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## A taste of Thailand

by tuktuk

**Pages 8-11**

STARS AND STRIPES

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A new year is upon us, and it's time once again to turn your attention to the yearly tradition unlike any other – Best of the Pacific voting season!

For the past 24 years, our annual Best of the Pacific magazine has been the authority on the best places YOU need to go to in the Pacific. How do we know? Because you told us so!

You've made your voices heard over the years, and in turn, informed fellow members of the military community like yourselves of the Pacific's best attractions, restaurants, festivals, Sunday brunch, getaways and more. Whether you're in Guam, South Korea, Japan or Okinawa, you can place your vote for all your favorites.

Know where you can get a great phone plan with friendly service? Or is there an off-base dentist you tell all your friends about? We want to know, and we definitely want to know why you like it so much.

Voting is quick, easy and you just might get your name in the magazine! Take a few minutes and vote for all your favorites online. And if you do, you may qualify to win up to \$300.

Thanks to your input, every year we're able to make Stars and Stripes community products to help you enjoy your stay in the Pacific. That's what we're all about. As we are fond of saying, our papers, websites and magazines "are about you, for you, and in some cases, by you."

The votes keep rolling in year after year and it's all thanks to you! We had a great turnout in 2024, and we expect nothing short of a record number of votes in 2025. Vote and share so even more of you can experience the best the Pacific has to offer!

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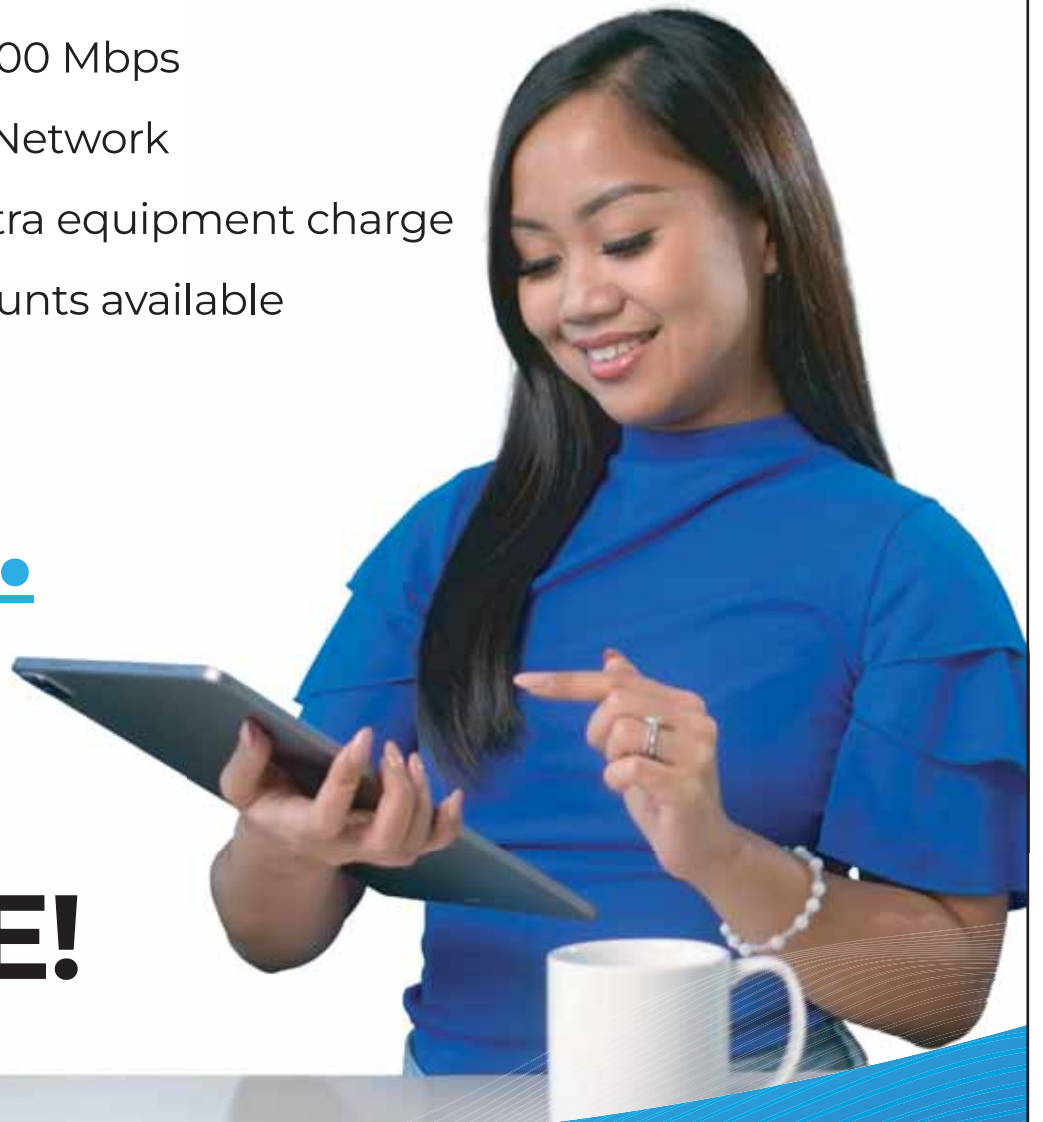
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# New Year pep talk: Simply do better

As I dunked a two-week-old Christmas cookie into my coffee on the first day of 2025, my stomach still gurgled with the contents of the overindulgent dinner we'd eaten on New Year's Eve. Despite the long list of resolutions I'd made for myself, I'd already broken three of them, and it was only noon.

"Wake up early," I'd told myself. "Exercise each morning," I'd told myself. "Do intermittent fasting," I'd told myself. Only hours into the New Year, and I already felt like a failure.

I'd been repeating this dysfunctional pattern every year. Beginning in October, when Halloween festivities lured me into "treating myself" to an entire bag of miniature Almond Joys (full disclosure: I'd buy them knowing kids often turn their noses up at coconut, leaving them all for me). I'd give in to too many Pumpkin Pie Martinis and Cinnamon Spiked Ciders. A bit of self-indulgence would throw my schedule off track, and before I knew it, I'd skipped Boot Camp class and slept in again.

November, with its Sunday football chili-cheese Frito boats, complicated family logistics and gravy-splattered Thanksgiving splurges, would drag me further into the gauntlet of holiday excesses.

December presented me with an entire month's worth of excuses for lowering my health, financial and behavioral standards: Obligatory events to attend, marathon shopping trips to endure, sticks of butter to soften, cards to send, cookie platters to consume, cheese balls to chomp, eggnog to guzzle, puzzle pieces to find, expensive cuts of beef to buy, advent calendars to fill, mail carriers to reward, garbage workers to tip, teachers to treat, bosses to butter up, stockings to stuff, holiday dinners to host, Christmas trees to water and presents to wrap.

By the end of the calendar year, I'd fallen off of the Polar Express into a deep, dark abyss, eventually reaching my lowest level of personal disgust.

Ready -- no, begging -- to get back on track, I'd then draft a list of New Year's resolutions that seemed realistic

## The Meat and Potatoes of Life

Lisa Smith Molinari



**Rather than demanding that I make sudden, drastic changes in specific areas of my life as I had done for years, I needed to encourage myself to simply ... do better.**

in the moment given my desperation, but was so overly ambitious, I was bound to fail. It covered everything from dramatic weight loss and extreme physical fitness, to sleep regulation, buying behavior, procrastination, wrinkle management, stress levels, thinking patterns, attitude tendencies and relationship goals.

And when failure inevitably happened, as it had every year, I'd wallow in shame and remorse wondering how much farther I'd go before my belief in my own ability to change hit its rock bottom.

As I sat in my kitchen on New Year's Day, I realized that for years, maybe decades, I'd repeated this maladaptive annual cycle as if failure, guilt and self-loathing were my holiday traditions themselves. "What should I do to break the cycle?" I wondered.

Implement self-inflicted punishments? "You're grounded!" Use reverse psychology? "You should eat the leftover cheeseball, because your paunch needs more jiggle." Embrace my weaknesses? "Isn't it wonderful that you spent thirty bucks for another used sweater on eBay?" Give up on resolutions altogether? "Cholesterol levels be damned!"

