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VOLUME 12 NO. 36

STARS AND STRIPES

Community Publication

JAPAN

JANUARY 30 – FEBRUARY 5, 2026

FREE

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INSIDE INFO



**ENJOY ICE SKATING
NEAR CAMP ZAMA
AND NAF ATSUGI**

PAGE 6



**RARE TRIPLE EAGLE
SCOUT CEREMONY
AT YOKOTA AB**

PAGE 8

Military children tell us your story!

Hey, all you kids in the military community need to read this. Seriously! So, please put down your iPad, iPhone or other digital device for the next couple of minutes. You'll survive, and I promise no one will take them.

Now that I have your attention, I want to give you a little job. No, wait! Don't stop reading! I'm not going to ask you to clean your room! I'm simply going to give you the opportunity to be heard by tens of thousands of people. Seriously! You see, April is the Month of the Military Child, and for the 15th straight year, the Stars and Stripes community publications are dedicating it to you, the children of our men and women in uniform.

**Send your story to
Militarychild@stripes.com**

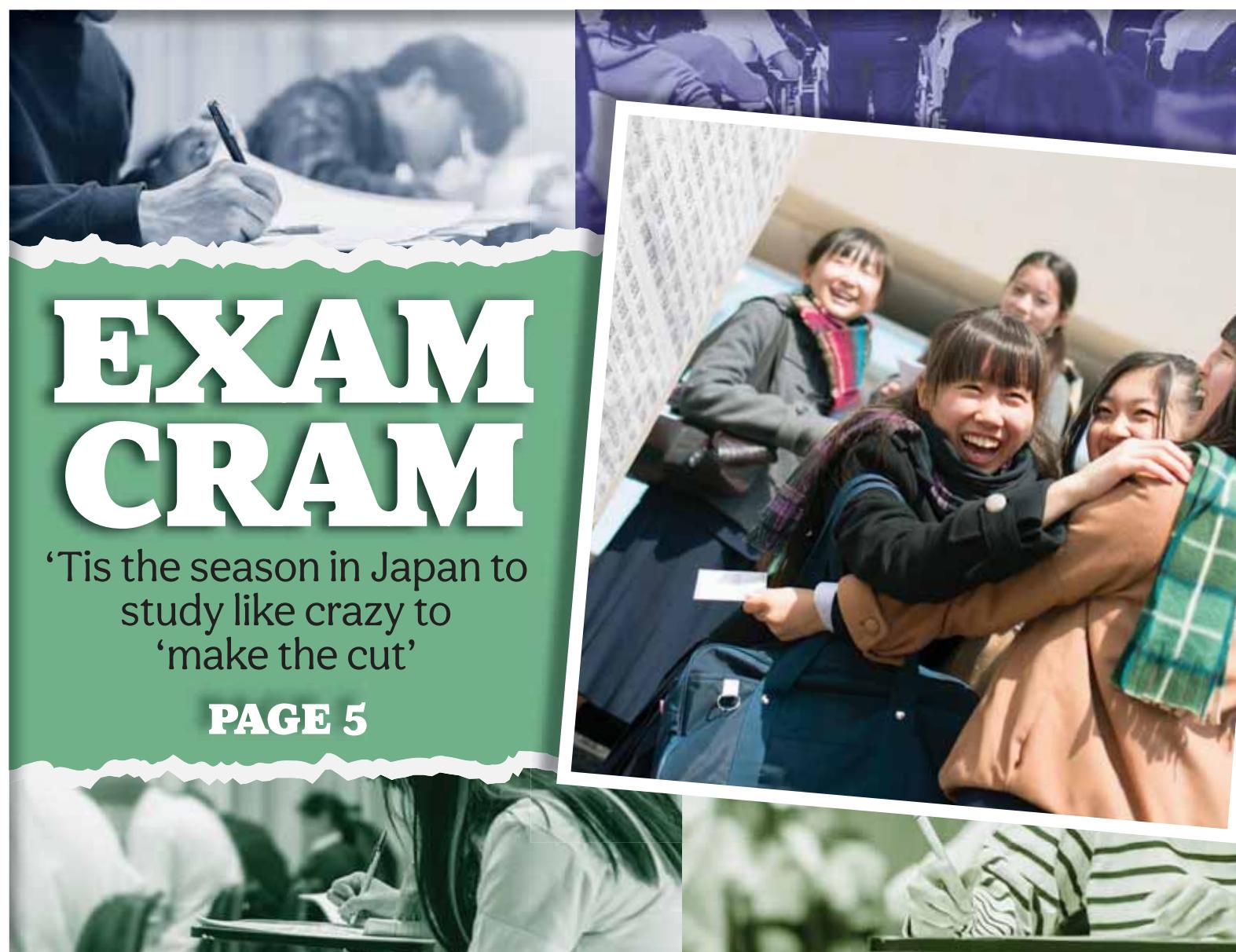
SEE MOMC ON PAGE 2



EXAM CRAM

‘Tis the season in Japan to
study like crazy to
‘make the cut’

PAGE 5



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MOMC: We're here for you!

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Each Stripes Okinawa, Stripes Japan, Stripes Korea and Stripes Guam issue in April will contain your stories, poems, drawings and photos about what life is like as a military child.

For those children who are part of the military community overseas but not technically a military child, we want to hear from you, too! You and your Department of Defense civilian parents are also a key part of the military community.

So, what's life like as a military kid? Tell us. And after you share with us, your submission will be posted on one of our four community sites – Japan.stripes.com, Okinawa.stripes.com,

Korea.stripes.com and Guam.stripes.com – depending on where you live. It could appear in at least one weekly paper.

We are giving you a platform to say what you want. Of course, to have your say, you must write, type or draw it. You can be funny or serious. You can write a paragraph or a longer story (250-word maximum, please). Whatever you do, be yourself. Stand up and be heard!

