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Celebrating Month of the Military Child

What my military childhood taught me

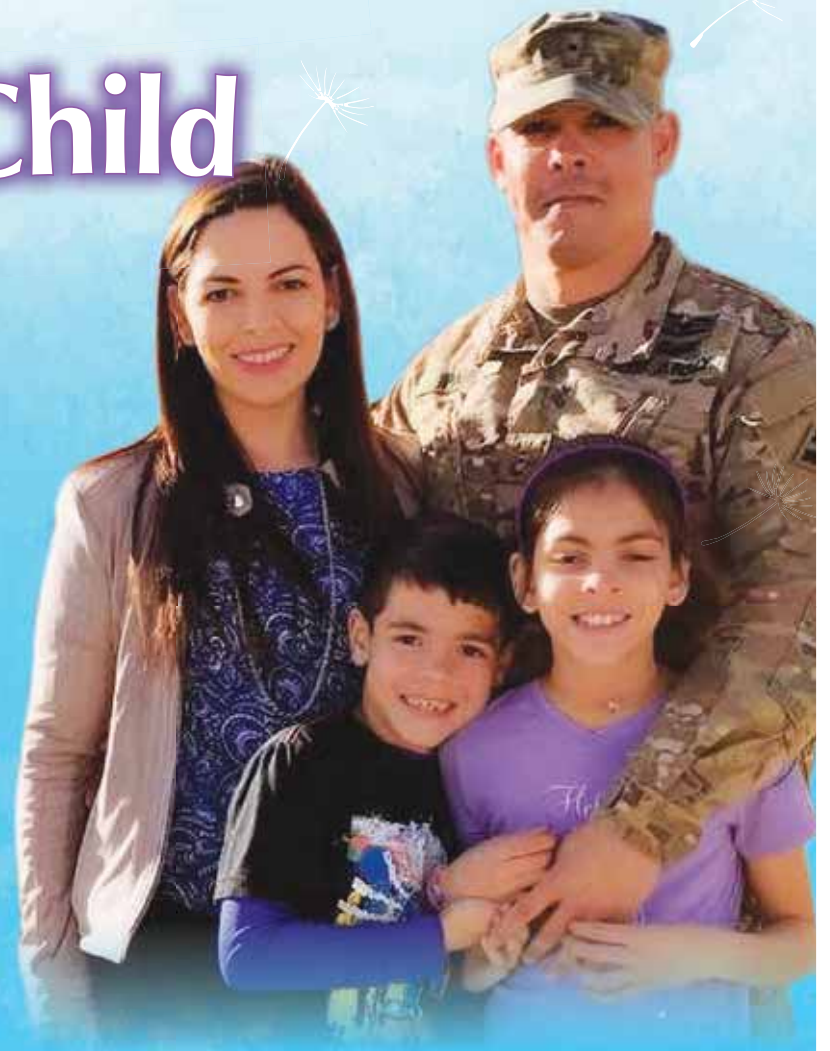
STORY AND PHOTO BY YERIANYS PADIN CARO, 12TH GRADE, ZAMA MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

As my senior year comes to an end, I find myself looking back at a life filled with deployments, new schools, airport goodbyes, and countdown calendars. Being a military child is not just something you say. It is something you live every single day.

When I was little, it was hard to understand why my dad had to leave so often. I did not understand what deployment really meant. I just knew that he would pack his bags, hug us tight, and be gone for months. I remember asking when he would come back. I remember missing him at school events and family dinners. As a child, it felt confusing and unfair.

Through it all, my mom was our strength. She always puts us before anything. No matter how hard it was for her, she made sure we felt safe, supported, and loved. She kept our home calm when everything else felt unsure. Looking back, I realize how much she carried so that we would not feel the full weight of it.

As time went by and we grew older, my dad continued to deploy, attend training schools, and leave for long periods of



SEE CHILDHOOD ON PAGE 2

Growing up as a devil dog's daughter

BY ADRIANA ANDERSON, 5TH GRADE, OKINAWA CHRISTIAN SCHOOL INTERNATIONAL

For me, as the daughter of a United States Marine, it means growing up with constant change, adventure, and learning how to be resilient.

I was born in Okinawa, Japan, eleven years ago. A few years after that, we moved to Germany. Living there was exciting, but sometimes hard. I made friends from many different places, but I always knew we might have to say goodbye sooner than I wanted.

I especially remember visiting Belleau Wood in France, where U.S. Marines fought bravely in World War I. It was there that Marines earned their famous nickname, the "Devil Dogs," because of their courage. Walking through the quiet cemetery, surrounded by tall

trees and rows of white crosses, I felt proud, yet also a little sad, thinking about the sacrifices military members and their families make.

Later, we lived in Virginia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though that time was uncertain, living in America was still exciting because I got to explore new places and feel closer to family.

One amazing part of being a military child is traveling. By now, I have lived in or visited 29 countries on four continents (in some countries more than once). Living in different places has taught me how to be kind, open-minded, and respectful toward other cultures.

Now I am back in Okinawa again. I am thankful for this chapter, especially reconnecting with my Okinawan nanny, Aika-san. Military life is not always easy, but it has made me open-minded, grateful, and resilient.



Send your Month of the Military Child submission to MilitaryChild@stripes.com by April 15!

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Photos courtesy of Yerianys Padin Caro



CHILDHOOD: 'This journey makes you braver than you know'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

time. It never became easy. You never fully get used to saying goodbye to someone you love. But a part of me learned to understand. I knew that in a few months he would be back. I learned patience. I learned how to count down the days. I learned how to be strong even when I missed him a lot.

Moving became normal. New schools have become normal. Making friends and then having to say goodbye became normal. Starting over in new places, sometimes even new countries, shaped how I see the world. I learned that home is not just one place. Home is wherever your family is.

Being a military child taught me more than I could ever learn in a classroom. It taught me resilience. It taught me independence. It taught me how to adapt to change and not be afraid of it. It taught me how to sit with uncertainty and still move forward.

The only thing I would ever change is having my dad with me all the time. No child wants to spend holidays, birthdays, or everyday moments without their parents. That part never gets easier. But I also know that my dad gave us an incredible life. Because of his service, I experienced places, cultures, and lessons that many people never will.

People often say military kids serve too. And in a way we do. We carry the strength we had to build early. We learn how to say goodbye and still stay strong.

Now, as I am preparing to graduate high school, my dad has just retired after 28 years of service. It feels like the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. While I am stepping into my future, he is stepping into a new season of life too.

I am proud of my dad for his sacrifice.

I am proud of my mom for her strength.

And I am proud of the person this life shaped me to be.



I am proud because, to us, we learned to call home every place we were together.

To all the military kids out there, stay strong and remember this journey makes you braver than you know.

Writer's bio: Yerianys Padin Caro is a senior at Zama Middle High School who enjoys staying involved in both academics and extracurriculars. She's currently taking fashion dual enrollment courses to prepare for a future career in fashion and recently started a fashion club to share her creativity and ideas with other students.



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BLAZ MARINES MAKE DIFFERENCE IN GUAM SCHOOLS



Sgt. Darren Ascura and Sgt. Erwin Mariano huddle with students.



Ascura and Mariano judge a race between students wearing a Navy K9 training suit, and a Marine Corps flak jacket and kevlar.



Mariano and Staff Sgt. Kelli Williams help a student with gear.



‘They supported me my entire young adult life’

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHELSEY SUAREZ-PIERCE, MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP BLAZ

AGAT — On Feb. 27, Marines assigned to Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz volunteered at Oceanview Middle School’s career fair, supporting an initiative designed to encourage early career exploration and professional development. Among the participating service members were three Marines who had once walked the same halls as the students they were now addressing. The Marines returned to their alma mater, reconnecting with former teachers, faculty, and classmates who now serve as educators at the school.

The event featured a booth-style setup, where students were encouraged to visit all participating tables, take notes, and ask any questions that sparked their curiosity. Through engaging video reels, props, and enthusiasm, the Marines were able to engage the students and even spark a friendly Navy and Marine Corps competition. The Marines shared details about the diverse occupational specialties within the Marine Corps, as well as the physical demands of training. They also highlighted a variety of opportunities available to Marines, including travel,

education, and professional development. Through these interactions, students gained a deeper understanding of what it means to be a United States Marine, and, perhaps even more importantly, what it means to be a Marine serving on the island of Guam.

“This school, this village, and these teachers and faculty supported me throughout my entire young adult life,” said Gunnery Sgt. Jessica Suarez-Pierce, manpower chief, Headquarters Company, Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz. “Having the opportunity to return to my school and support the growth of the next generation on the island I call home is one of the greatest rewards the Marine Corps has given me.”

During the fair, several faculty members and teachers visited the Camp Blaz booth, proudly welcoming their former students back and admiring their achievements. “Having our former students return as Marines and give back to the school is truly special,” said Dr. Rose F. Castro, Principal of Oceanview Middle School. “Watching them grow, both personally and professionally, and hearing about their successes is one of the greatest joys we experience as educators.”

‘We’re here to be part of the community’

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CPL. BRAYDEN DANIEL, MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP BLAZ

YIGO — Marines assigned to Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz spent the morning collecting trash and clearing debris along Finegayan Elementary School’s fence line and playground area before trading work gloves for handshakes and high-fives with students during lunch and recess on Feb. 27, 2026.