"There must be a better way to better myself," I thought. If I am to ever succeed at self-improvement, I knew I needed a different approach. One that was more realistic, encouraging and forgiving.

Rather than demanding that I make sudden, drastic changes in specific areas of my life as I had done for years, I needed to encourage myself to simply ... do better.

Whatever form my betterment would take, be it significant or small, I needed to recognize that step toward self-improvement. I would be aware that slipups would happen along the way. I would give myself the grace to be human. I would stop being my own judge, jury and executioner. I would discourage guilt and encourage progress in any form. I would become my own cheerleader, offering pep talks that would inspire me to take pride in all accomplishments both big and small.

Besides, I'd always dreamt of being a cheerleader. "Blech, this cookie is stale," I muttered, and threw the remainder into the kitchen trash. "Nice job," my inner voice praised, and the corner of my mouth turned up into a proud half-smile. "See? You've got this."

Read more of Lisa Smith Molinari's columns at: [themeatandpotatoesoflife.com](http://themeatandpotatoesoflife.com) and in Lisa's book, *The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com* Email: [meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com](mailto:meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com)

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
CHRISSY M. YATES,  
STRIPES GUAM

**T**our groups sometimes get a bad rap. Especially if you're in a large group, one of 30-plus tourists shuffling along like zombies trying not to lose sight of the leader holding a flag or umbrella while being in the way of other tourists and locals alike. It can feel way too much like a school trip.

However, when you're short on time or just exhausted, say after traveling around two different countries in two weeks, a tour provides the opportunity to escape some of the planning part and get right to the adventure. It's even better if you end up in a small group.

I prefer to get to know a place through its food, but two and a half days is not a lot of meals. Fortunately, I found a tour in Thailand that boasted letting me try 30-plus foods in one evening.

My only problem was the tour was via tuk-tuk. I was a bit nervous to climb into a glorified golf cart without a seatbelt, but I let my growling belly be my guide. My guide introduced herself as Peach and started our tour at a small temple in the Nak

# A taste of TH

## Thailand Tips

- **Transportation**  
Taxis are cheap, but traffic is bad. If possible, use the train to get around or leave a lot of wiggle room to get to destinations.
- **Be adventurous but not dumb**  
I liked doing a food tour as it meant I had someone to not only translate my food allergies to the staff, but also someone who knew which places were less likely to give me food poisoning.
- **Charcoal tablets**  
A tip I learned later is to travel with activated charcoal to help your tummy deal with dicey food decisions.
- **Visit booths with lots of customers**  
During our tour, we didn't eat anything raw or undercooked, which made it a lot safer.



Gai yang, or grilled chicken.



Sauteed morning glory.



Fried duck beaks.



Klang area.

From there we went to our first restaurant, Lung Ayutthaya Boat Noodle. They were ready for our group of 10 and kept bringing dish after dish from the kitchen for us to try. One downside is I lost track of what was what. The only thing that stood out was the morning glory greens, which reminded

me of a similar dish I'd Not a great start.

The highlight of the stop, at Wat Prayun, a 19 white chedi. Inside, you and receive a tiny square buddha or walls for goo

## speaking Thai

- Hello:** Sawasdee
- Thank you:** Kob Khun
- No worries:** Mai Pen Rai
- Delicious:** Aroy
- Sorry / excuse me:** Kho Thot
- What is your name?:** Khun Chue Arai
- Bathroom:** Hong Nam

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Rooftop view from Wat Prayun.



A-Roi Cheap fusion Thai food in Bangkok.



# Thailand *by* tuktuk



tendons inside were very chewy and salty, and I later learned it's more of a beer snack), chicken feet (in a noodle soup that was wonderfully spicy) and beef tripe soup (way too spicy). While some of my fellow travelers stuck to the som tam (spicy green papaya salad), larb (a ground pork dish) and gai yang (grilled chicken), I decided to try a little of everything. I'm a Southerner, so eating from the "rooter to the tooter" isn't new for me.

Finally, it was time for dessert. A short walk through the night market led us to Ni-Ang Ice Cream. However, we didn't start with ice cream, rather with bua loy, or rice balls in coconut milk topped with a kai wan or sweet poached egg. It was like having egg tarts inside of a coconut soup, delicious but very heavy and rich. Next came giant scoops of coconut ice cream with a drizzle of sugary egg syrup on top.

SEE THAILAND ON PAGE 11

views of the surrounding neighborhood.

Afterward, we stopped at a small food stall on the side of the road to try fusion Thai food at A-Roi Cheap. The standout dish was the fried crab rice, which smelled just as good as it tasted. We also tried glass noodles with prawns.

The most adventurous part came next as we walked through a crowded night market to B.B. Pork Fondue for some Isaan food, which hails from the northeastern region of the country.

Some of these foods proved to be a bit of a challenge for western palates. Among the many foods served here were fried duck beaks (the

ateen in Hoi An, Vietnam.

vening for me was the third 9th century temple with a can make a small donation e of gold leaf to apply to the d luck. It also offers cool



Coconut ice cream with sweet egg topping at Ni-Ang Ice Cream.



Papaya salad and chicken feet soup.



Tripe and beef soup at BB Pork Fondue.



Pak Khlong Talat (Flower Market).



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# THAILAND: Tasty trip!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

Most of us were full and sadly the ice cream went to waste.

Our last dessert was Khanom Buang Thai crepes filled with meringue and strips of sweet fried egg. It was like eating a fortune cookie where the fortune was replaced with sweet, slightly eggy deliciousness.

We ended with a tour of the Pak Khlong Talat flower market, which was a great opportunity to walk off some of the calories. Peach presented each of us with a gift, a small phuang malai or floral garland for good luck.



Khanom Buang Thai crepes.



Stall selling Khanom Buang (Thai crepes).

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# Solo adventure in Phu Quoc



STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
CHRISSEY M. YATES,  
STRIPES GUAM

Phu Quoc, the biggest island in Vietnam, is known for its white-sand beaches, turquoise water and hiking trails. A destination wedding brought me to the “Maldives of Vietnam,” but after a few days I got tired of the

resort life.

I found my guide, Hien, through Airbnb Experiences, where she offered a personalized 3-hour tour. We worked together via WhatsApp to put together an afternoon itinerary that included “eating a popular cake.” It cost \$20 initially, but I opted to have a lot of the tour be by taxi instead of scooter to reduce travel time and maximize our time at each location.



Hien's Website

## Dinh Cau Rocks

We started with a tour of Dinh Cau Rocks, a small temple next to a lighthouse, both perched on a jagged rock formation. Hien explained that it was built to honor the goddess of the sea who protects sailors and fishermen. It is the most visited shrine on the island as it is located in Duong Duong Town, the center of Phu Quoc Island and a short walk from Phu Quoc Night Market. It offers breathtaking views of the harbor, especially at sunrise and sunset, but can get crowded, so our plan was to watch the sunset from a different location.

My personalized tour included foodie-friendly adventures, so after a cautious climb on the nearby rocks, my guide took me for an afternoon snack of chè, a Vietnamese dessert best described as a sweet soup or pudding. I chose a hot coconut milk base with soft tofu, tapioca and ginger syrup. It was sweet, surprisingly refreshing, and worth sitting in a deep squat on a plastic seat on a hot day.



## Ong Lang Beach

We got in a taxi then headed a bit north to Din Bah, a Buddhist temple that is set between two high end resorts on Ong Lang Beach. The beautiful grounds overlook the beach and ocean and have plenty of seating from which to take in the beautiful scenery. We were able to walk down to the sand in front of the 5-star Ocean Bay Suites because, as Hien explained, in Vietnam, beach access is public. Hien pointed out that you can see a sliver of Cambodia from the beach.



## Suds and sunsets

The sun was already getting low as we left Ong Lang but we quickly made our way through the fish market, where Hien picked out some fruit for us to try later. We arrived about 15 minutes before sunset to have a beer at Tiệm beer thủ công - LoCo Beer, known for its craft beer. The spot is mostly for locals, so all the menus are in Vietnamese. It was a hot day, and my cold lager was refreshing and smooth.