We get thousands of submissions a year, so for stories to run in the paper, they must be submitted by April 15. But no matter when they are submitted, they will be posted on the website. As we approach another April, our team is ready for the onslaught. In fact, we're already receiving submissions.

Like every year, we've been in touch with teachers across the Pacific who are using this as a class project, so be ready for that. For those of you who haven't participated in our annual salute, we hope to hear from you this year.

Stars and Stripes is very proud to serve the military community, and it's an honor to spotlight its resourceful group of children.

We can't wait to hear from you!

Chris Carlson,
Publishing and Media Design Manager
Stars and Stripes



Stories must
be submitted
by **April 15**
to appear in
Stripes Japan!



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Handmade in the city

Discover Tokyo's hidden street of artisans and craftsmen

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
MARC CASTANEDA,
STARS AND STRIPES
Published: January 15, 2026

Beneath the elevated tracks between Akihabara and Okachimachi stations in Tokyo lies 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, a collection of specialty shops devoted to handmade crafts.

Insulated from the noisy streets nearby, the street is lined with storefronts showcasing the skills of artisans who care as much about process as they do about the final product.

Here is where you'll find a curated community of creators. Woodworkers, leather crafters, jewelers, textile artists offering something distinct and personal.

Blue Trick is a denim shop that specializes in "boro," a Japanese textile tradition that embraces the look of garments repaired, patched and worn over time. If you're a denim fan, this shop is definitely a must-visit.

The jeans are all dyed and sourced from Okayama. Blue Trick also offers in-store minor tailoring.

EXCLUSIVE NEWS FROM:
STARS AND STRIPES
www.stripes.com



Each pair of jeans and every jacket feels like its own canvas. Various pieces of fabric in varying shades are stitched together in visible layers. No two items are alike, and the prices reflect the artistry, up to 45,000 yen, or about \$300, for a single pair of jeans.

A few steps down, you'll find Ganma, a woodcraft shop filled with hand-carved combs, charms and decorative pieces. The sales representative briefly walked me

through the creative process.

The craftsmanship is impressive, though the price reflects the time and effort; some combs were easily over \$200. I admired the artisanship, even if I couldn't justify such a purchase.