The volunteer effort, coordinated between the installation and school officials, focused on improving the appearance and safety of the campus while building meaningful connections with local families. Armed with trash bags and rakes, Marines moved methodically along the school’s outer boundary, removing litter and overgrown brush that had accumulated along the fence line.

School administrators said the cleanup made an immediate impact on the campus environment and demonstrated the Marines’ continued investment in the island community.

After completing the cleanup, the Marines joined students for lunch and recess, answering questions about life in the Marine Corps and participating in playground games. For many students, it was a chance to interact with service members they often see in uniform throughout the island.

“As Marines stationed in Guam, we’re not just here to train — we’re here to be part of the community,” said Pfc. Gabriel Cajas, military police, Provost Marshal’s Office, MCBCB. “Opportunities like this show that we stand ready to help and support the people who call this island home.”

The event is one of several community engagement efforts conducted by Marines aboard the installation, underscoring Camp Blaz’s role not only as a growing operational hub in the Indo-Pacific, but also as a trusted partner dedicated to service beyond the gate.

For the Marines involved, the day served as a reminder that even small acts — picking up trash, sharing a meal or pushing a swing — can strengthen relationships and reinforce a simple message: Camp Blaz is here to help.

“The students enjoyed having the Marines here,” said Rose Salas, a Finegayan Elementary School faculty member. “They had so much fun interacting with them, sharing lunch and spending time together during recess, and it meant a great deal to our faculty and staff to see that connection; it reminds the students that Marines at Camp Blaz are not just service members but role models. We look forward to welcoming them back

again.”

As the Marine Corps Service Component for Joint Region Marianas, MCBCB provides power projection capabilities from which operational forces train, deploy, redeploy, and reconstitute; while providing support to tenant organizations, military personnel, and their families. MCBCB operates a training base that promotes the combat readiness of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) and the missions of other tenant commands. MCBCB provides training venues, facilities, services, and support that meets the Marine Corps’ future combat requirements and is responsive to the needs of Marines, Sailors, and their families.



Lance Cpl. Mark Dvoskin and Pfc. Jadon Samulski pick up trash.



1st Sgt. Philip Sandfire speaks with students.



Sgt. Alex Rivera plays a game with students.



Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Mark Dvoskin plays a game with students.



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5-star TRICARE rating for USNH Guam

BY REGENA KOWITZ,
U.S. NAVAL HOSPITAL GUAM

The U.S. Naval Hospital on Guam has earned a 5-star rating in the TRICARE Inpatient Satisfaction Survey (TRISS) for the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2025, the eighth time in the past three years the hospital has received the survey's highest distinction.

The TRISS measures patients' perceptions of their hospital experience, from communication with clinicians to discharge planning and overall confidence in the care they receive. In a forward-deployed setting like Guam, hospital staff say those experiences are what build the confidence that encourages service members and families to seek care early, stay engaged with their treatment, and return when new health concerns arise – all factors that directly support medical readiness. That confidence starts with transparency.

Throughout the hospital's inpatient units, interdisciplinary teams meet repeatedly during the day to ensure every member of the care team, and every patient, understands the plan of care. Clinicians present options, explain risks and benefits, and invite patients to make informed decisions based on their personal goals and values.

"All members of our staff meet and discuss regularly during the day to keep all parties informed on the plan of care, and so patients are able to get consistent and accurate updates on their plan," said Lt. Alexander Pazevic, a Navy physician and



Sailors from U.S. Naval Hospital Guam prepare for their annual dress whites inspection. Sailors on island will not switch from their dress white uniform to their dress blue uniform in the fall with the rest of the fleet due to the island's climate.

Photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Kristina Rasco, U.S. Navy

the Multi-Service Unit director. "Plans are made through shared decision making, outlining the risks and benefits, allowing the patient to make a personalized and informed decision on how they want to proceed based on their goals and preferences rather than blanket decisions that leave them out of the loop."

Pazevic said that approach is particularly important for active-duty patients who may delay seeking care if they fear how a diagnosis could affect their careers. By focusing on clear communication and long-term health, the team helps patients understand that medical decisions are made in partnership with them, not for them.

Across the inpatient units, that approach is most visible in the one-on-one interactions that patients and their families

remember long after they leave the hospital.

"Our nurses and corpsmen bringing a positive attitude and a passion for helping those in need, despite reprioritization of tasks throughout the day or night, are what make the biggest difference to patients and their families," said Lt. Alysa Valdez, a Navy clinical nurse specialist in the Multi-Service Unit. "Seeing staff members take a moment to sit, listen and even provide a warm embrace has helped to ease the heart-felt burdens of the unexpected circumstances families face."

Valdez described a pediatric case in which the entire care team coordinated to minimize a painful procedure, retrieve medications for the family, and conduct discharge teaching together in a seamless, patient-centered process that ensured the family left the

hospital feeling confident and supported.

For the hospital's junior Sailors, that kind of experience helps them grow from corpsmen fresh out of training into skilled and caring medical professionals.

Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Sara Barreda, directorate leading petty officer for nursing services, said watching new corpsmen "fresh from Corpsman A school" grow into confident caregivers is one of the most rewarding parts of her role.

"From assisting in a patient's first labor to supporting end of life care, our corpsmen are entrusted with significant responsibility early in their careers," Barreda said. "Their ability to combine clinical competence with genuine compassion reflects the strength of our training and the culture we cultivate within our directorate."

In the Mother-Baby Unit, that culture is sustained through constant collaboration across departments and a strong emphasis on mentorship. Nurses, corpsmen, and clinicians train together, learn from one another, and maintain continuous communication so patients experience a single, unified team.

When asked what specific actions by nurses make the biggest difference to patients and their families, U.S. Navy Lt. Katherine Leonard, perinatal clinical nurse specialist, said it is "their willingness to go the extra mile for their patients, not only to keep them safe and provide competent care, but to make them feel connected to their care team and ensure that they have a special birth experience."

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Frederick Hatch serves communities during patrol

BY CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER SARA MUIR,
U.S. COAST GUARD FORCES MICRONESIA/
SECTOR GUAM

SANTA RITA — The crew of USCGC Frederick Hatch patrolled more than 500 miles of U.S. waters from Guam to the remote Northern Mariana Islands during a 20-day operation to secure U.S. waters, deter illegal migration, and enforce federal law across one of the nation’s most expansive maritime regions.

The Frederick Hatch crew deployed February 9 through March 1 as part of Operation Rematau, the Coast Guard’s standing law enforcement and security operation in Micronesia. The crew logged 186 hours underway, maintaining a persistent presence in U.S. territorial waters and the exclusive economic zone to detect, deter, and disrupt illegal activity, and to provide search-and-rescue capability. The patrol stretched across waters surrounding Guam, Saipan, Tinian, and the remote volcanic islands of Pagan and Agrihan.

“When we pulled into Pagan and Agrihan and handed supplies to people who haven’t seen a ship in months, you remember why this job matters. We secure these waters for the residents and the nation. That same sense of purpose motivated this crew through four days of searching for a missing swimmer off Tanguisson in heavy seas,” said Lt. Anna Maria Vaccaro, commanding officer of USCGC Frederick Hatch.

Securing the waters from Guam to the Northern Islands The CNMI’s Northern Islands stretch hundreds of miles across open ocean with no permanent law enforcement presence, making them vulnerable to

illegal and unauthorized maritime activity. Frederick Hatch provided that presence, patrolling offshore and monitoring vessel traffic to ensure the Coast Guard maintained a clear picture of who was operating in U.S. waters.

The cutter also embarked a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Department of Fish and Wildlife officer for four days to observe offshore maritime activity and assess conditions around the remote Northern Islands, strengthening the interagency partnership that underpins federal law enforcement in the region and protects living marine resources.

Supplies delivered to Pagan and Agrihan While operating in the Northern Islands, Frederick Hatch’s crew transported 1,500 pounds of food and supplies from Saipan and delivered them to the small number of residents living on Pagan and Agrihan. The two volcanic islands sit roughly 200 miles north of Saipan with no regular transportation links, and the cutter’s patrol provided an opportunity to resupply their communities. The delivery reflects the Coast Guard’s role in the region: securing remote U.S. territory while serving its residents.

Search and rescue off Tanguisson Beach On the evening of February 10, a 22-year-old swimmer was swept beyond the reef line by strong rip currents at Tanguisson Beach on Guam’s western coast. The Frederick Hatch crew executed a short-notice recall and got underway that night



On Feb. 22, the crew of the USCGC Frederick Hatch delivers supplies to the residents of Agrihan Island. Photos by U.S. Coast Guard

to conduct 96 hours of offshore search operations. The cutter worked alongside Coast Guard Station Apra Harbor boat crews, Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 25, Guam Fire Rescue, Guam Police, and Guam National Guard aviation assets in the multi-agency effort.

“Our crew sends our deepest condolences to the family and friends of the swimmer who remains missing. We hope our effort provides some measure of peace in these difficult times,” said Vaccaro.

Building the crew to meet the mission Frederick Hatch advanced crew readiness throughout the patrol, qualifying five members in roles ranging from quartermaster of the watch to boat deck captain. The crew also completed multiple damage control and engineering training drills to sharpen its ability to respond under demanding conditions.