## - Random tips -

### ❖ Don't let a long layover keep you trapped in an airport

But make sure if it's in Vietnam, you get a multi-entry visa. There's baggage storage for cheap at the airport, so leave your bags behind. I booked a last-minute 3-hour Vietnamese cooking class via Airbnb Experiences to keep me busy during a 9-hour layover on my return flight.

### ❖ Pack a USB fan

This came in handy not only for cooling me off but also my phone as its clear plastic protective case made it very unhappy in the heat.

### ❖ Transportation

The wedding guests and I mostly used taxis via the Grab app as well as an area bus that went from our resort to the night market area. Scooters are also available to rent, but please wear a helmet.

### ❖ Cash is king

Many vendors in Vietnam don't accept credit cards. Surprisingly, some places will accept U.S. dollars on larger purchases. Watch out for high fees from ATMs and use an app, like Xe, to understand the conversion rate so you don't overpay for basics like bottled water.

### ❖ Water, water everywhere, but from a bottle you should drink

Tap water in Vietnam is unsafe. I noticed that even locals don't drink it. Make sure the ice in your drinks is from a purified source and even keep a bottle in the bathroom by your toothbrush to be extra safe.



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

# PHU QUOC: Fun with food



Read more stories!



## Did someone say cake?

.....  
Finally, it was time for cake. But something was lost in translation as the dish I had, banh xeo, is more like a seafood egg crepe and savory, not sweet. I enjoyed it nevertheless, but I struggled a bit using chopsticks to break up pieces of the crepe to stuff into the rice paper shell. However, once I got the hang of it, I was in heaven. The saltiness of the crepe's seafood filling paired well with the anise-like herbs, crisp lettuce and sour-sweet taste of the guava on top. I busied myself trying to create the perfect bite.

## Phu Quoc Night Market

.....  
Our adventure ended at the lively night market. There I saw plenty of seafood-based street foods, handmade crafts and inexpensive souvenirs. I was still quite full from the banh xeo, but made a little room for some rolled ice cream.





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## Speakin' Vietnamese

- Hello:** Xin chào (sin chow)
- Thank you:** Cảm ơn (gahm uhn)
- Yes:** Vâng (vuhng)
- No:** Không (khome)
- Please:** Làm ơn (lam uhn)
- Excuse me/Sorry:** Xin lỗi (sin loy)
- Goodbye:** Tạm biệt (tam byet)



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# Boonie Stomps Guam

INFORMATION PROVIDED BY  
GUAM BOONIE STOMPERS



## SCHEDULE 2025

Jan. 25 (Sat.)	Tarzan Falls (Medium)
Feb. 1 (Sat.)	Agfayan River and Falls (Medium)
Feb. 8 (Sat.)	La Sa Fua River (Difficult)
Feb. 15 (Sat.)	Hila'an/Lost Pond/Shark's Hole (Medium)
Feb. 22 (Sat.)	Mt. Finacresta (Schroeder) (Difficult)
March 1 (Sat.)	Ague Cove (Medium)
March 8 (Sat.)	Pagat Cave to Coast (Difficult)
March 15 (Sat.)	Ija to Mt. Finacresta (Schroeder) (2x Difficult)
March 22 (Sat.)	Talofofo Caves (Medium)



Tarzan Falls

**REMINDER! We no longer meet at Chamorro Village. We meet at the trailhead.**

Every Saturday, Guam Boonie Stompers offers public hikes to a variety of destinations such as beaches, snorkeling sites, waterfalls, mountains, caves, latte sites, and World War II sites. We meet at the trailhead on Saturdays at 9 AM. Directions to the trailhead will be posted on the Guam Boonie Stompers Inc Facebook page. The cost is \$5.00 for hikers over 17. Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult. Hikers should provide their own transportation. Guam's trails are not developed. Weather conditions can make the hikes more difficult than described. No reservations required.

**For more information:**  
[www.facebook.com/GuamBoonieStompers](http://www.facebook.com/GuamBoonieStompers)



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**NOTE: Schedule subject change, so please check Boonie Stomps Facebook in advance.**

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### Crossword by Margie E. Burke

**ACROSS**

- 1 Like Hubbard's cupboard
- 5 World record?
- 10 Loud door sound
- 14 System for servers
- 15 Shipping container
- 16 Roman robe
- 17 Breathing apparatus
- 19 Screen symbol
- 20 Jacket fabric
- 21 Family-tree study
- 23 Library section
- 25 Sneaky coward
- 28 Catch in a sting
- 32 Stately tree
- 33 Potting mixtures
- 36 Chopin piece
- 37 H.S. lab class
- 39 Track events
- 41 Till fill
- 42 Revs
- 44 Digs for pigs
- 46 Top anagram
- 47 Request
- 49 Token
- 51 Valued highly
- 54 Notre Dame, for one
- 57 Shopping aids
- 61 Workers' protection org.
- 62 Glassmaking color
- 64 Subsequently
- 65 Edit
- 66 Songstress
- Home
- 67 Ogled
- 68 Labor's partner
- 69 Washstand vessel

**DOWN**

- 1 Ward who played Robin
- 2 Turn over \_\_\_ leaf
- 3 Skyrocket
- 4 Master hand
- 5 Puzzler's dir.
- 6 Shakespeare works
- 7 "See ya!"
- 8 Perform penance
- 9 Peaceful
- 10 Thin-heeled shoe
- 11 Off one's rocker
- 12 Highly excited
- 13 Countless
- 18 "Any \_\_\_?"
- 22 Skin blemishes
- 24 Gift-tag word
- 25 Actress Winger
- 26 Fake name
- 27 Artist's garment
- 29 Kind of sentence
- 30 Skilled
- 31 Linguine sauce
- 34 Permit
- 35 Pick-me-up
- 38 Ring finger's place

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14				15					16			
17				18					19			
20					21			22				
23				24								
25	26	27					28		29	30	31	
32				33		34	35		36			
37			38		39			40		41		
42				43		44			45		46	
47					48			49			50	
51					52	53						
54	55	56							57	58	59	60
61					62				63			
64						65					66	
67							68				69	


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**Answers to Previous Crossword:**


A	L	F	A	S	O	A	P	S	P	A	M			
L	E	A	P	U	R	G	E	F	A	R	C	E		
L	A	V	A	P	I	E	D	I	N	E	R	T		
O	V	E	R	S	E	E	I	C	E	D	T	E	A	
W	E	S	T	E	R	N	G	O	R	S	E			
			M	A	S	T	E	R	L	Y	N	B	A	
A	S	S	E	R	T	L	E	O	I	D	E	A		
J	O	H	N	I	D	L	E	R	N	E	A	R		
A	L	O	T	T	E	E	S	E	N	D	U	P		
R	O	W	P	I	N	N	A	C	L	E				
			T	A	R	O	T	C	H	A	R	G	E	R
M	A	R	T	I	N	I	C	E	N	T	I	M	E	
A	X	I	O	M	S	T	E	M	U	V	E	A		
D	I	A	N	E	T	O	N	E	B	E	N	D		
E	L	L	E	S	E	T	S	E	N	D	S			

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## Stripes Sports Trivia

Wide and right. When paired, the two words can inflict the kind of pain Bartman and Buckner used to represent. For Buffalo Bills fans, the pain of losing four straight Super Bowls in the early 1990s is a tough one to get over. But, in Super Bowl 25, the Bills came ever-so-close, missing a game-winning field goal with eight seconds to play. Who missed the infamous kick for the Bills?

**Answer**

Scott Norwood

### SUDOKU

Difficulty: Medium

		5	2					7
					4		5	
		8		7	1			
								8
		8	6				7	3
3			7	4			6	5
					6	8	4	
	4	6		9				
	1				2			

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**HOW TO SOLVE:**

Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

8	9	6	4	2	7	1	3	5
7	5	3	8	6	1	9	4	2
2	4	1	3	9	5	7	8	6
6	2	5	1	4	9	3	7	8
9	3	7	2	8	6	5	1	4
4	1	8	7	5	3	6	2	9
1	6	4	9	7	8	2	5	3
5	7	2	6	3	4	8	9	1
3	8	9	5	1	2	4	6	7

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GUAM EDITION

JANUARY 20, 2025

## 'Flat-out, straight-up American hero'

7 receive Medal of Honor  
Pages 2, 3



President Joe Biden awards the Medal of Honor on to Spc. 4 Kenneth J. David in Washington on Jan. 3.