Muzica Vita stands out for its soft leather bags, wallets and key holders. The colors range from subtle tans to bright jewel tones, and everything feels incredibly lightweight and flexible.

Wallets and small holders range from 4,000 yen to 8,000 yen, with larger handbags costing 40,000 yen,



Left: At Blue Trick inside 2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan, each pair of jeans and every jacket feels like its own canvas. Above: Hand-crafted combs at Ganma take three to four days to complete from raw material to finished product.

a surprisingly reasonable price tag considering the quality. The leather is sourced from Chiang Mai, Thailand, and handcrafted in Japan.

The last stop of my visit was Zestis, a jewelry shop run by a skilled craftsman who's been designing and producing silver pieces for nearly a decade. The display cases are full of bold rings, pendants and charms, many of which feature rare stones.

The cheapest item, a simple women's bracelet, was priced at 9,950 yen, but most pieces carried a much higher value due to

the materials and labor involved. The owner explained parts of the process and showed how he sets stones, shapes silver and refines the final form.

I ended up customizing a ring from the showcase. The original piece featured onyx, but I requested a sleeker design with sapphire, my birthstone. The order was shipped in a few days, another convenience the shop offers.

Browse a handful of shops for a couple hours or spend the better part of a day exploring. And if hunger kicks in, grab a bite at the on-site ASAN Cafe, a trendy spot with hammock seating and soufflé pancakes.

castaneda.marc@stripes.com
@markuscas2025

2k540 Aki-Oka Artisan

DIRECTIONS: A 7-minute walk from Akihabara Station at 5-9 Ueno, Taito City, Tokyo 110-0005

TIMES: Open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. except Wednesdays.

COSTS: Free entry; merchandise costs anywhere from \$2 to more than \$300.

FOOD: Grab a bite at the on-site ASAN Cafe.



WEBSITE



Photos courtesy of PR TIMES



File photo

Can you survive Squid Game in Shibuya?

JAPAN TRAVEL



Room, faithfully recreated from the screen.

There is plenty to enjoy beyond the games themselves. A themed collaboration cafe serves visually striking menu items inspired by the show's symbols and color contrasts, while Yonghee's Playground, the official merchandise store, offers exclusive Squid Game items such as green player jerseys, apparel, and collectibles. Both the cafe and merchandise area can be accessed without an admission ticket.

Several ticket options are available, including VIP tickets that

grant access to the VIP Room with a drink, and bonus redemption tickets that allow participants to purchase the iconic green jersey at a special price. Private bookings are also available for groups. For more information, please check out the official website. (QR code below)

Getting there

Shibuya Fukuras is located just two minutes on foot from Shibuya Station.



JapanTravel.com

Things to know

DATES: Through July 20 (Mon.)

TIME: 11 a.m. - 9:30 p.m.

VENUE: Shibuya Fukuras

ADDRESS: 1-2-3

Dogenzaka, Shibuya,

Tokyo



WEBSITE

Burning ceremony held at Nishiarai Daishi Temple

JAPAN TRAVEL

Daruma Kuyo is a traditional event that has been held at the Nishiarai Daishi Temple since 1954. It is held during Setsubun, on the day before the official start of Spring.

At the Daruma Kuyo event, people come with their Daruma dolls to dispose of them properly and buy new ones for the coming year. During the event, thousands of Daruma dolls are burned together in a ceremony set to the sounds of sutra read by Buddhist monks.

The Daruma doll is often used as a good luck symbol and used to pray for good health and business. They are unmistakable in

appearance, with a round, red body complete with large white eyes and stern facial expression. When you make a wish you paint the left pupil, only filling in the right pupil once the wish has been realized.

The event is a spectacle to watch, with an entrance of conch-shell horn-blowing Buddhist monks all dressed in traditional garments, before they proceed to the main ceremony.

Things to know

DATES: Feb. 3 (Tue.)