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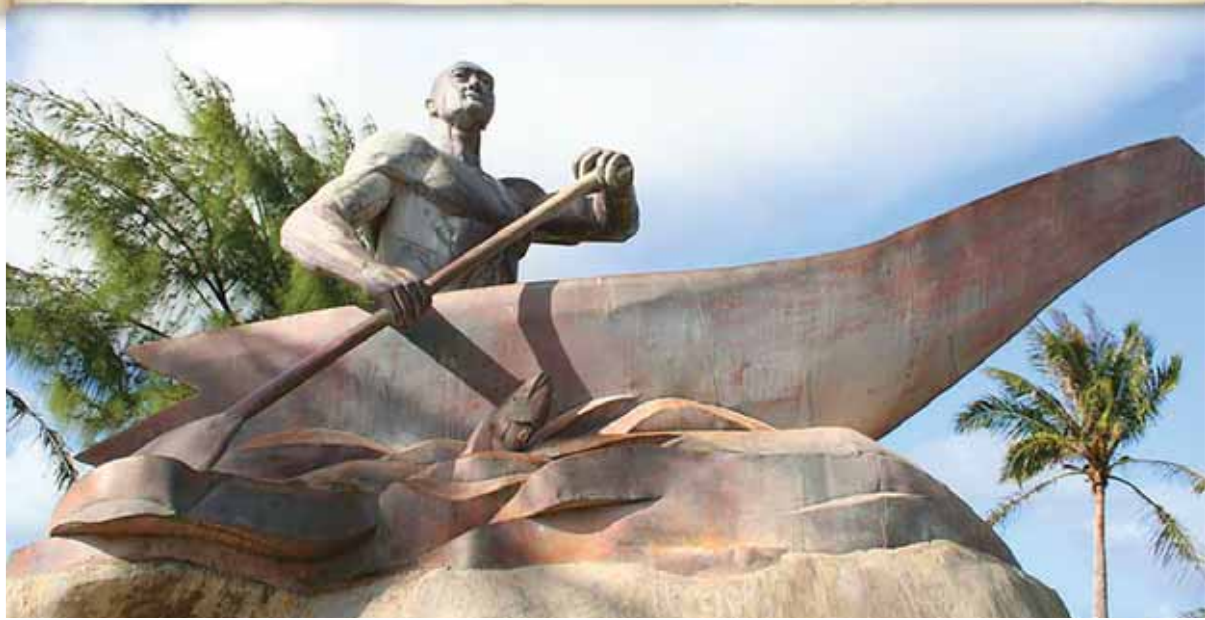
GET TO KNOW



A VILLAGE PROFILE COURTESY OF GUAMPEDIA

Editor's Note: The U.S. territory of Guam is comprised of 19 villages, many with their own distinct character, history and points of interest. Stripes Guam and Guampedia have joined forces to present this weekly feature on each of them in the hopes that it will help our readers get out – and get to know – our gracious hosts. To learn more about Guam's people, history, culture and places, visit: guampedia.com

Inarajan (Inalåhan)Old-world Spanish-style charm



Legendary Chief Gadao paddles his half of a canoe to Inalåhan after outsmarting a Tumon chief in a contest of strength.
Photo by Nathalie Pereda, Guampedia

BY LEO BABAUTA,
GUAMPEDIA

The village's CHamoru name, Inalåhan, probably refers to the *åla* or large woven coconut-leaf harvest baskets for which the village was noted. The name could also be derived from the word *hålla*, meaning to pull something or move something with a rope tied to it. In written historical documents, the Spanish changed all the l's in CHamoru words to

r's, thus changing the village's name to Inarajan. The official spelling was changed in 2021 to Inalåhan.

Village history

Not much is known about the early inhabitants of Inalåhan, which was a village before the Spanish arrived on Guam. The village was officially established in 1680 by the Spanish, along with St. Joseph Church, and was one of the main villages on Guam during the Spanish era. The village was designed in the Spanish custom with the church as its focus.

The Spanish were also responsible for an unusual addition to the residents of the village, as the residents of the northernmost Mariana Islands, known as Gåni (including Anatahan, Sarigan, Alamagan, Pagan, Agrihan, and Asuncion), were relocated to Inalåhan and Malesso' in the late 1600s. The Spanish relocation of the CHamoruses, including the consolidation of the villages of Guam, was done to better control the local people during the Spanish-CHamoru wars that were going on at the time. There is still a section of Inalåhan known as "As Gani" today.

The St. Joseph Church is named after the village's

patron saint of San Jose or St. Joseph. It contains a large statue of St. Joseph that, according to oral tradition, was brought to Guam by the Spanish, who intended to bring it to Humåtak. But a storm prevented the ship from going to Humåtak, and it ended up landing in Inalåhan, where the statue remained.

The church has been rebuilt several times, and the current church was built in 1939. It was damaged during the bombing of World War II, and in the earthquake of 1993, the church's steeple fell to the ground. It was rehabilitated in the late 1990s by the Parish Council, the church Pastor, and parishioners.

The church is famous as being the burial site of Father Jesus Baza Duenas, a local martyr who was one of the only two CHamoru priests on Guam during World War II. Father Duenas was arrested on 8 July 1944 in Inalåhan by the Japanese police on suspicion of aiding the American fugitive, Navy radioman George Tweed. Father Duenas had also angered the Japanese authorities by opposing official directives and calling the two Japanese priests on Guam propagandists for Japan. He was tortured, along with his nephew, former Island Attorney Eduardo Duenas, at Inalåhan and at the police headquarters in Agana Heights. On July 12, the two men were beheaded at Tai, a section in the village of Mangilao. Father Duenas's body was exhumed in March 1945 and reburied under the altar of St. Joseph's, where he had served. The island's only Catholic boys' high school in Tai, Mangilao is named after him.

While Inalåhan, sitting so close to the sea, has been hit hard by a number of typhoons, the most notable include a supertyphoon in 1900 that killed twenty-eight Inalåhan residents when huge waves engulfed the village, and Typhoon Allyn, which destroyed many homes in the village in 1949. ↗



This historic photo, circa 1950, shows Inarajan's main street surrounded by homes some built in the early 1900s. Inarajan is one of two Guam villages (the other is Hagåtña) designated as an historic district. National Park Services



Left: Hungry customers wait for their order at McKraut's Fast Food located along Malojloj Highway. Right: Bear Rock, far right, is a large natural rock formation at the edge of Agfayan Bay. Photos by Nathalie Pereda, Guampedia



Points of interest

➤ Institutions

Inalåhan Elementary School

This school, built in 1997, is a Guam Department of Education elementary school. It is located south of the main village.



Established in the late 17th century, St. Joseph's Church has been rebuilt several times by the community most recently in the late 1990s. Photo by Nathalie Pereda, Guampedia

Inalåhan Middle School

Inalåhan Middle School, one of eight public middle schools, was constructed in 1973 and served as a high school until the late 1990s. It is now a small middle school that sits atop a hill above the village.

St. Joseph Church

Inalåhan's Catholic church was established by the Spanish in late 1680 and has been rebuilt several times, most recently in the late 1990s. It has been the center of the village for several hundred years. The village holds two fiestas for its patron saint: one in March in honor of St. Joseph, Husband of Mary, and another in May in honor of St. Joseph, the Worker.



Ancient pictographs adorn a wall of Gadao's Cave in Guaifan, Inarajan. This particular symbol has become a Guam cultural icon. Photo by Nathalie Pereda, Guampedia

This village at a glance

- **Population:** As of the 2010 US Census, the population was 2,273.
- **Village officials:** Anthony P. Chargualaf, Mayor 2020 – Present; Doris Flores Lujan, Mayor, 2013-2020; Franklin M. Taitague, Mayor, 2001-2012; Jesse L.G. Perez, Mayor, 1993-2001; Juan C. Cruz, Commissioner/Mayor, 1989-1993; Jaime D.S. Paulino, Commissioner, 1981-1989; Alfred S.N. Flores, Commissioner, 1976-1981; Jose P. San Nicolas, Commissioner, 1973-1976; Joaquin S.N. Diego, Commissioner, 1944-1973; Pedro M. Mantanona, Commissioner, 1935-1944; Mariano R. Leon Guerrero, Commissioner, 1935; Enrique Paulino Naputi, Commissioner, 1928; Romaldo C. Diego, Commissioner, 1919; Manuel D. Flores, Commissioner, 1917; Mariano R. Leon Guerrero, Commissioner, 1910; Jesus Aguon Flores, Commissioner, 1900; (No information is available for the century between Jesus Aguon Flores and Juan Mesa Naputi); Juan Mesa Naputi, Commissioner, 1800; Jose Evaristo Duenas, Commissioner, (no date provided); Jose Meno, Commissioner, (no date provided); Antonio (Julian) Mantanona, Commissioner, (no date provided) Enemesio S.N. Diego, Deputy Commissioner, 1935-1944; Pedro M. Mantanona, Deputy Commissioner, 1928; Ramon Guzman Fejeran, Deputy Commissioner, 1919; Jose L.G. Fejeran, Deputy Commissioner, 1917.
 - The preceding list was provided by Konsehelon Mahot Guåhan, the Mayor's Council of Guam.

• **Village description:** To the outside eye, the village of Inalåhan seems to have been untouched by the hand of change. It is known as the most distinctly Spanish-style village on the island, with the village proper on Inalåhan Bay, remaining basically intact over the decades.