Eric KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

## COVER STORY

# 2 Vietnam soldiers receive Medal of Honor

## Both rescued fellow troops in combat

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden was direct when speaking to Kenneth David on Jan. 3.

“You’re a hero, a genuine hero,” said Biden, who presented such an honor for the final time in his administration. “Flat-out, straight-up American hero, and we owe you.”

David was one of seven soldiers that day who served in the wars in Vietnam and Korea to receive the nation’s highest military award for valor in combat from President Joe Biden. But David, who served in Vietnam, was the only man present for the ceremony. The other awards were presented posthumously. Four men had died in combat and two died after their military service.

David, now 74, joined the Army in August 1969 after being drafted. He graduated from Girard High School in Ohio and had been working for a year.

“Being I was brought up proper, I went in the Army and fulfilled my commitment to our country. That’s what I believed in,” he told reporters ahead of the ceremony.

Then-Pfc. David distinguished himself on May 7, 1970, in the Thua Thien Province. He served as a radio-telephone operator with Company D, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, near Fire Support Base Maureen.

“We got overrun,” he said. “[It] was pitch black at night. Explosions started going off, and we got overrun by sappers. And behind the sappers were [North Vietnamese troops].”

The enemy’s initial assault mortally wounded the company’s platoon leader. David’s lieutenant was killed instantly, Biden said. Then David was also hit in the back with shrapnel.

“But he couldn’t and wouldn’t give up,” the president added.

Without hesitation, David handed his radio to his platoon sergeant and moved forward to the defensive perimeter, unleashing automatic weapons fire on the enemy troops.

David, from his position, beat back enemy efforts to overrun him. Realizing the impact of the enemy assault on the wounded, who were being moved to the center of the defensive perimeter that the U.S. troops had



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**President Joe Biden kisses Debra Nelson McKnight on Jan. 3 after presenting the Medal of Honor posthumously to her father, Capt. Hugh R. Nelson Jr.**

established, David moved to a position outside of the perimeter while continuing to engage the enemy.

Each time the enemy attempted to concentrate its fire on wounded Americans inside the perimeter, David jumped from his position and yelled to draw enemy fire away from injured troops. Refusing to withdraw in the face of the concentrated enemy fire now directed toward him, he continued to engage the enemy.

Though wounded by an exploding satchel charge and running low on ammunition, he tossed hand grenades toward the attackers to counter their fire.

The unit’s medic, realizing David had been injured, moved to his position to provide medical aid. David told the medic that he was OK and continued to fight on.

“The adrenaline was so high in me that I had no idea ... but I was able to save seven [other troops],” he said. “So, between the effort of Greg and myself, we did our duty.”

David credited his buddy, Spc. Gregory Phillips, for his efforts during the fight. Phillips received the Silver Star for his actions. David initially received the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroics that day.

Another soldier who fought in Vietnam also received the Medal of Honor on Friday — Capt.

Hugh Nelson Jr.

His daughter, Debbie McKnight, recounted recently how she didn’t want her father to go to Vietnam.

“As a 5-year-old, I remember him lifting me up in my grandparents’ house. And I told him not to go because I was never going to see him again,” she said.

Six months later, Army officials drove up to the Nelsons’ house to inform them that Hugh was killed in action. He was 28. It happened the day before her little brother, Hugh Nelson III, turned 1 years old.

McKnight and her family know the sacrifice her father made. The country now knows it too as Nelson posthumously received the highest military honor for heroism in battle.

Nelson was raised in Rocky Mount and Durham, N.C. McKnight said her father was in JROTC in high school before graduating from The Citadel in South Carolina in 1959.

On June 5, 1966, near Moc Hoa, Nelson was the acting aircraft commander of a Huey helicopter with the 114th Aviation Company on a search-and-destroy reconnaissance mission when the aircraft was struck by a barrage of enemy fire that rendered it uncontrollable.

McKnight’s brother, “Tripp” as the family refers to him, said his father was flying the hel-

icopter with three other crew members. Tripp Nelson said reports on the fight concluded the aircraft hit the ground at 100 miles per hour.

The crash left the four-man crew unconscious in the helicopter. Nelson was the first to wake up and moved to the other side of the aircraft where he found his dazed and wounded crew chief still trapped inside the Huey. After getting him out of the aircraft, Nelson climbed into the severely damaged helicopter to assist the door gunner, who was still strapped inside and unable to move.

While Nelson tried to free his comrade, North Vietnamese troops attacked the downed helicopter, firing automatic rifles and small arms from about 30 feet away. The heavy enemy fire wounded Nelson but he continued his efforts to free the trapped door gunner. After freeing the soldier from the Huey, Nelson used his body as a shield to cover the door gunner from the intense enemy fire.

“I’ve read everywhere that he took between six and, I believe, 20 rounds,” Tripp Nelson said. “He passed away during that time. The other three crew members lived and luckily were evacuated fairly quickly.”

McKnight said the family was returning home from getting haircuts when they pulled up to the house and saw two men waiting for them. After the men left, McKnight went in the house and saw her mother crying.

“She looked at me and she said that my daddy was gone and he was never coming back,” McKnight said. “He was just brought up as a good Christian and a good soldier, and all he would have thought about was doing the right thing. He told us, and our mother, that the one thing that he had to do was he had to fight for freedom so that everyone had the right to live their lives the way they wanted.” Nelson had initially received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army’s second highest military decoration, for his actions and sacrifice.

The Medal of Honor process can take years before a service member receives the award.

Herm Breuer, an Army veteran and a veterans service officer in Trumbull County, examined David’s records and felt the Medal of Honor was justified. David said Breuer devoted 17 years to work on a recommendation packet for him.

“Mr. Herm Breuer never gave up on me and that’s why I’m here today, and I thank him for that,” David said.

McKnight said she remembers the day that Biden called. The phone call lasted two minutes and 16 seconds. She was sitting down because her knees were shaking.

After the president recapped Nelson’s actions and he would present the family with the Medal of Honor posthumously, Biden commented her father was a very handsome man.

“I was like, ‘Yes, my mother thought so too,’” McKnight said. “And that was when the conversation ended. I’m not sure if I should have said that to him, but it always kind of makes me smile and giggle when I think about having said that to the president.”

Tripp said despite not knowing his father, he has several of his possessions. He has his uniforms and parachute. He also has his father’s wallet.

In Nelson’s wallet, there was a picture of his wife and a vaccination card. There were three or four documents related to code of conduct and what to do if you were captured by the Vietnamese. His father also had a prayer in his wallet.

“It was filled with documents he was keeping with him, I guess, to remind him what good conduct was. I don’t think he needed to remind himself,” Tripp said. “You can tell a lot about a person. He felt he was in the right place where he belonged, and that was in the war, fighting for our country.”

McKnight accepted the award on her father’s behalf. She and the president held hands as the Medal of Honor citation was read. It appeared McKnight held back tears.

As Biden handed the framed medal to her, McKnight said, “Thank you and God bless.”

David was the last to receive the award among the group. He stood in a military uniform next to Biden as his citation was read. The snapping of photos being taken could be heard as members of the audience captured the moment. David stayed on the stage for a little while after the president placed the medal on him. The crowd applauded him. Some people stood up during the celebration, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

“It’s the greatest honor of my life. To be entrusted with the greatest fighting force in the history of the world ... and to learn these stories of Americans,” Biden said.

## COVER STORY

# 5 Korea soldiers awarded Medal of Honor

## Heroics were not fully recognized in 1950s

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Juanita Mendez gave President Joe Biden a kiss as she sat on stage Jan. 3 to accept the nation's highest military honor for combat valor on behalf of her brother, Pfc. Charles Johnson.

It drew a laugh from the crowd gathered in the East Room at the White House. Biden then moved forward with presenting the Medal of Honor to five Korean War soldiers.

"These are genuine to their core heroes. Heroes of different ranks, different positions and even different generations," he said during the ceremony. "But heroes who all went above and beyond the call of duty, heroes who all deserve our nation's highest and oldest military recognition."

