continues to fly. More than a dozen have been sent to the Middle East to fly missions as part of Operation Epic Fury, the U.S. attacks on Iran.

One A-10 was lost on April 3 during the effort to help rescue crew members of a downed Air Force F-15 in Iran. Known for being able to absorb ground fire, the A-10 was able to fly to friendly airspace over Kuwait before the pilot ejected to safety.

The A-10 began production at Fairchild Republic's factory in Farmingdale, N.Y., in 1975, with the last plane rolling off the production line in 1984. A total of 713 were built for the Air Force.

Armed with a GAU-8 30 mm cannon firing 3,900 rounds per minute, it was originally intended as a Cold War-era Soviet tank bus-



STERLING SUTTON/U.S. Air Force

An A-10C Thunderbolt II of the 303rd Fighter Squadron sits on the tarmac at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.

ter. Instead, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the A-10 earned a reputation for close air support in Operation Desert Storm and the wars against terrorism following 9/11.

Supporters of the Warthog say it fills a one-of-a-kind role in combat, able to fly low and slow over the battlefield, raking enemy positions with cannon and carrying loads of bombs and rockets for close air support.

But the Air Force had continued to argue that the A-10 is a weapon ill-suited for what it saw as the future likely wars against "near-peer" adversaries such as Russia and China with sophisticated anti-aircraft radar and weapons.

Critics of the A-10 argue it is siphoning money and manpower away from its preferred programs, such as the F-35A Lightning II fighter, the F-15EX Eagle, B-21 Raider stealth bomber and planning for the next generation F-47 fighter.

Those still flying are an average more than 43 years old and require increased maintenance. In the 2026 budget plan, the Air Force estimated it would save over \$400 million by dropping the A-10.

In his post on X, Meink said there would be "more to come" on the decision.



HAMPTON STRAMLER/U.S. Air Force

An A-10 Thunderbolt II flies over a combined arms demonstration at the Luke Days air show on March 22 at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz.

Hegseth rescinds flu vaccine requirement for service members

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Getting a jab every year to protect against the flu is no longer a requirement for active-duty personnel, reservists and Defense Department civilians as part of a new policy announced by the Pentagon.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth signed a memorandum lifting the annual influenza vaccine requirement in a video posted April 21 on X.

"We're seizing this moment to discard any absurd, overreaching mandates that only weaken our warfighting capabilities," Hegseth said in the video.

"This includes the universal flu vaccine and the mandate behind it," he said. "The notion that a flu vaccine must be mandatory for every service member, everywhere in every circumstance at all times, is just overly broad and not rational."

The new policy is simple and leaves the

decision on whether to get the vaccine up to the individual, Hegseth said.

"If you ... believe that the flu vaccine is in your best interest, then you are free to take it; you should," he said. "But we will not force you, because your body, your faith and your convictions are not negotiable."

The new guidance, posted by the Pentagon, is dated April 20. It says that effective immediately, the annual influenza vaccine is voluntary for all active and reserve component service members and DOD civilian personnel.

Hegseth's revision is at odds with longstanding Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, which recommends, with rare exceptions, that everyone 6 months and older get the shot every flu season.

Military health experts have also warned that because influenza can spread quickly, seasonal vaccination "is the most effective control measure" to reduce serious infection and minimize the risk to the force and the mission, according to a flu vaccine statement on the Navy and Marine Corps Force Health Protection Command website.

The Department of Defense Education

Activity, which requires the vaccine for its staff and students, did not answer a query by deadline about how the new policy may affect that guidance.

Hegseth also directed the services and components to submit requests for exceptions to the new policy within 15 days of the memorandum publication date.

He prefaced his announcement by discussing the COVID-19 vaccine, which was mandatory for active-duty service members from August 2021 to January 2023 under former President Joe Biden.

Approximately 8,700 service members were involuntarily separated for not complying with the vaccine mandate, and more than 3,000 of them did not receive honorable discharges, the Pentagon has said.

Discharged service members have until April 2027 to pursue reinstatement under a program to welcome them back to active-duty service with fully reinstated benefits.

"Our men and women in uniform were forced to choose between their conscience and their country even when those decisions posed no threat to our military readiness," Hegseth said of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

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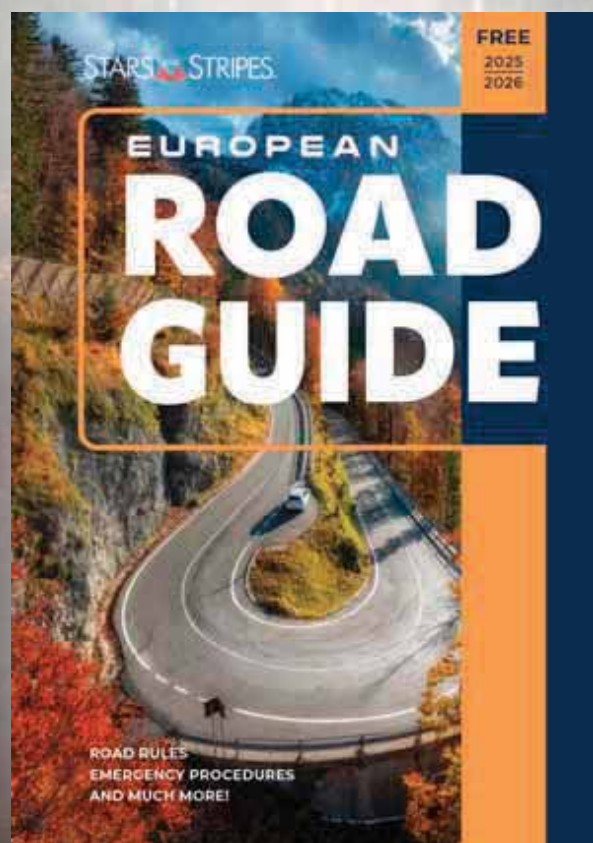


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