A visitor could drive through the small Spanish barrio-style streets, which until recently were one-way streets, and see the history of Inalåhan in its old houses. The houses reflect a mixture of architecture influenced by the Spanish period and the early American period (early 1900s).

The village retains many of its traditional ways, with the St. Joseph Church still at the center of many activities, including the village's annual fiestas. Residents of the village are still a small number of families whose roots are deeply entwined in Inalåhan. Very few outsiders have moved into the village, and very few modern structures have been erected.

Part of what gives Inalåhan its heritage-rich flavor is

one of its more recent additions: the Gef Pa'go Cultural Village, which sits right on the bay. The village, which consists of ancient-style thatch-roofed huts, is staffed mainly by elder CHamorus who demonstrate traditional CHamoru arts, crafts, and cooking to visitors. A younger group of CHamoru cultural dancers also performs at Gef Pa'go called Inetnon Gef Pa'go.

Residents from all over the island drive south for Inalåhan's famous Hotnu Bakery, at the Gef Pa'go Cultural Village. The bakery serves freshly-made bread and pizzas cooked in the historic place. The bakery is open 10 a.m. to 3 pm Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays as of 2019.

The village was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 as an historic district, and is also designated as a folk arts village receiving federal funds for the preservation of its arts and culture. But to the older CHamorus, or manåmko', of the village, there are noticeable changes that have occurred in Inalåhan over the past few decades. The busloads of tourists and schoolchildren that come to visit Gef Pa'go, for example, have changed the pace of the village a bit. To accommodate those buses and other visitors, one of the one-way roads was expanded and paved into a modern two-lane road.

Inalåhan is divided into different sections, including areas known as Lada (near Bear Rock), Belen, Peca, Chagamin Lago, Se'se' (going uphill to Inalåhan Middle School), and Tinaga. One of the biggest sections is Malojloj, which sits uphill and north of the main village. The subcommunity of Malojloj began as a farming community in the 1950s and has grown over the past twenty years, so that it now has its own Catholic church, San Isidro, as well as a gas station, a convent, a solid waste transfer station, and the Inalåhan mayor's office.

Also north of the main village is the Inalåhan public health clinic, the University of Guam Agricultural Experiment Station, the Inalåhan Senior Citizens Center, Fire Station #16, Department of Public Works bus satellite station, US Post Office, and the wastewater treatment plant.

Driving south of the main village, the road passes natural swimming pools known as Salaglula Pools, and the small, seaside Tipogo Cemetery. The road nearly touches the ocean at Agfayan Bay, where visitors can see the famous Bear Rock, which at some angles is shaped like a bear. The newly constructed boat ramp near Agfayan Bridge is an ideal spot to take snapshots of Bear Rock. Further south is the Inalåhan Garden House (a resort reserved exclusively for employees of a Japanese corporation) and privately owned family beaches.

San Isidro Church

Located in the district of Malojloj, this Catholic church is a more recent structure than St. Joseph's. However, Malojloj residents take equal pride in their celebration of the Malojloj fiesta in May every year in honor of their patron saint, San Isidro.

Historical

Baptist Church ruins

Colorful bouganvilla cover the last remaining wall of the church which was initially constructed in the early 1900s adjacent to the Gef Pa'go Cultural Village along Inalåhan Bay. Beside it is a statue of legendary Chief Gadao erected in the late 1980s.

Gadao's Cave

Located in the area of Guaifan, near the entrance to Inalåhan Bay, is a cave with ancient pictographs of stick figure people well known on Guam and often used

as cultural icons. Chief Gadao was a legendary chief of Inalåhan who, according to legend, outsmarted a chief from Tumon who came to Inalåhan to challenge Gadao to contests of strength. Part of the legend tells how the two powerful chiefs rowed a canoe in opposite directions, breaking the canoe in half. A statue of Chief Gadao rowing his half of the canoe back to Inalåhan is located along the shores of the main village.

Historic homes

Some of the oldest homes in the village have been preserved using federal funds, and the Gef Pa'go Cultural Village gives a tour of the Leon Guerrero House, built in 1901, which housed the village commissioner and his 16 children.

The Jose Duenas Cruz (Beck-Ping Cruz) House is still being maintained by the Historic Inalåhan Foundation. The George Flores two-story building is under care of the Guam Preservation Trust, which has led restoration of much of historic Inalåhan.

SEE GUAM ON PAGE 10



Left: Talofofo Bay Beach Park Photo by Guampedia Right: Faithful March, Altar servers lead people in a procession in honor of village patron saint, St. Joseph. Photo by Victor Consaga, Guampedia

GUAM: Beautiful views by the ocean

Points of interest



Gef Pa'go Cultural Village stands along Inarajan Bay and provides daily tours giving visitors a taste of traditional Chamorro life. Photo by Nathalie Pereda, Guampedia

shape of a bear. Older residents know the rock as “Lasso’ Gi’ ai,” which refers to male genitalia.

Gef Pa’go Cultural Village

Located along Inalåhan Bay in the main village, the thatched huts of Gef Pa’go are a popular attraction for students, tourists and other interested visitors who want to learn about the island’s past. Manåmko’ will tell visitors stories of their childhood and give them demonstrations of traditional CHamoru cooking, crafts and arts. The cultural center also has exhibits of ancient CHamoru tools, tours of historical homes in the village, and cultural dances.

Salaglula Pools

These natural pools of sea water are located toward the southern side of the main village.



Salaglula Pools Photo by Guampedia

Talofoyo Bay Beach Park

This black-sand beach, which eroded considerably in the late 1990s, was once a popular park for swimmers and family gatherings. Though the pavilions are mostly destroyed now, the bay remains one of the island’s prime surfing spots. Although it is named Talo’fo’fo Bay park, its facilities are on the southern side of the bay, the area most people visit, is actually part of Inalåhan.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

Recreational

Bear Rock

Sitting at the edge of Agfayan Bay is a large, natural formation of rock that from some angles looks like the

See more of what Guam has to offer at GUAM.STRIPES.COM

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Photos courtesy of Japan Club of Guam

Guam Japan Festival to be held at Ypao Beach on April 11

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI, STRIPES GUAM

With the cheerful beat of taiko drums, lyrical tunes of traditional Japanese music and carnival foods from the Land of the Rising Sun, the Guam Japan Festival is back April 11!

Harumatsuri is a Japanese traditional festival to welcome the arrival of spring. In previous years, a local group of Japanese companies and individuals hosted the celebration in autumn as an Akimatsuri “autumn festival” every year since 1970 at Ypao Beach Park in November. Last year, the festival moved to spring, as the club wanted to avoid the fall typhoon season.

With the success of last year’s spring festival, which attracted many participants from the local community, tourists and the U.S. military, organizers have chosen “Tsunagu (connect) – Full Bloom” as this year’s theme, wishing the event will continue to bring people in Guam together with the image of Sakura, a symbol of spring.

“Spring symbolizes new beginnings, and we believe it will bring a fresh and vibrant energy to our beloved festival,” said Rui Miyamori, a public affairs officer with the Japan Club of Guam.

This annual festival originally started as a small Japanese community event to show their children a typical traditional Japanese

festival and culture. It has grown year after year, and today is considered the island’s largest annual festival – enjoyed by locals and tourists alike. The event attracts more than 37,000 people every year, according to the organizers. Partial proceeds go to the Japanese International Academy of Guam.

The festival is scheduled to run from 3 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the Governor Joseph Flores Beach Park (Ypao Beach Park) on April 11. The first

half will be dedicated to family-friendly activities. Beginning at 5:30 p.m., the event will feature live performances and alcohol sales for adults.

Visitors will get a rare glimpse into the Japanese festival culture, including bon odori dancing, mikoshi (portable shrine)-carrying and plenty of games and food booths. Performances scheduled include Japanese folk dancing, Aikido and sword-fighting demonstrations, wadaiko drum performances and a tuna filleting event.

Don’t miss yakisoba stir-fried noodles, yakitori skewered

chicken and other Japanese festival foods.

Tickets will be sold in groups of 10 for \$10 each. Money cannot be used at the booths, only tickets. Organizers recommend purchasing tickets in advance at the Japan Club of Guam in Pier Marine, Japanese International Academy of Guam and Tokyo Mart in Tamuning or online.

Parking is available at Freedom Park and John F. Kennedy High School. A free shuttle service will operate from 2:45 p.m.-10:15 p.m.

There are plenty of fun activities planned for the entire family, so make plans to attend the Guam Japan Festival!

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com



44th Guam Japan Festival – Harumatsuri (Spring Festival)

HOURS: April 11, 3 -9:30 p.m.
LOCATION: Ypao Beach Park
PHONE: (671) 646-8066 (The Japan Club of Guam)

* Japan Club of Guam is seeking sponsors, vendors, and performers. For more information, contact the office or email at jpclub@teleguam.net.



WEBSITE

Advance Tickets

*Sold in groups of 10 for \$10 each

Get your tickets in advance to avoid a long line at the ticket booth. You can buy tickets at Japan Club of Guam or Pier Marine [1st floor] (Till April 10, Mon., Tue., Thu. and Fri., 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.), Japanese International Academy of Guam (Till April 10, Mon. – Fri., 8 a.m. – 4 p.m., Sat. 8:30 a.m. – 11:30 p.m., 12:30 – 3:30 p.m. Cash Only) and Tokyo Mart in Tamuning (April 6 – 10, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.).