The president presented seven medals that day to soldiers who served in the Korean War and Vietnam War. The heroics of the five troops who fought in Korea were not fully recognized at the time, and they received the Medal of Honor posthumously as part of a campaign to shine a light on the role of minority service members in defense of the United States.

All five — one Hispanic, one Filipino-American, one Japanese-American and two African-Americans — were awarded medals for valor at the time.

However, in August 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed secretaries of the military branches to review decorations given to Black and Native American veterans to determine whether their actions "warrant the award of the Medal of Honor," the military's highest award for valor.

Of the more than 3,500 service members who have been awarded the Medal of Honor, only 94 African Americans, 59 Hispanics and 35 Asian or Pacific Islanders have received the decoration, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

On Jan. 3, Biden added five more.

**Gen. Richard Cavazos**, who was from Kingsville, Texas, entered the Army after graduating from what is now Texas Tech University. During the Korean conflict, he served as commander of E Company, 2nd Battalion, 65th Infantry Regiment, comprised mostly of Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans.

On the night of June 14, 1953, Cavazos led his company on a raid on an enemy outpost on Hill 142 near Sagimak, Korea. During the initial attack, the company came under intense mortar and artillery fire.

After fierce close combat in the enemy trenches, the company was forced to pull back under heavy artillery and mortar fire. Twice more Cavazos led his soldiers in assaults on the position despite intense hostile fire.

Ordered to withdraw, Cavazos remained alone on the enemy position to search for missing men. While exposed to enemy fire, he located five casualties and evacuated them to safety on the reverse slope of a nearby hill where they were shielded from enemy fire.

Returning to the battlefield, he found others who had become separated from the main assault force and personally led them to safety.

Cavazos repeatedly returned to the enemy position until he was satisfied all had been accounted for, according to records from the time. Only then would he allow medics to treat his own wounds.

Cavazos was initially awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest military decoration for valor, for his actions on Hill 142.

After fighting in Korea ended, Cavazos remained in the Army and was again awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in Vietnam. In 1976, he became the first Hispanic to be promoted to brigadier general and six years later was appointed the first four-star general of Hispanic origin.

He retired in 1984 after a 33-year career and died in 2017 at age 88. In 2023, Fort Hood, Texas, was renamed Fort Cavazos after Congress directed the removal of names of Confederates from American military installations.

**Pvt. Bruno Orig** was born in Hawaii to parents from the Philippines. He was 11 years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, plunging the U.S. into World War II. Following the example of his father and stepfather, he enlisted in the Army in 1950 less than two months after the North Koreans attacked the South, igniting the Korean War.



Orig

On Feb. 15, 1951, while assigned to G Company, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, Orig was returning from a wire-laying mission near Chipyeong-ni, Korea, when he saw several of his comrades had been wounded during an attack.

Disregarding his own safety, Orig rushed to them and began administering first aid under fire. With the help of several comrades from the company command post, Orig began removing the wounded to safety.

After returning to help more of the wounded, Orig volunteered to man a machine gun because most of the crew had been wounded. He provided covering fire so a platoon of allies could escape and continued firing even as his company's positions were overrun.

After the battle was over and the area secured, Orig was found dead beside his weapon. In front of his position lay the bodies of several enemy soldiers.

He was 20 years old. For his sacrifice, he was initially awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

"He came upon a firefight, rescued fellow soldiers, took a machine gun position, engaged with the enemy and ultimately died in action," his nephew Charles "Chuck" Allen III said. "But [he] saved a platoon and doing that is now being recognized."

**Pfc. Wataru Nakamura** was a 20-year-old Japanese American when the U.S. entered World War II and then-President Franklin Roosevelt ordered citizens of



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**President Joe Biden stands next to Victoria Secrest after posthumously awarding the Medal of Honor to her father, Cpl. Fred B. McGee, on Friday in Washington.**

Japanese descent into internment camps. Nakamura and his family were sent to a camp in Rowher, Ark.

After Japanese American men were allowed to enlist, he signed up for the Army, according to his nephew Gary Takashima. He was assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a Japanese American unit that fought in Italy and became one of the most decorated American units of the war.

After World War II, Nakamura joined the Army Reserve and was called up when the Korean War began. On May 18, 1951, Nakamura, serving as a lieutenant in the



Nakamura

2nd Infantry Division, volunteered to repair a communications line between his platoon and the command post. As he made his way along the line, he came under fire from an enemy unit threatening to breach the company defense lines.

Nakamura rushed the enemy troops with a fixed bayonet and singlehandedly destroyed a hostile machine-gun position, driving the enemy from several bunkers they had captured. When his ammunition ran low, he withdrew under intense enemy fire until he met an ammunition party climbing the hill.

With more ammunition, Nakamura returned to the fight, killing three enemy soldiers in one bunker before charging another. Continuing to press the attack, he was mortally wounded by an enemy grenade.

Nakamura was 29. He initially received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions and sacrifice.

"He lost his life, volunteering for an assignment, helping out his unit," Takashima said. "My uncle had a commitment to his service and his fellow soldiers. It impressed one of his buddies, Richard Edlebeck. When Richard learned years later his friend didn't receive the Medal of Honor, he spent the rest of his life working on a packet."

**Cpl. Fred McGee** was an African American from Steubenville, Ohio, who enlisted in the Army in May 1951, only about three years after then-President Harry S. Truman ordered the desegregation of the U.S.

military.

Biden said McGee served in one of the first integrated Army units in the Korean War.

Sent to Korea, McGee was serving with the 7th Infantry Division on Hill 528 when his unit came under fire. After his squad leader was wounded, McGee assumed command and ordered the remaining members to advance to a more exposed position and attack an enemy machine-gun crew.



McGee

When his own machine-gunner was mortally wounded, McGee took over the weapon and ordered the rest of his squad to withdraw while he provided cover fire. Though wounded in the face, he stood straight up under intense enemy machine-gun and mortar fire and tried to evacuate the body of the company runner. Forced to abandon the body, he aided a wounded man and moved him to safety through a barrage of enemy mortar and artillery fire.

McGee's daughter, Victoria Secrest, said while her father was still in Korea, a comic book publisher wanted to do a story on his actions at Hill 528. However, there was a glaring inaccuracy in the depiction.

"They made him a white soldier," Secrest said. "I think it could have been inadvertent because they hadn't seen a picture of him. I don't know if they ever saw his DD-214 (service record)."

McGee was initially awarded a Silver Star, the third-highest combat decoration. He died in 2020.

Before **Pfc. Charles Johnson** was drafted into the Army, he played football, basketball, baseball and ran track at Arlington High School in New York. He was also a singer.



Johnson

"He had some options when he was drafted," said his nephew Garry Trey Mendez. "He could have applied for different roles in the military. But he said, 'No, if other people are going to the front, I need to go to the front too.'"

Johnson, who was African American, was serving as a Browning Automatic Rifle operator with Company B, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, when Chinese forces attacked his unit on June 11-12, 1953. Overwhelming numbers of Chinese troops assaulted the trenches and bunkers defended by Johnson and his squad.

Johnson, who was wounded by artillery and grenade fire, administered first aid to the more seriously injured. He dragged a wounded soldier to a secure bunker, stopping intermittently to aid injured soldiers and kill several enemy troops in hand-to-hand combat.

As the second bunker came under attack, he left the position and began firing at the enemy to defend the American wounded. He was killed in the fighting at age 20. Mendez said his uncle saved the lives of at least eight soldiers, including his high school classmate Don Dingee.

He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star in 2010.

## MILITARY

# US interest in Greenland, Arctic growing

Trump comments a reminder of US, adversaries' focus on High North

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — President-elect Donald Trump's recent assertion that the United States must take possession of Greenland cast a spotlight upon U.S. military operations on the landmass, as the Arctic ice thins and competition with Russia and China grows.

Since the 1940s, the Pentagon has valued Greenland, which serves as a gateway to the Arctic. During the Cold War, the military had more than 10,000 troops in its territory, which hosts Pituffik Space Base, formerly known as Thule Air Base.

Today, the nuclear armed long-range bombers that were part of the original Cold War force are gone. But a ballistic missile early warning mission carries on. About 200 active-duty U.S. Air Force and Space Force personnel are part of that effort, which entails monitoring orbiting satellites for signs of attack.