TIME: 9:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

FEES: Free entry

VENUE: Nishiarai Daishi Temple

ADDRESS: 1-15-1 Nishi

Arai Adachi-ku, Tokyo

PHONE: 03-3890-2345



WEBSITE



File photos



Exam cram

‘Tis the season in Japan to study like crazy to ‘make the cut’

BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES JAPAN

On any given February morning, you might see hundreds of young students – some with parents, or even teachers, in tow – flocking to a nearby high school or university. Chances are they are on their way to take their entrance examinations.

Entrance exams – along with hours upon hours of cram-school study – are an annual rite of passage that takes place nationwide in Japan every year. Most people take these rigorous exams at least twice in a lifetime – for high school as well as college, but those trying for private schools might try three or more times.

Taking exams

This year, 496,237 students signed up for the Common Test for University Admission, according to officials.

Some take more than one exam a year just to hedge their bets.

Unlike the United States, free compulsory education in Japan extends only through junior high or middle school.

High school and college exams typically cover three to five subjects, such as Japanese, English or another foreign language, math, science and social studies. They usually take the entire day with a break for lunch.

It is widely believed that graduation from a prestigious high school and university virtually guarantees preferential treatment from prospective universities or

employers after graduation. And since major universities receive four to eight times as many applicants as available slots, competition is stiff.

As a result, students study ... and study ... and study.

Cram school craze

Many students don't make the cut and must decide whether to enter their second or third school of choice. The other option, primarily for university candidates, is to wait until the next year and try again.

Those who do opt to wait are called “ronin,” literally masterless samurai.

To give their children an edge over the competition, many parents turn to “juku,” or cram schools, which have been doing brisk business in Japan for decades. (Industry profits were at one time in the \$6 billion range according to Bloomberg Business Weekly.)

The Japan Juku Association estimates that there are 55,037 juku in Japan (2016) and that 50-70 percent of students who plan to take entrance exams use them.

These exams tend to focus on the quantity of knowledge rather than deeper comprehension or mastery. To put it simply, the more information from textbooks students can memorize, the better their test scores.

After regular school hours, students go to these cram schools two to five times a week to study for a



A little luck of the ‘ema’ for exams

You may be familiar with bunches of small wooden plaques with drawings of horses and Japanese characters written on them that can be found hanging in Shinto Shrines. These “ema,” or horse icons, are used as prayers or wishes for good luck in certain endeavors.

Japanese believe that their wish and prayers will come true if they write them on these plaques and hang them as offerings to the Shinto gods. Some of the common wishes for success include work, family peace, health and (yes, you guessed it) school entrance examinations.

As each shrine is dedicated to certain deities, different shrines are frequented for different types of fortune. Tenjin is the Shinto god of scholars, and his shrines are called “tenmangu.”

Many students who are going to take entrance exams visit Futenmangu in Futenma, Okinawa; Dazaifu Tenmangu in Fukuoka Prefecture; and Yushima Tenjin in Tokyo to offer ema for success. There are many others elsewhere throughout the nation.

Ema are sold at these shrines for about 500 to 1,000 yen (\$3.25-\$6.50). Students write their name and wish on the blank side and hang it with all the others.

In February, you will likely see many students offering these ema at shrines near you.

- Takahiro Takiguchi, Stripes Japan

couple of hours.

Tuition ranges between 10,000 to 50,000 yen (\$65-\$325) a month or more. This is part of the nearly \$56K for public or nearly \$150K

for private school the Ministry of Education estimates the average family pays to put one child through Japan's school system in 2025.

As part of the government's measures to address the country's declining birthrate, the gradual introduction of free high school education has been underway since 2025.

Alternative attitudes

But things are changing and according to a Japan Juku Association official, so is the level of students' ambitions. Gone are the days when most students viewed Japan's entrance exam system as if it were a life-or-death matter.

“Many are not setting their goals very high for prestigious schools; instead they tend to be content with schools they can easily get accepted by,” the official said.

To avoid of the competition altogether, some students turn to using recommendations from their existing schools to gain admittance.