ONLINE TICKETS

Stage and field events you won’t want to miss

FIRST HALF

- 3 p.m. Opening
- 3:15 p.m. Chorus “Sakura Sakura” and “Niji”
- 3:25 p.m. Folk Dance “StarMine”
- 3:35 p.m. Jump rope performance (by students of Japanese International Academy)
- 3:50 p.m. Japanese Folk Dance Kids Troupe
- 4:02 p.m. Team Bark (sword-fighting performance)
- 4:17 p.m. Guam Wadaiko Juku Dolphin Jump (Wadaiko performance)
- 4:37 p.m. MoreYouRhythm (dance by seniors)
- 4:52 p.m. Guam Aikido (Aikido demonstration)

SECOND HALF

- 5:30 p.m. Opening performance (Guam Wadaiko Juku Dolphin Jump and Guma Taotao Tano), National Anthems, messages from event sponsors and VIP remarks
- Kagamiwari (sake barrel breaking) ceremony
- 6:15 p.m. Mikoshi Parade and Bon Odori dancing
- 6:45 p.m. Tuna filleting show
- 7 p.m. Japanese folk dance and Bon Odori (Japanese Folk Dance Kids Troupe)
- 7:30 p.m. Team bark (sword-fighting performance)
- 7:40 p.m. MoreYouRhythm (dance by seniors)
- 7:55 p.m. Guam Wadaiko Juku Dolphin Jump (wadaiko performance)
- 8:25 p.m. Mikoshi Parade and Bon Odori dancing (by Kosaikai)
- 9:20 p.m. Closing Remarks



Land snails of the Mariana Islands

BY ALEXANDER M. KERR,
GUAMPEDIA

Pacific Islands, including the Mariana Islands, often have many small native snails. Many of the species in the Marianas are unique to the archipelago, or even to only one of the islands. Some of these snails live in trees in the moist and shaded forests, while others live in the moss and leaf litter of the forest floor. Guam has about 100 species of land snails, although about twenty of these have probably been introduced.

Cultural history

In the Chamorro language, land snails in general are called *akaleha*. Land snails appear not to have been used as food or used in material culture, given their absence from the archeological record and oral culture. Intriguingly, some snails spread through the Pacific by hitching a ride on ancient canoes and cargo. Archeological research indicates that several widely distributed snails repeatedly show up on islands at about the same time as did the earliest human inhabitants. The same pattern appears to hold true for the Mariana Islands.

The first Europeans to collect the land snails of the Mariana Islands were Jean-René Constant Quoy and Joseph Paul Gaimard, the scientists aboard the French naval vessel *Uranie*, Captain Louis Claude de Freycinet commanding, which stopped on Guam in April of 1819 during its circumnavigation of the world during the



A group of women making akaleha' (land snail) products. Women standing: in a mestisa to the left is Rita Perez Torres and on the right Maria Torres Limtiaco. Photo taken in Sinajana post WWII.

Photo courtesy of the Guam Public Library System and the Department of CHamoru Affairs

years 1817 to 1820. The only recorded use for land snails was an apparently relatively recent practice—to bead the large and colorful *Partula* snails into purses for export and sale to tourists. This practice is of uncertain origin, but one that apparently ceased after World War II and as *Partula* became rarer on the heavily populated larger islands after the mid-20th century.

Diversity and systematics

Land snails belong to two main evolutionary or taxonomic groups, the informal group Pulmonata (formerly a taxonomic order), that is, the lung-bearing snails, and the clade Caenogastropoda (formerly a taxonomic superorder), a large group of primarily marine snails that all retain the ancestral gills of their marine gastropod or snail cousins.

The shell-less slugs are all members of the air-breathing pulmonate family, but several slug groups have independently evolved through the partial or complete loss of their shell. The land snails of the Indo-west Pacific are not at all well documented. In the Mariana Islands, there are about 110 known distinct species, and even a couple of dozen of these still require formal scientific

names and descriptions. Many of the Mariana Island species have only been collected from the southern islands of Saipan, Tinian, Rota and Guam. The fauna of the northern islands remains the least known.

The best-known snails in

the Mariana Islands are the tree snails in the family Partulidae from the genera *Partula* and *Samoana*. The first *Partula* described from the Mariana Islands, *Partula gibba*, is the most widely distributed in the archipelago. Another species, *Partula radiolata*, is endemic to, and still widely distributed within, the

largest and southernmost island of Guam. Another species, *Partula salifana* was discovered in the forests surrounding the summit of Mt. Alifan of Guam. The fourth species, *P. langfordi* is restricted to the tiny island of Aguiguan. The fifth Marianas partulid, *Samoana fragilis*, is known from northern Guam and Rota.

Current decline

Across the Pacific, there is an ongoing and unprecedented rate of extinctions documented for native snail species. Sadly, the same holds true for the snail fauna of the Mariana Islands, where the numbers of nearly all species have declined precipitously during the

latter half of the 20th century. Many species have not been seen alive in half a century, some, in fact, not since the publication of their original descriptions.

The cause of the declines in the Marianas are primarily due to habitat destruction and the imprudent introductions of generalist predators such as the gastropods snails – *Gonaxis rosea* to control yet another invasive gastropod, the agricultural pest *Achatina fulica*, the giant African land snail. In unparalleled biological irony, these predators, as well as their endemic prey, have now fallen prey to the introduction of the generalist predatory flatworm *Platydemas manokwari*. The worm appears to have also essentially eliminated the introduced snail predators, but still decimates native species.

The upshot is that the forests of the southern Marianas are now nearly devoid of native snail species, including on most islands the iconic and once prolific *Partula*. Declines of partulids have been of the order that the two Marianas *Partula* having the most restricted distributions—*Partula salifana* and *Partula langfordi*, are now undoubtedly extinct, and *Partula radiolata* is probably reduced on Guam to a few thousand animals. Even *Partula gibba* no longer occurs in vast areas of its formerly broad range; on Guam, it probably exists as a few hundred animals. As a result of the carnage wrought by the foolish introduction of the predatory worm, the faded, pocked and empty shells of *Partula* and other snails now litter Guam's forests. They will soon erode and fragment, such that most evidence of their existence will be gone forever in another decade or so.

This is a reprint from Guampedia.com, an online resource about Guam history and the CHamoru people, used here with permission.



An akaleha' (land snail) bracelet from the Van Peenen collection made on Guam (1940-1941).

Photo courtesy of the Department of CHamoru Affairs



A young lady poses with a display of akaleha' (land snail) products.

Photo courtesy of the Guam Public Library System and the Department of CHamoru Affairs



Partula radiolata, whose shell is shown here, is a rare tree snail found only on Guam currently in danger of extinction.

Photo courtesy of Alexander M. Kerr



Pythia scarabaeus, a snail native to the Mariana Islands, is found widely in the western Pacific.

Photo courtesy of Alexander M. Kerr



The *Achatina fulica*, commonly called giant African snail, was introduced to the Mariana Islands and is an agricultural pest.

Photo courtesy of Alexander M. Kerr



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Upcoming Events

GUAM VISITORS BUREAU

Tour of Guam

DATES: April 26
LOCATION: Skinner Plaza / Guam Museum, Hagåtña
SHOW TIME: 5:30 a.m.
GO TIME: 6:30 a.m.
FACEBOOK: @touofguamcycling
INSTAGRAM: @touofguam

Whether you are a competitive powerhouse or a scenic rider, this is your chance to traverse the breathtaking landscapes of Hagåtña and beyond. This signature event offers two distinct distances to suit your skill level:

- **105KM ROUTE:** The ultimate test of endurance for elite cyclists.
- **42KM ROUTE:** A perfect challenge for intermediate riders and enthusiasts.

MAD COLLAB Block Party

DATES: May 3
LOCATION: Tumon, Guam (Night Market Grounds)
ADMISSION: Free entry and family friendly!

This massive collaboration brings together the best of the Tumon Night Market for an unforgettable evening of food, music and island creativity. Feast on Guam's best BBQ, fusion dishes, and sweet treats from local vendors. Vibe to live music and performances that showcase the island's talent. Explore unique "collabs" featuring local artisans, muralists, and creators. Don't miss out on the energy, the community, and the island spirit. Grab your friends, bring the family, and come over to enjoy the party!

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Call G.A.I.N. (Guam Animals In Need) Animal Shelter in Yigo at 653-4246 or visit <www.guamanimals.org> for more information on adopting this pet. G.A.I.N. is a shelter-based humane society with a mission to prevent cruelty to animals, educate the public and promote good animal laws. Under Water World will donate one adult admission for every Pet of the Week adopted.



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Boonie Stomps Guam

INFORMATION PROVIDED BY
GUAM BOONIE STOMPERS





Southwest Coast

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 a.m. unless otherwise indicated. Directions to the trailhead will be posted on the Guam Boonie Stompers Inc Facebook page. The cost is \$5.00 for hikers over 13. Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult. Hike fees for active military and veterans are covered by Adaptive Adventures. 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



Guam Boonie Stompers is a non-profit Guam corporation composed of volunteer leaders committed to leading hikes to and protecting the unique natural destinations on our island.