Trump, during a news conference, rattled some allies when he refused to rule out the possibility of seizing Greenland, an autonomous territory of NATO member Denmark, by force.

"I'm not going to commit to that," Trump said after being asked if he would reject the notion of using military or economic coercion to control Greenland.

"We need Greenland for national security purposes," he added.

How Trump's public pressuring will play out isn't clear, but his emphasis on Greenland's value to the United States suggests that military activities in the Arctic will be getting more attention during his second term.

The High North has taken on added importance in recent years given concerns about Russia's growing military presence in the Arctic. China also has signaled an intent to play a larger role in the region, declaring itself in 2018 a "near-Arctic country" with vested interests.

Trump alluded to both countries Tuesday, saying that Russian and Chinese vessels navigating waters near Greenland pose a danger.

"You have Chinese ships all over the place. You have Russian ships all over the place. We're not letting that happen," Trump said.

Military and civilian ships



BENJAMIN WISEMAN/U.S. Air Force

Airmen conduct engine runs on an F-35A Lightning II aircraft on the ramp at Thule Air Base, Greenland, in 2023. President-elect Donald Trump has said that the U.S. must take possession of Greenland for national security reasons.



Stars and Stripes

The Ballistic Missile Early Warning System in Greenland is one of three such installations that keep an eye out for long-range missiles leaving Russia. President-elect Donald Trump has said that the United States must take possession of Greenland for national security reasons.

alike typically have the right to freedom of navigation under international law. There are some restrictions on the actions they may take, particularly for warships, in territorial waters.

The Pentagon has sought to bring more attention to operations in the Arctic and updated its strategy for the region in 2024. But there haven't been any major force posture adjustments there.

That could change given environmental factors. With melting sea ice, new commercial shipping lanes are opening up that

will shorten travel routes between the Far East and northern Europe.

Arctic shipping increased by 37% between 2013 and 2023, according to the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum.

The circumstances bring potential access to valuable minerals and oil, which also could be of interest to Trump.

The ice-free part of Greenland also has the potential to be a major source for in-demand rare earth minerals that support a wide range of industries, the Geological Survey of Denmark

and Greenland said in 2023.

There are already indications of the Pentagon stepping up activities in Greenland.

In 2022, the U.S. Air Force awarded a nearly \$4 billion contract to ensure ongoing operations at Pituffik. And in 2023, four Air Force F-35s deployed for the first time at the base to show off the ability to operate in harsh terrain.

In August, the Washington-based Atlantic Council think tank published an analysis that said the United States should "double down" on the development of

Greenland as a cornerstone of its security strategy in the Arctic.

Given China's overtures to Greenland to develop its mineral resources, "much more needs to be done to realize Greenland's full potential in supporting the United States' economic and security interests," the Atlantic Council paper said.

Greenland was ruled directly by Denmark from the early 18th century until home rule began on the island in 1979. In 2009, Greenland approved a referendum granting it autonomy in all matters except defense, security and foreign policy.

Floating the idea of using coercion or force could be a negotiating tactic for Trump, who said that he didn't consider Denmark's authority over Greenland legitimate.

But Trump has long had an eye on Greenland and his recent comments went further than past statements about wanting to acquire the territory.

The situation is likely to become a point of diplomatic tension inside NATO and a source of unease for Denmark, which has signaled that it has no intention of parting with Greenland.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen sought to solidify the island's autonomy following Trump's remarks, saying that "Greenland belongs to Greenland" and wasn't for sale.

## MILITARY

# Air Force expands retention bonuses

## 89 high-demand career fields covered

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Air Force expanded retention bonuses this month for 89 career fields in high demand from cyber systems operations to bomb technicians.

Though the list was not made readily available by the service, it appeared on a Facebook group called “Air Force amn/nco/snco.”

“The list is authentic and accurate and was effective Dec. 16. We use the selective retention bonus to help retain talent that is in high demand,” Air Force spokeswoman Rose Riley said in a statement.

The military celebrated meeting recruiting goals in 2024 but attracting young Americans has been a long-running issue for the services. The Army, Navy and Air Force made changes after not meeting recruiting goals in 2023. Each service employed various strategies, programs and enticements to overcome recruiting woes in recent years that were exacerbated by several issues including in-person recruiting restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic, a low unemployment rate and stiff competition from the private sector.

The Air Force fell short of its recruitment goals by 10% in 2023. Relaxed tattoo rules and in-

creased bonuses are among the methods used to help the Air Force reach its recruiting mission goals in 2024, service officials have said.

The service also recently expanded medical waivers to cover asthma, food allergies and hearing loss in a bid to bring more recruits into the fold.

The memo detailing the career fields states the funds can range from \$180,000 to \$360,000 during an airman’s career. The selective retention bonuses are used to keep highly skilled airmen in job fields that might have low staffing, low reenlistment or high exit rates.

Some of the various roles include working dog handlers, bomb technicians, flight attendants, paralegals and airborne cryptologic language analysts.

Though the list has 89 jobs, some older jobs might not be included. For any careers that might have been removed from the list, airmen have until Feb. 15 to get another contract “before it is reduced [or] terminated” by Feb. 16, the document said.

The Air Force’s budget for fiscal 2025 set aside \$1.1 billion for bonuses and retention programs for 118,000 positions.

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MICHAEL WARD/U.S. Air Force

Senior Airman Victor Diaz, a military working dog handler, enters the assessment zone with Lezer at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.

# Marines to unify senior leadership courses for NCOs

By **LYDIA GORDON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Marine Corps staff sergeants and gunnery sergeants will begin attending the same leadership school for promotion to the next rank under a pilot program that will merge their respective schools.

The creation of a single program to teach leadership skills, tactics classes and other aspects of their roles is intended to lessen the time those Marines spend away from their units.

The program consolidating the Career and Advanced schools will begin in the spring, a Marine Corps administrative message said.

While the change is being referred to as a pilot program, it appears likely to become permanent. The administrative mes-

sage issued last month stated that the existing format offering separate resident schools will sunset in February 2025, while distance learning programs will be available until June 2025.

The new senior noncommissioned officer leadership school will be offered in two formats, online and in person. The online version will last 15 weeks, and prerequisites will be updated.

The distance course will be run through the Fort Worth, Texas, region beginning in March 2025 and be offered to Marines who can’t attend in person.

The course sites are at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.; Camp Lejeune, N.C.; Camp Pendleton, Calif.; and Camp Smedley D. Butler on Okinawa. For the resident version, instruction will begin in April and is shortened to



RYAN PULLIAM/U.S. Marine Corps

Marines at Recruiting Station Houston graduate from their Advanced School Seminar in June. A new senior noncommissioned leadership school pilot program will merge career and advanced schools for staff sergeants and gunnery sergeants, streamlining their training time, according to the service.

seven weeks.

Staff sergeants and gunnery sergeants who have already completed current requirements are exempt from attending the new program, according to the statement.

A third option is a two-week format available for Marines of those two ranks who are individual ready reservists or get mobi-

lized as individual augmentees.

“Through the (school), our SNCOs are equipped with the tools to not only lead more effectively but to mentor and guide their Marines through the complexities of today’s operational environment,” Sgt. Maj. Stephen Griffin of the Training and Education Command said in the Dec. 23 statement.

The change was intended to balance the needs for education and occupational training, Griffin said.

Timelines for classes beginning in the 2026 academic year starting in July have not yet been announced.

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## VETERANS

# Natural outcome: 'Just put me in a pine box'

## Survey finds more vets interested in green burial option offered at 3 national cemeteries

BY LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Christopher, a Marine Corps veteran who survived a truck explosion while serving in Afghanistan, said the near-death experience caused him to consider his own mortality and how he wants his burial to be handled.

The 35-year-old Colorado resident, who declined to provide his last name, said he has done advance planning and conveyed his desire to have a natural burial, also known as a green burial, that does not burden loved ones with thousands of dollars in funeral bills.

In contrast to the pomp and circumstance of traditional military funerals, a growing number of veterans say they prefer a simple, low-cost burial that forgoes the luxury of lined caskets and marble urns for a natural interment with minimal impact to the environment, according to a recent survey of veterans by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Based on survey feedback, the VA recently opened green burial sections at three national cemeteries that limit markers and landscaping, forgo chemicals and embalming fluids, and use caskets, shrouds and urns from natural materials that degrade over time.