So, for those who do opt for the traditional cram-and-exam method – with, perhaps, less fervor than their forefathers – how sweet is the taste of success?

Not very, according to a student who entered a private prestigious Tokyo university after cramming like crazy to make the cut.

“Once it's over, the pressure and motivation to study are gone,” he says. “After having spent so many years studying just for exams, many of us have little sense of what comes next – or how to shape our futures.”

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com



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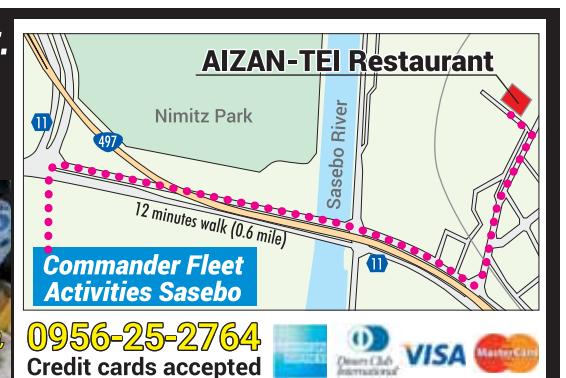
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**Enjoy ice skating near
Camp Zama and NAF Atsugi
at WakuWaku Ice World**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES JAPAN

Since ice skating was the first winter sport introduced to Japan about 150 years ago, today numerous ice rinks (both outdoors and indoors) are located throughout the nation.

Hit the ice at WakuWaku Ice World, a temporary ice rink near Camp Zama and NAF Atsugi. This fun winter spot runs until Feb. 15 and is conveniently located at the field of ViNAWALK mall at Ebina Central Park.

It's fun for families and perfect for a date night as the 240-square-meter wide rink is beautifully illuminated in the evening.

The rink is close to Odakyu Ebina Station, so don't miss out on the fun!

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com



View video

Things to know

LOCATION: Ebina Central Park in ViNAWALK, 1-4-1 Chuo, Ebina City, Kanagawa Prefecture

HOURS: 2 p.m.- 7 p.m., Mon. – Fri.; 11 a.m.-8 p.m., weekends and holidays.

SKATING TIME: Unlimited skating Mon.- Fri.; 45-minute timed entry on weekends and holidays.

ADMISSION: Middle school students or older 1,700 yen; from ages 4 to elementary school students 1,300 yen; Parent-child tickets 2,800 yen

PHONE: 0120-18-7801



Website



Stripes Sports Trivia

Which all-time great is the NBA All-Star Game MVP trophy named after?

Answer

Kobe Bryant



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SUDOKU

Difficulty: Medium

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

Edited by Margie E. Burke

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

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The Weekly Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

1 Comedy routine
5 Grouchy Muppet
10 Greenish-blue
14 Colombian crop
15 Woodworking tool
16 Stare flirtatiously
17 Out of the blue
19 Romances
20 Jon Hamm series
21 Adds to, in a way
23 Rush order?
25 Far from wordy
26 Crude dwellings
30 FBI folks
33 Young billy
34 Branch of dentistry
36 One to worship
38 Ewe's mate
39 Smoker's puff
40 Dependability
45 One of the Gershwin's
46 Stereo knob
47 Ancient Italian
49 Bird feeder fill
51 Turbanned Punjabi
52 In bad shape
55 Band tour toter
59 What comes to mind
60 Breathing aid
62 Let off steam
63 Pull strings?
64 Sea eagle
65 A chip, maybe
66 That and that
67 Places for props

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6 Utah airport initials
37 Set free

7 "Black Bag" actress

41 Downwind

42 Canopy support

43 Ancient Greek ship

44 Territory of NW Canada

48 humiliates

50 Extra sense

52 Prima donna

53 Tree of life locale

54 Newbie

56 Child's challenge

57 Say it so

58 Barely gets by

61 Director Van Sant

Answers to Previous Crossword:

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

DID YOU KNOW?