SCHEDULE 2026

April 4 (Sat.)	Hila'an/Shark's Hole/Lost Pond (Medium)
April 11 (Sat.)	Mt. Jumullong Manglo' Sunrise Hike- (Medium) *4:45 Meet up
April 18 (Sat.)	Southwest Coast (Very Difficult) *8am Meet up
April 25 (Sat.)	Tinechong Falls/Yokoi's Cave (Very Difficult)
May 2 (Sat.)	Ague Cove (Medium)
May 9 (Sat.)	Mepo Cave & Latte (Difficult)
May 16 (Sat.)	To'guan Bay to Humatak Bay (Easy)



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Crossword by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

- 1 Corrin or Stone
- 5 Scalp misery
- 9 Big picture?
- 14 Leave, slangily
- 15 Goofs up
- 16 Oscar-winning rom-com of 2024
- 17 Has the wrong effect
- 19 Metric volume
- 20 Type of campaign
- 21 Repeating
- 23 NPR fan
- 25 ___ Paulo, Brazil
- 26 Bump on the tongue
- 29 Claim
- 31 Ginger ___
- 32 Lackadaisical sorts
- 37 Parisian picnic spot
- 39 Jules of sci-fi fame
- 40 Trendy sandwich
- 41 Alias
- 44 Texter's "I think ..."
- 45 Press a garment
- 46 Most embarrassed, maybe
- 48 Baseball stat
- 50 Scatter, as a crowd
- 53 Hidden
- 55 Muppet Sam, for one
- 59 Part of an EGOT
- 60 Springtime prank victim
- 62 Find out
- 63 Created a web
- 64 Some may be fragile
- 65 ___ Park, Colo.
- 66 Mass number
- 67 Slangy denial

DOWN

- 1 Trails off
- 2 Hat-tipper's word
- 3 Cheese nibblers
- 4 Acid neutralizer
- 5 Oahu garland
- 6 Bent out of shape
- 7 Largest Greek island
- 8 German steel city
- 9 Tropical woe
- 10 Academic credit
- 11 Cooking device
- 12 Performance place
- 13 Key ___, FL
- 18 Clothing trim
- 22 Coupon user
- 24 Neighbor of Croatia
- 26 Bearded Smurf
- 27 Woeful word
- 28 Longhaired feline
- 30 FYI cousin
- 33 Coffee holder
- 34 Percussion instrument
- 35 NFC West team
- 36 Parking place
- 38 Mongrel dog
- 42 Contemporary people
- 43 50's Ford flop
- 47 Overwhelm with noise
- 48 The Sorbonne, e.g.
- 49 Thorny bunch
- 51 URL character
- 52 Full of energy
- 54 Be concerned
- 56 Belinda Carlisle, for one
- 57 Rollercoaster feature
- 58 Otherwise
- 61 Quaint lodging

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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Stripes Sports Trivia

What is the term used to describe a match where a club holds its opponent scoreless?

Answer

Clean sheet

SUDOKU

Difficulty: Medium Edited by Margie E. Burke

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

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:

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

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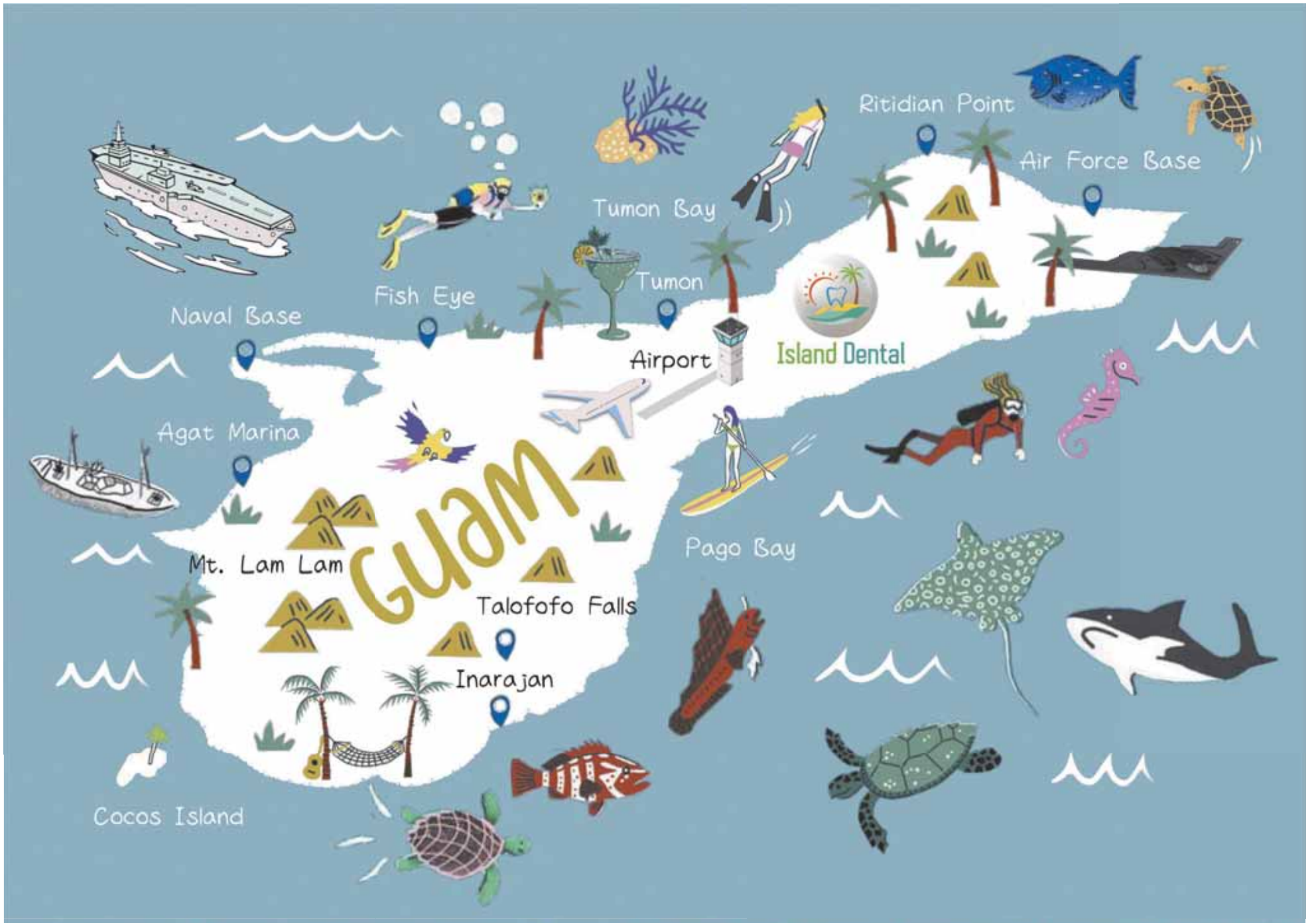
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GUAM EDITION

MARCH 30, 2026

Indo-Pacific gap?

Analysts raise concerns about moving Marines to Mideast as security burden increases in Asia **Page 2**



Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team take positions at the Central Training Area on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on March 6.

Ryan M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Gap seen as Marines deploy to Middle East

Move comes as Pacific burden is increasing, analysts warn

By **BRIAN MCELHINEY**
Stars and Stripes

Sending a Marine expeditionary unit from Okinawa to stand by in the Middle East leaves a gap in U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific while increasing the defense burden on its Asian allies, according to analysts.

The amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli and roughly 2,500 members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit have been en route to the Middle East since March 13, according to multiple news reports. The Tripoli and its amphibious ready group — the amphibious transport docks USS San Diego and USS New Orleans — are homeported at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force and 7th Fleet referred questions about the deployment to the Pentagon, which declined to comment, citing operational security.

The 31ST MEU unit has “unique capabilities” that would not be easily replaced without moving another expeditionary unit into the region, said retired Marine Col. Grant Newsham, a senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo.

“Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy doesn’t have enough amphibious ships in working order to keep enough MEU’s fully operational and deployable these days,” he said by email.

The 31st is one of seven Marine expeditionary units and the only one permanently deployed in the Pacific. It features a combination of air, ground and support elements designed to quickly respond to combat and noncombat situations, including humanitarian assistance and evacuations.

Even if additional forces from the I MEF in California were moved into the region, “the lack of amphibious ships is a constraint,” Newsham said.

The 855-foot Tripoli can carry MV-22 Osprey tiltrotors, F-35 fighter jets and a variety of helicopters, such as the MH-60S Seahawk.

Sending the unit out of the Pacific “certainly sends a negative message to U.S. allies and partners about U.S. commitment and focus” on the region, said retired Navy Lt. Luke Collin, former director for Japan and Australia at the U.S. National



PHOTOS BY RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team take positions while training on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on March 6.

“Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy doesn’t have enough amphibious ships in working order to keep enough MEU’s fully operational and deployable these days.”

Grant Newsham

Japan Forum for Strategic Studies

Security Council and principal at the Asia Group advisory firm in Washington, D.C.

But pulling U.S. combat ships, aircraft, long-range munitions or integrated air and missile defense systems out of the Pacific “could have more significant impacts on U.S. deterrence,” he said by email.

“Although I don’t expect Chi-



Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team train on Camp Hansen.

na, Russia, or North Korea to push aggression further in the near-term, they will certainly seek to exploit this situation to press the narrative that the U.S. is a declining and unreliable power in Asia,” Collin wrote.