The green burials are offered at Pikes Peak National Cemetery in Colorado Springs, Colo.; the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona in Phoenix; and Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, which is north of Tampa.

The VA survey showed respondents ages 40 and under had the greatest interest in natural burials and overwhelmingly supported green alternatives.

"Just put me in a pine box where my body can decompose and return to nature," said Christopher, a former sergeant who served between 2007 and 2016 in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Interest by veterans and their families in green burials parallels a national trend among Americans seeking alternatives to formal funerals with costly grave sites, underground vaults and a standardized burial process that does not allow for individual expression, according to Ann Hoffner, who publishes "Green Burial Naturally," a state-by-state guide to natural burials.

The number of cemeteries offering green burials has grown from 42 in 2016 to more than 300 in 2024, Hoffner said.

Hoffner first learned about green burials through her own



Ann Hoffner

**Mourners stand before the gravesite of Edward Hoffner, a World War II veteran who died in 2016. His daughter, Ann Hoffner, chose a green burial for her father that used only biodegradable materials. Hoffner was buried at Steelmantown Cemetery, a natural burial preserve in New Jersey.**



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Jane Pennington holds a photo of her deceased husband, World War II veteran Ken Pennington, who was buried using green burial methods.**

experience seeking an alternative to a conventional funeral for her 94-year-old father, a World War II veteran who died in 2016.

Edward A. Hoffner was an Army lieutenant who participated in the liberation of France, his daughter said.

Hoffner published an essay about her father's natural burial at a wooded sanctuary, comparing it to a cousin's traditional funeral "in a painted casket in a concrete vault under an Astroturf temporary covering" at a memorial park.

An American flag was draped over her father's body, which was wrapped in a shroud of natural material. Mourners placed his body in a wooden wagon that was wheeled to his grave at Steelmantown Cemetery, a woodland burial preserve in New Jersey.

An honor guard played taps and fired a three-volley salute as a final farewell after the body was lowered into the ground.

"The wild blueberries had been pulled back to admit his body and would be replanted,"

Ann Hoffner wrote. "It was an extraordinary realization that he had joined an ecosystem. It would recycle the nutrients in his flesh and bones and weave them into life."

While the Hoffner family holds a deed to his burial plot, there are no grave markers or head stones.

The simplicity of green burials also makes them less costly for the survivors. They typically cost about \$6,000, but prices vary by location and the services selected, according to the Green Burial Council.

Conventional funerals can run up to \$15,000 — with fees for viewing, burial, refrigeration, transport, casket purchase and embalming. Standard caskets and urns alone can cost thousands of dollars.

When a veteran dies, the Department of Veterans Affairs provides a burial allowance to offset the costs of a funeral, with the family responsible for the difference.

For service-connected deaths, VA pays up to \$2,000 for burial

expenses of former service members who died after Sept. 11, 2001. It provides up to \$1,500 for deaths prior to that date.

If the veteran is buried in a VA national cemetery, some or all of the cost of transporting the deceased may be reimbursed.

For non-service-connected deaths, VA will pay up to \$978 toward burial and funeral expenses with a \$978 plot-interment allowance, if the veteran is not buried in a national cemetery.

The National Cemetery Administration will accept cremated and intact remains for green burials at the three cemeteries participating in the pilot program.

According to the National Funeral Directors Association, nearly 70% of Americans surveyed expressed interest in learning about green burials as a funeral option because of the lower costs and benefits for the environment.

Congress in 2022 authorized the VA to establish green burial sections in national cemeteries.

Under the National Cemeteries Preservation and Protection Act, a veteran's remains interred in a green burial section must be prepared without chemicals and using caskets and urns that will naturally degrade in the environment.

The idea behind green burials is to allow the body to recycle in the natural environment with little disturbance to the surroundings, according to the Green Burial Council.

"When it comes to green burials, I like to say there are many shades of green. For some families, green burial means no chemical preservation of the

body, a casket made of natural material, and no vault or grave liner if the cemetery allows," said Lily Buerkle, director of funerals for the historic Congressional Cemetery in Washington, where 1,700 veterans are interred.

The private, nonprofit cemetery is unique among burial grounds in Washington for providing both natural burials and conventional funerals.

At green burials, families "tend to want to be active participants in their loved one's funerals," Buerkle said. "They want to put their grief to action — whether that is helping to bathe and shroud their person, or hand-shovel earth at the cemetery, or lead their own heartfelt ceremonies without clergy. They want to be a vital part of it," she said.

Buerkle, who is a licensed mortician in D.C., Maryland and Virginia, said she appreciates that the National Cemetery Association is giving veterans and their families the option of green burials at some of its cemeteries.

"This is a giant leap forward to allow veterans' families access to greener burial options," Buerkle said. "I love knowing that our veterans are beginning to have these choices."

Jane Pennington, 98, of Maryland, said she sought a more eco-friendly alternative to cremation, which dumps toxins into the air, when she began making funeral arrangements for her late husband, an Army and Air Force veteran who served in 1945 and 1946.

"Crematoriums are usually located in disadvantaged areas in the city, so my husband and I had decided while he was alive that we would start looking for an alternative," Pennington recalled.

Kenneth Pennington, 96, died in 2023. The former Air Force corporal had served in an Army specialized training corps while studying to be an engineer in college. He joined the Air Force after graduation and was assigned to a military installation in Dayton, Ohio.

After her husband's death, Jane Pennington said she found Serenity Ridge, a new cemetery in Maryland where burial vaults and embalming chemicals are not permitted. A trail network leads to wooded burial sites.

"By offering a recreational green space with walking trails, families are invited to embrace the space itself, and the cemetery enjoys a dual purpose," said Ed Bixby, founder of the Global Green Burial Alliance.

## MILITARY

# Billions more needed to build warships

Navy needs \$85B more per year to meet shipbuilding goals, CBO says

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy will need a budget boost of at least \$85 billion annually to realize an ambitious goal to grow its fleet by nearly 100 ships over the next three decades, according to a recent Congressional Budget Office analysis.

The service would need an estimated annual budget of \$340 billion to operate, purchase and maintain a fleet of 381 battle force ships as outlined in its most current shipbuilding proposal, the CBO said in a report Jan. 6.

That's roughly one-third more under current valuations than the Navy's \$255 billion budget in 2024, said the CBO, which analyzed the service's 30-year shipbuilding plan submitted to Congress in March.

That plan would grow the fleet to a level not seen since 2001, according to the report. The service now has about 296 numbered battle force ships, including aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines and combat logistics vessels, among others.

"Over the past decade, funding for ship construction reached its highest level since the Reagan Administration's defense buildup in the 1980s," the CBO said. "Since 2015, lawmakers have appropriated an average of \$2.5 billion more per year for shipbuilding than the President has requested, partly because of concerns that the fleet is too small to perform all of its mis-



BRANDEN BOURQUE/U.S. Navy

**The attack submarine USS Texas departs Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Maine on Dec. 6 for sea trials. In its 2024 plan the Navy envisioned purchasing as many as 35 next-generation attack submarines, but its 2025 proposal includes buying just 14 of the vessels.**

sions."

The Navy needs a larger, more flexible fleet to address growing threats in the Pacific, Europe and the Middle East, officials and naval analysts have argued.

An inadequately sized force is one reason why there are fewer Navy ships currently on patrol in the eastern Mediterranean Sea than in recent years, analysts recently said.

Presence in the Mediterranean is "partly threat-driven and situation-driven, and it's all conditioned by (the fact that) there aren't enough ships in the Navy," said Bradley Martin, a retired Navy surface warfare officer and director of the Rand Corp. National Security Supply Chain

Institute.

Under the Navy's 2025 shipbuilding plan, the service would buy fewer next-generation attack submarines and large surface ships, favoring proven current-generation submarines, destroyers and other vessels, according to the CBO report.

For example, in its 2024 plan the Navy envisioned purchasing as many as 35 next-generation attack submarines. Its 2025 proposal includes buying just 14 of them.