“-san”, a simple honorific title equivalent to Mr. Mrs, Miss or Ms. can be very convenient. The title may be applied to most Japanese regardless of gender, age and social status. “Takanaka-san” can be either a senior gentleman or a young girl. So, when you need to write a letter or email to someone whom you have never met before, be sure to use this title.

Kanji of the week

怒
Oko(-ru)/do [angry]

Language Lesson

I'm hungry.

Onakaga suite imasu.

SUDOKU

Edited by Margie E. Burke

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.

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

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Edited by Margie E. Burke

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

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KELLY & KELLY USED

Rare triple Eagle Scout ceremony at Yokota highlights youth achievement

STORY AND PHOTO BY
JEREMY STILLWAGNER,
STARS AND STRIPES
Published: January 15, 2026

YOKOTA AIR BASE — Scouting America Troop 45 in a rare event promoted three of its members to the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout on Jan. 14.

The three new Eagle Scouts — Julian Chuckrey, Evan Horne and Evan Okamoto — were promoted during an on-stage ceremony at Yokota Middle School in front of their families, friends and fellow Scouts.

“The Eagle rank is the top rank for Scouting America, and we’re really celebrating the path to get there,” the scoutmaster, Air Force Col. David McAlroy, director of operations for 5th Air Force, told Stars and Stripes at the event. “It takes most Eagle Scouts anywhere from three to six years to earn it, and it must be completed before their 18th birthday.”

Becoming an Eagle Scout is a



Julian Chuckrey, Evan Horne and Evan Okamoto recite the Eagle Scout pledge during a ceremony at Yokota Middle School on Yokota Air Base, Jan. 14.

prestigious and often surreal moment for Scouts.

“It doesn’t feel real,” Okamoto said in an interview at the event.

To earn the Eagle rank, Scouts must advance through six prior ranks, earn 21 merit badges and complete a service project that

benefits their community and demonstrates leadership and management skills, according to a Scouting America website.

Fewer than 10% of Scouts achieve the rank.

For his Eagle Scout project, Okamoto refurbished 13 benches outside the middle school, which took two years thanks to paperwork, approvals and other requirements, he said.

Most troops typically award only one Scout the Eagle rank each year, according to McAlroy.

“Another unique thing is two of them did their whole scouting career at Yokota,” he said.

Okamoto is the only one of the three from a military family; Chuckrey and Horne started at Yokota as Cub Scouts.

The ceremony came at a time of uncertainty regarding Scouting America’s support from the Pentagon.

National Public Radio in November reported that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth was planning to end support for Scouting America, according to a draft memo NPR said it obtained. The memo

was meant for Congress but had not yet been sent, according to the report.

Hegseth, in the memo, said Scouting America promoted diversity, equity and inclusion and had become an organization designed to “attack boy-friendly spaces,” according to NPR.

Scouting America’s precursor, Boy Scouts of America, emerged from an era of scandals and bankruptcy to become Scouts BSA in 2018, the year it admitted girls into the program, according to an Associated Press report in May 2024. The organization rebranded itself as Scouting America in February 2025.

Hegseth’s plan would eliminate medical and logistical support to the Scouts’ National Jamboree and would bar Scout troops from holding meetings on U.S. military installations, according to NPR.

“For more than a century, we’ve worked with every U.S. presidential administration — Republican and Democrat — focusing on our common goal of building future leaders grounded in integrity, responsibility, and service,” Scouting America President and CEO Roger Krone said in a Nov. 25 news release following the NPR report. “We will continue our efforts to work with the Pentagon to address this critical issue.”

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— Col. David McAlroy,
Scoutmaster

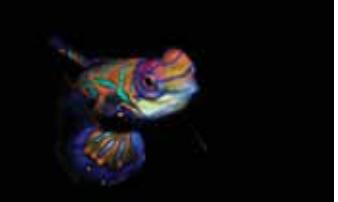
“The organization has been through a lot of changes; it’s a pretty old organization, it’ll continue,” McAlroy said.

“I think it has sound principles, and I see a lot of application to preparing young men and women for potential life in the military, so I hope they continue to support it on DOD installations.”

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