The outcome of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific may not hinge entirely on the Marines’ absence,

said Benjamin Blandin, a research fellow with the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies.

“In case of a direct Chinese attack on Japan or Taiwan, both should be able to hold up for at least a few weeks, granting enough time for the [Marine Corps] to come to the rescue,” he said by email.

Newsham said regional allies in the interim must rely on their own defense capabilities.

“It’s just the reality of the world today and the size of the U.S. military,” he wrote.

Stars and Stripes reporter Alex Wilson contributed to this report.
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MILITARY

A-10 Warthog back in action in Iran war

Congress halted Air Force plans to retire popular attack aircraft

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Three months after Congress put the brakes on Air Force plans to retire its fleet of 162 A-10s this year, the versatile Warthog is back in the fight, this time in a maritime mission chasing Iranian naval vessels.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefly mentioned the A-10C Thunderbolt II at a Pentagon briefing March 19 about the war in Iran, calling the attack aircraft by its familiar nickname.

“The A-10 Warthog is now in the fight across the southern flank and is hunting and killing fast attack watercraft in the Strait of Hormuz,” Air Force Gen. Dan Caine said.

AH-64 Apache helicopters are also prowling the same area, flown by the U.S. Army and “some of our allies ... to handle one-way attack drones,” Caine said.

U.S. Central Command on March 15 released imagery of A-10s receiving fuel in flight while supporting Operation Epic Fury, with a caption stating the aircraft “can loiter for hours, standing by and ready to exe-



U.S. Air Force

An A-10 Thunderbolt II flies over the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility during Operation Epic Fury on March 9.

cute a mission whenever needed.”

The A-10, first built in the 1970s for use against Soviet tanks in Europe during the Cold War, is designed to provide close air support to ground troops.

It is capable of loitering near hot spots and operating under 1,000-foot ceilings.

Its firepower includes a seven-barrel Gatling gun that can deliver nearly 4,000 rounds a minute, according to the Air Force.

Its maritime mission in the current war isn't its first foray over water.

In 2011, an A-10 engaged two small Libyan watercraft in the country's port of Misrata, destroying one and forcing the

Libyans to abandon the other, U.S. Africa Command said in a statement at the time.

Despite the Warthog's versatility, the Air Force has been trying to divest the aircraft for years, citing maintenance costs and its vulnerability to modern air defense systems.

Congress in this year's National Defense Authorization Act

directed the Air Force to keep at least 103 of the aircraft, with 93 to be designated as primary mission.

The service is also supposed to brief lawmakers on its future plan for the A-10 by the end of this month.

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Army pushes for yet another newer, lighter service rifle

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Army's ongoing push to upgrade its handheld firepower isn't slowing down, as it prepares to introduce yet another new rifle later this year, the service confirmed this month.

The XM8 carbine is the latest weapon expected to be field-tested by soldiers as early as October, an Army spokesperson told Task & Purpose. The Army's Program Executive Office did not immediately respond to questions about the rifle.

The service only standardized the M7 as its primary rifle last year, but the XM8 is not intended to replace it. Instead, it is being developed as a companion weapon.

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



DUKE EDWARDS/U.S. Army

A soldier fires an M7 rifle during a weapon qualification test at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in January.

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.”

The Army began fielding the M7 in 2023, but it was not until May 2025 that the service officially designated it as the standard-issue rifle to replace the M4, according to an Army release.

Still in early development, the XM8 is being designed as a carbine — which is typically lighter and shorter — 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 XM8 is about five inches shorter and roughly one pound lighter than the M7 and features a fixed buttstock, a Sig Sauer spokesperson confirmed to Task & Purpose.

Images of the experimental rifle gained traction online March 16 after the link to a military weapons website, SoldierSystems.net, circulated on the

popular Army Reddit forum.

The website's article shared side-by-side photos of the M7 and XM8, highlighting the carbine's more compact design. The site reported that details of the XM8 first surfaced last month, when the Army issued a new national stock number — often an early indicator that an item is entering the service's supply chain.

As of 2024, the Army planned to purchase more than 100,000 M7 rifles and 13,000 M250s by early 2030. It remains unclear what the timeline would be for adopting the XM8, if it moves beyond testing.

In contrast to the Army's shift toward larger-caliber weapons systems, the Marine Corps plans to retain its 5.56 mm rifles, with officials telling Stars and Stripes last month it will continue fielding the M27.

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MILITARY

Pilot receives Silver Star for his 'selfless decision'

Air Force major earned award for 2025 combat mission

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Maj. Michael "Danger" Blea was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on a night involving high G maneuvers and missiles detonating within feet of his aircraft.

At a ceremony this month at Ramstein Air Base, Blea received the Silver Star for "extraordinary heroism in combat" during a Middle East deployment in 2025, U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa said.

Blea and his fellow F-16 "Wild Weasel" pilot, Lt. Col. William "Skate" Parks, each earned a Silver Star for a harrowing mission they flew together on March 27, 2025.

Fewer than 100 airmen have earned the military's third-highest valor award, after the Medal of Honor and service Crosses, in the post-9/11 era, according to USAF-AFAFRICA.

Blea and Parks were deployed with the 480th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron out of Spangdahlem Air Base at the time. Parks, the squadron's former commander, received his Silver Star at the Pentagon in November, according to the Air Force.

Blea is also moving on. He has orders to Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, where he's transitioning to the F-35, the Air Force's most advanced fighter jet.

He volunteered for the assignment, even though the F-16 will "forever hold a piece of my heart," he said on March 11. "It's the jet that kept me alive and

taught me to be a 'Wild Weasel.'"

The Spangdahlem fighters train as "Wild Weasels," a mission to suppress enemy air defenses that dates back to the Vietnam War and the one that Blea and Parks were conducting on the night they earned their Silver Stars.

The Air Force statement does not specify the enemy or country involved in the mission, but at least two public accounts of the event say the actions occurred against the Houthis over Yemen and the Red Sea.

Blea said he could not confirm those details, either.

But he was able to describe what it looked and felt like when the ground lit up underneath him and Parks, the flight lead, on a moonless night as they prepared to head out while low on fuel.

"We were doing an escort," Blea said, making sure the aircraft they were accompanying were "protected throughout the night."

It was toward the end of the sortie, and Blea needed to get to the tanker since he was low on fuel.

"We turn around to start heading back," he said. That's when the night took a sudden turn.

"I look outside and just see the ground light up," he said, the first indication that the enemy was launching surface-to-air missiles under their location. "It's pitch black, we're on (night-vision goggles), the moon is completely obscured.

"The missile lighting up the ground is one of the images that

will forever stick with me," Blea said.

His medal citation says Blea's "selfless decision to act as a decoy, drawing the full fury of the enemy's integrated air defenses, including four radar-guided missiles and a barrage of anti-aircraft artillery, ensured the success of the critical bombing mission, which aimed to cripple enemy ballistic missile storage facilities."

During the course of about 15 minutes, Blea used a combination of defensive measures and high G maneuvers to evade the missiles, which detonated within feet of his aircraft, his citation says.

Blea described one missile that sailed within 20 to 30 feet of him, so close the smoke plume behind it lit up his aircraft canopy and he watched it explode "just as it flies past me."

While still within enemy territory, "Blea calmed his nerves and expertly rejoined on an emergency air refueling tanker operating lights out and in low illumination," his citation reads.

Blea said he's honored to receive the Silver Star but the award to him is recognition of the teamwork by his squadron during the entire deployment.

"Between the maintainers that gave us jets night in and night out that we never questioned were going to work to the tanker crews that we had, I owe them a huge debt of gratitude," he said.

Another reward was being greeted by maintainers, a few pilots and other crew when he



ALEXANDRA LONGFELLOW/U.S. Air Force

Air Force Maj. Michael A. Blea, 480th Fighter Squadron assistant director of operations, is awarded the Silver Star during a ceremony at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, on March 3.

landed back at base that night. "I had so much support at my jet waiting for me," he said.

The enormity of the moment, however, didn't sink in until he opened the jet's canopy and felt a rush of fresh air, he said. "That's when it kind of hit me, that I'm safe, I'm on the ground; we lived through it and we had mission success."

One of his good friends climbed up the ladder and put his hand on his chest, Blea said. "He said, 'Dude, you're back, take a deep breath.' That's the first time I realized I hadn't taken a deep breath in the last three hours."

In that moment, Blea said he felt "just the gratitude to be alive, and the rewarding feeling that the training worked and we were able to do what we set out to do."

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Marines to require more time in water

BY LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

Marines will soon be expected to spend more time in the pool in line with the service's plans to overhaul its water survival requirements beginning later this year, according to a recent message to the force.

A new five-level qualification program, set to begin Oct. 1, will replace the current three-tier system of basic, intermediate and advanced swim qualifications. Additionally, swimming proficiency level will now be factored into Marines' performance evaluations, the March 5 message said.

The change is intended to ensure that Marines are more comfortable in the water and better prepare them for amphibious missions, the service said.

The new progression will include a basic level for recruits, followed by novice, competent, proficient and advanced levels.

Changes to swimming qualifications at boot camp will be "minimal," though recruits will be expected to complete both the basic and novice levels, according to the message.

Recruits who do not meet the novice standard before graduation will require a waiver from the recruit depot's commanding general, and the basic qualification will be valid for only one year, the announcement said.