Instead, the service is opting to buy 36 Virginia-class fast-attack submarines in the coming decades. In 2024, the Navy said it would buy as few as 10 of those submarines.

Over the next 30 years, the Navy would buy 364 ships, or an average of about 12 annually, for an estimated \$903 billion.

That cost likely is higher — \$1.075 trillion in current-year dollars — when all expenses, such as outfitting new ships or purchasing oceanographic survey, sealift and other vessels not considered part of the battle force are included, the CBO said.

The Navy and CBO cost calculations also vary in the way they determine the design and capabilities of some future ships, as well as labor and other costs, the report stated.

The CBO cautioned that the estimates don't include costs for adding 134 surface and undersea

drones in the Navy's plan, which would bring its total platforms to 515 by 2054.

The report cast doubt on the Navy's ability to achieve its acquisition goals, which also include more missiles and unmanned systems on ships to make it more difficult for an opponent to destroy the fleet's offensive capability.

"If the Navy is unable to reduce the maintenance delays that it has been experiencing for more than a decade, it would not be able to deploy as many ships as achieving its 381-ship goal would suggest," the CBO said.

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## Army tests drone offering big-picture view of battlefield

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army has a surveillance drone prototype that when fielded will give brigade commanders a clearer picture of the battlefield terrain where soldiers are maneuvering, the service said this month.

The unmanned aircraft was delivered to the Army after two years of development and testing. A training phase is expected to be completed by the end of January.

The Army then will evaluate production proposals for its Future Tactical Uncrewed Aircraft Systems, with awards anticipated by the end of 2025, the service said in a Dec. 20 statement.

The program "will provide brigade combat teams with an organic capability for reconnaissance and surveillance operations, enabling them to collect, develop, and report actionable intelligence," the Army statement said.

The system could be fielded as soon as 2026.

Incorporating an array of drones into combat formations has been a focal point for the Army in recent years as it looks for ways to give its ground forces an advantage on modern battlefields.

While sophisticated drones have been part of the U.S. military's arsenal for decades, the Russia-Ukraine war has high-



U.S. Army

**The Army has taken delivery of the Textron Systems MK 4.8 HQ Aerosonde drone prototype.**

lighted how relatively simple unmanned systems can be put to effective use by junior soldiers in small units.

At Army training centers, soldiers have been busy working

with both hand-held drones and more advanced systems.

For example, U.S. troops training in Romania in November were the first to try out a pair of drone systems designed for in-

fantry and scout platoons on dismounted patrols. Those drones give ground troops a better view of the immediate area.

The prototype delivered to the Army in December is focused on the bigger picture, enabling commanders to "maintain dominance during multi-domain operations," the Army said.

The system is known as the MK 4.8 HQ Aerosonde and was developed by Textron Systems.

It has a variety of features sought by the Army, including vertical take-off and landing capabilities.

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## MILITARY



JEFF GRITCHEN/Orange County (Calif.) Register

Firefighters work to control a blaze at the North Hangar at the former Marine Corps Air Station Tustin, Calif., on Nov. 7, 2023.

## Tustin hangar fire cost Navy over \$123M since blaze in 2023

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has pumped over \$123 million into the clean-up of a World War II anti-submarine blimp hangar in Southern California destroyed by fire more than a year ago.

Workers for the Navy have hauled away over 395 tons of twisted and charred steel from the wreckage at the former Marine Corps Air Station Tustin, along with 77 tons of toxic waste and 1,180 tons of other debris, according to a tally by the Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command.

David Bennett, a Navy spokesman for the project, said work will “continue through the first quarter of 2025.”

Fire broke out Nov. 7, 2023, at one of two landmark World War II blimp hangars, towering historic landmarks in the heart of Orange County, home to 3.2 million people. Plumes of smoke and airborne debris settled across a wide swath of suburban housing tracts, schools and parks.

After initially battling the blaze from the ground and helicopters, fire officials removed responders because of concerns they could be killed or injured if the 17-story, 1,000-foot-long, 300-foot-wide hangar collapsed.

Built with two-million board feet of Oregon Douglas fir trees, the hangar smoldered, then repeatedly flared over the next 24 days, before it was declared officially extinguished on Dec. 1, 2023.

The South Hangar, a virtual twin just a few hundred feet away, was untouched by the blaze.

As of the end of December 2024, the Navy has spent \$20 million on direct demolition and clearance of the North Hangar site, while it has paid the City of Tustin that sits next to the hangars, a total of \$103.3 million in six installments.

Late last summer, Tustin officials said the city’s costs could top \$150 million before the recovery was over.

The money would come from

the Navy, which was deemed the responsible party for damages from the fire by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The cause of the fire remains unknown.

The Navy’s webpage for the clean-up gives a 15-month timeline from the beginning of debris removal on July 8 until work is completed.

Two hangars were erected in farmland about 35 miles south of Los Angeles following the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The project was completed in less than a year. The hangars housed Navy anti-submarine blimps that patrolled the Pacific coast for signs of Japanese ships or submarines.

After World War II, the hangars became the centerpiece of the 1,600-acre Marine Corps Air Station Tustin, home to 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing helicopters. Fighter jets and transports flew from the nearby Marine Corps Air Station El Toro.

Both bases were closed in 1999.

# Special counsels now prosecuting harassment cases

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Military commanders lost their authority to overturn court-martial findings in the most serious sexual harassment cases as of Jan. 1, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

Under a plan approved by Congress, certain sexual harassment cases under the Uniform Code of Military Justice — the military’s set of laws — will be investigated and prosecuted by the new Offices of Special Trial Counsel in each service branch.

The Defense Department issued a statement confirming the special trial counsels of the Army, Air Force, Navy and the Marine Corps will take over Article 134 sexual harassment cases.

Article 134 is the military’s “general article” covering “all disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces, all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the armed forces, and crimes and offenses not capital, of which persons subject to this chapter may be guilty, shall be taken cognizance of by a general, special, or summary court-martial,” according to the U.S. Manual of Courts-Martial.

Article 134 has several subsections dealing with specific violations, including disloyal statements, fraternization, underage drinking, abusing animals, adultery and gambling with subordinates.

Sexual harassment violations under Article 134 are defined as knowingly making sexual advances, demands or requests for sexual favors. The advances must also have been unwelcome, and a reasonable person would believe submission or rejection to the advances would have an effect on the targeted person’s job, pay, career, benefits or entitlements. It is also defined as severe, repetitive or pervasive, creating a hostile environment and being to the prejudice of good order and discipline, and a discredit on the armed forces.

The maximum penalty for each count of sexual harassment is a dishonorable discharge for enlisted personnel or dismissal from service for officers, total forfeiture of pay and allowances, and confinement for up to two years.

Congress has acted to remove commanders from exercising

discretionary authority on prosecution and punishment for 14 “covered offenses” of the UCMJ, including nearly all sex crimes, kidnapping, manslaughter and murder.

Some lawmakers said they pushed for reforms after receiving several reports of “command influence” in which charges were not brought against senior officers or findings were overturned following courts-martial.

The special trial counsels were established in late December 2023 and began taking cases immediately.

In past cases, officers were sometimes allowed to accept retirement, with a reduction in rank, with an honorable discharge in lieu of dismissal, the military’s equivalent of a dishonorable discharge for officers.

Lawmakers who supported removing commanders from the decision-making process said they hoped it would create a more professional prosecution and punishment of offenders.

“We’re trying to professionalize how these cases are handled,” Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said in May 2021. “We are creating a state-of-the-art [District Attorney’s] office within the military to handle all serious crimes.”

The addition of sexual harassment cases to the slate of crimes handled by special trial counsels was delayed until 2025 to allow the new offices more time to develop reporting methods and standards.

Before Jan. 1, decisions to charge service members with sexual harassment under Article 134 were made by unit commanders. The commanders also reviewed the outcome of cases that went to court-martial and had the unilateral power to vacate sentences or overturn verdicts with which they disagreed.

The new rules mean appeals of courts-martial handled by the special trial counsels can only be reviewed and altered by the secretaries of the service branches.

Conviction for sexual harassment under Article 134 is considered a felony, which could limit the guilty person’s ability to get a job, vote, and buy firearms, among other civilian penalties, once the person has left military service.

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