Each qualification beyond the basic level introduces more demanding requirements than the previous system, including time increases for treading water and a greater number of swimming strokes and techniques, according to the Marine Corps' fitness site.

The push to strengthen water survival standards dates back to the Corps' Training and Education 2030 planning guidance released in early 2023.

Previously, Marines who completed the basic water survival course in boot camp had to requalify every two years, while those holding intermediate or advanced qualifications were required to requalify every three years.

Under the new guidance, Marines with a requalification requirement after Oct. 1 will have six months to complete the appropriate course under the new program before being considered unqualified.

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Army approves issue of its first new hand grenade since 1960s

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers have a new baseball-sized weapon in their arsenal designed to give them an advantage in close-quarter fighting.

The Army on March 10 approved for full release of a hand grenade built for urban combat, marking the first new grenade to enter the service since the Vietnam War era.

According to the service, the M111 will provide an advantage in confined spaces while augmenting the M67, which is the primary hand grenade American

soldiers have fought with since 1968.

Unlike the M67, which replaced the older "pineapple" grenade and releases steel fragments in all directions to inflict injury, the M111 leverages blast overpressure, the force generated by an explosion that can lead to severe injuries, according to an Army statement.

The M67 is more suited to fighting in open terrain, a key lesson the Army learned during door-to-door urban combat in Iraq, Col. Vince Morris said in the statement.

Inside a building, M67 shrap-

nel can be limited by enclosed spaces or barriers, the Army said. Fragments can pierce a thin wall and risk the lives of American service members on the other side, Morris said.

The blast overpressure generated by the M111 "can clear a room of enemy combatants quickly, leaving nowhere to hide while ensuring the safety of friendly forces," said Morris, project manager for Close Combat Systems at the Capabilities Program Executive Ammunition and Energetics.

The canister-shaped M111 was developed by Army engineers at



The M111 will be the first new grenade for the Army since 1968.

Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey.

It replaces the obsolete Mk3A2 hand grenade series, which stopped being issued in 1975 due to asbestos in its exterior coating. The M111 uses a plastic body that is fully consumed during detonation, according to the Army.

MILITARY

DOD plans to expand Stripes oversight

Pentagon wants to limit content, shift away from print newspaper

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon has released a modernization plan for Stars and Stripes that affirms the publication's independence while expanding Defense Department oversight, introducing new restrictions on content and transitioning away from a print publication.

An eight-page memo, dated March 9 and effective immediately, limits the use of wire services, bars comics and other syndicated features and states that content must be consistent with "good order and discipline," a phrase borrowed from the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

The memo is the first formal explanation since Pentagon chief spokesman Sean Parnell said in a Jan. 15 social media post that the Defense Department intended to "refocus" the news organization "from woke distractions that syphon morale."

On March 13, Parnell in a statement provided the first direct comment to the organization since Jan. 15. He said the department is "returning S&S to its original mission: an independent news source for service members stationed overseas that is by the warfighter and for the warfighter."

Parnell said the effort includes "a transition from print to digital, transition to uniformed staff at locations outside the continental U.S., and other efficiency measures that will eliminate redundancies and ensure smart use of DOW resources."

Stars and Stripes staff currently includes service members on one- to three-year assignments who are mentored by civilian journalists.

The service members are typically trained by the services in public relations.

Parnell did not answer questions about how his office is coordinating with the news organization to implement these changes or if the decisions are

based on any formal review or evaluation of Stars and Stripes operations.

No coordination

Stars and Stripes Publisher Max Lederer told U.S.-based staff of the memo March 12 and said he would begin meeting with the organization's leadership to discuss implementation of the memo.

Lederer said he has not been contacted directly by anyone from the Pentagon about the changes, despite reaching out to them. The memo, which was sent to Pentagon leaders and combatant commanders, was written without Stars and Stripes' input.

Stars and Stripes was not notified about publication of the memo, which was found during a search on a DOD website.

"It is unlikely that the Pentagon was aware of the extensive modernization that Stars and Stripes had already begun," Erik Slavin, Stars and Stripes editor in chief, said in a statement on March 12. "Over the past year, the changes to our digitally produced news and information have resulted in significant increases in page-views, engagement and subscribers."

Reader feedback and real-world usage drove the efforts, said Slavin, who became the organization's top editor late last year after more than 20 years stationed with the company in Japan, Iraq, South Korea and Germany.

Business operations and funding remain largely unchanged by the memo.

'Threat' to First Amendment

Press freedom advocates said the memo shifts authority over content decisions in a way that risks undermining the newsroom's independence.

"This clearly shows that the Pentagon is trying to increase its influence over content decisions at Stars and Stripes," said Timothy Richardson, program



Reader submitted photo

A service member reads Stars and Stripes in 2024. A March 9 memo affirmed the paper's independence while announcing restrictions.

director of journalism and disinformation for PEN America, a nonprofit that protects free expression.

"That's a threat to the First Amendment, certainly, and the independence that the Congress has long guaranteed for the newsroom," he said after reviewing the memo.

PEN America and five other press-freedom organizations sent a letter to Congress last month in support of Stars and Stripes' editorial independence.

Stars and Stripes, which is owned by the Defense Department, was first published by Union troops during the Civil War and has been published continuously since World War II. The newspaper publishes print editions overseas and a U.S. weekly edition. It distributes to combat zones as needed.

Its website and other digital offerings have gained readership among troops stationed across the U.S. and among veterans.

The news organization has been threatened with closure over the years but has repeatedly garnered support from veterans and bipartisan members of Congress.

The Pentagon in January withdrew a federal regulation that underpinned the mandate set by Congress for Stars and Stripes to provide independent journalism

to the military community under the principles of the First Amendment.

The new memo confirmed that Stars and Stripes' editorial operations are "independent of the military chain of command, military public affairs activities or other external influences," but makes no mention of First Amendment freedoms.

It moves the defense secretary's public affairs office into an oversight role. Previous guidance gave it an administrative role to help with funding, military manning and other regulatory steps. It also calls for an advisory board of Defense Department personnel.

Content overhaul

The memo bars purchased content on the assumption that all service members overseas have online access to all commercially available news on their own. Exceptions for purchased content can be approved by Parnell, according to the memo.

Stars and Stripes uses wire services to provide more complete world coverage of interest to the military community.

Jacqueline Smith, Stars and Stripes' ombudsman, said wire services add value because they fill gaps and make a news outlet a "one-stop shop."

"A complete newspaper should include national sports and entertainment ...," she said. "Stripes does not have the resources to do its own reporting in those areas. Yet sports and entertainment contribute to the morale of troops."

Losing this "will reduce the quality and breadth of information available to readers," Slavin said.

The memo calls on Stars and Stripes to be a "hometown-style" publication for the increasingly niche U.S. military community" and says it "should" republish

content created by the Defense Department public affairs offices with a label describing its origin, though it grants the publisher latitude to determine whether such content serves readers' needs.

The memo does not specify which publications should include public affairs content.

"We have no plans to commingle military public relations offerings with our independent reporting," Slavin said. "Stars and Stripes remains committed to balanced and accurate reporting on behalf of the military community we serve."

Other changes require the ombudsman to send information bound for Congress through the Defense Department Legislative Affairs Office.

"The House Armed Services Committee created the independent position in 1990-91 with the requirement the ombudsman report to the committee on matters of importance to maintaining Stripes editorial independence," Smith said. "If that report must go through the Pentagon's legislative affairs staff, then there is no assurance it would be complete and unchanged and there would be no opportunity to ask the ombudsman questions."

The memo also bars reporters from requesting public records through the Freedom of Information Act in an official capacity and prohibits the organization from publishing "controlled unclassified information." This label has often been used to limit the release of information under broadly defined terms.

Last year, the Pentagon asked all reporters working within the building to sign a pledge that included a similar demand. Dozens of journalists turned in their access badges, while a new group of reporters signed the agreement and replaced them.

"The obstacles that the Pentagon continues to throw in the way of credible reporting are growing, and [the memo] is another clear example of that," Richardson said.

As plans to change the publication come together, Slavin said readers will be informed at each step.

"We will let readers, particularly print readers in remote locations and situations where unsecure internet is spotty or prohibited, know that comics, national sports, state-by-state roundups and other content may soon no longer be published due to the limits of the memo."

"Feedback from deployed troops tells us that this will not be a popular decision," he said.

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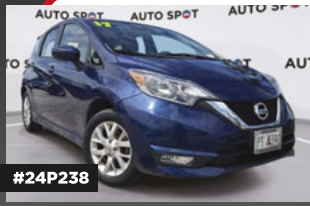
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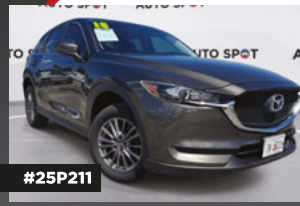
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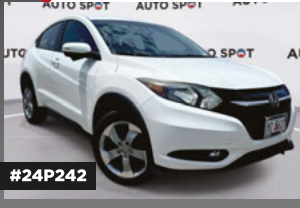
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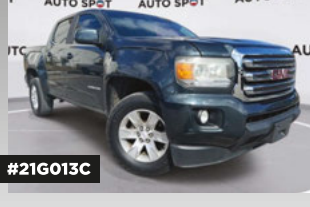
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