

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

Volume 18 Edition 4

©SS 2026

U.S. EDITION

stripes.com

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2026

Lost lifetime

Navy's destroyers will lose roughly 25% of their service lives to maintenance, CBO says **Page 2**



The Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Ross returns from sea trials in May 2024, marking completion of an extensive overhaul of the ship.

DANIELLE LOFTON/U.S. Navy

COVER STORY

Maintenance woes reducing service life

CBO: Chronic delays, labor overruns for Navy destroyers seen as persistent trend

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That increased spending is partially due to longer durations and greater labor use in destroyer overhauls. Higher costs also were caused by the need for additional maintenance on ships, according to the report.

Overhauls that take longer than expected can disrupt training and



CLAUDIA LAMANTIA/Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility

Riggers with Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility, handle the lead control lines during the un-docking of USS Hopper from Dry Dock 4, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in March.

deployment schedules not only for the ship involved but also for others, the CBO said.

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

tability Office said in January.

From 2020 to 2023, nearly \$25.9 billion was appropriated for the maintenance of combat surface ships, about \$1 billion more than the Navy requested, according to the GAO.

The new CBO report analyzed overhauls and other maintenance events for Navy destroyers and amphibious warships from October 2010 to Septem-



NETTIE MANFULL/U.S. Navy

The Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Spruance leaves Naval Base San Diego last year. On average, destroyers in the class will lose roughly one-fourth of their service lives to maintenance, a recent report said.

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

Congressional Budget Office

ber 2024.

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

Aging ships, unexpected additional work, late inspections and contract awards, and waits for parts and materials were among the factors in the longer maintenance times, the report said.

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

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

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

bath.alison@stripes.com
@alisonbath_

MILITARY

Navy planning Trump-class battleships

Ships would carry hypersonic weapons, lasers, rails guns

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Navy plans to bring back its heavily armed class of warship known as battleships, and it will arm them with the most modern weaponry, including nuclear missiles, President Donald Trump announced.

The president promised the new class of ship would be “100 times more powerful” than the Iowa-class battleships that fought during World War II and were last used by the Navy in the 1990s. Trump promised the new ships would be outfitted with an array of technology still under development, including hypersonic weapons, electric rail guns and high-powered lasers. And they will be capable of firing nuclear-armed cruise missiles, he said.

“Battleships are the largest, sturdiest and most heavily armed vessel built specifically for naval combat,” Trump said Dec. 22 from his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. “Each one of these will be the largest battleship in the history of our country, the largest battleship in the history of the world ever built.”

Trump said he would be involved in planning and designing the ships.

“The U.S. Navy will lead the design of these ships along with me, because I’m a really aesthetic person,” Trump said.

Trump said he would meet with top weapons builders next week at Mar-a-Lago to encourage them to build new facilities and produce weapons — including ships — more expeditiously.

The Navy intends to initially build two Trump-class battleships — whose logo depicts Trump in the moments after a July 2024 assassination attempt, fist held high. The first would be named the USS Defiant, Navy Secretary John Phelan said.

Naming the ships for Trump comes after the Air Force’s decision earlier this year to label its next-generation fighter jet the F-47, shunning normal naming conventions to give its forthcoming sixth-generation fighter a nod to the 47th president.

Phelan said he hoped to see the new



ALEX BRANDON/AP

President Donald Trump arrives at his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Fla., for a news conference on Dec. 22.

ships commissioned in about 2½ years.

Ultimately, the Navy plans to build 20 to 25 Trump-class battleships, the president said. It was not clear how much the new class would cost.

Trump has long called for the Navy to bring back the battleship and criticized some modern Navy ship designs. He said the new ships would anchor his “Golden Fleet,” which he has said would include more and larger ships, uncrewed ships and a new class of aircraft carrier bigger than the 100,000-ton USS Gerald Ford, which is the largest military vessel ever built.

The term battleship has historically described a particular design — a large, up-armored vessel with some of the largest cannons available to the Navy, according to the sea service.

The Navy commissioned its first three battleships in 1895 and ultimately built 59 battleships, the service said. Its last active battleship, the USS Missouri, was decommissioned in 1992.

The Missouri — a 58,000-ton Iowa-class battleship — was one of four Navy battleships active in the 1990s. It was the Navy’s final battleship built before it was commissioned in 1944 and sent to the Western Pacific to support combat operations during World

War II and again during the Korean War. It was decommissioned in 1955 and made a tourist attraction in Bremerton, Wash., before it was recommissioned in 1986. The Missouri supported combat operations during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 before its final decommissioning. America’s last battleship was then sent to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where it has served as a memorial since 1998. A newer U.S. Navy vessel — a Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine — now carries the name USS Missouri.

The new Trump-class battleship is expected to weigh between 30,000 and 40,000 tons and be made of steel, the president said.

Phelan said Trump has pushed him to develop a new battleship design since before he agreed to take the Navy secretary job. He said that combatant commanders and the Navy’s top brass agreed it was “something that Navy desperately needs.”

“The future Trump-class battleship, the USS Defiant, will be the largest, deadliest and most versatile and best-looking warship anywhere on the world’s oceans,” Phelan said. “The Iowa [class battleship] was designed to go on the attack with the biggest guns,

and that’s exactly what will define the Trump-class battleships — offensive firepower from the biggest guns of our era.

“This ship isn’t just going to swat the arrows. It is going to reach out and kill the archers.”

The announcement was met with some skepticism, The Washington Post reported.

Mark Cancian, a senior adviser in the defense and security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, questioned whether the vessel ever would be built. He noted that its size will saddle the battleship with similar limitations and vulnerabilities as the nation’s other large warships. The Navy for decades has emphasized a smaller and distributed fleet as a way to counter evolving technologies such as drone warfare.

“There’s going to be a lot of ink spilled over this ship — but this ship is never going to sail,” Cancian predicted.

Current destroyers cost about \$2.8 billion each. Cancian estimated that if the Trump-class vessels are built, they will cost \$10 billion to \$12 billion each.

MILITARY



SEAN WORRELL/U.S. Air Force

The T-7A Red Hawk will become the primary trainer for Air Education and Training Command.

Future of Air Force pilot training arrives

Texas base receives new pilot training jet: T-7A Red Hawk

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Lt. Col. Michael Trott already achieved his childhood dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. Now he's marked a milestone in the Air Force's goal to modernize pilot training.

Trott, call sign "Hyde," was the first to fly the service's T-7A Red Hawk training aircraft to San Antonio, where his squadron is in the final sprint to integrating the plane as the primary trainer for Air Force pilots.

"I am completely humbled and honored to be in the position that I am," said Trott, commander of the 99th Flying Training Squadron, which is responsible for training pilot instructors at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph Air Force Base in Texas.

"All of my initial cadre have tens — if not hundreds — of hours already in the simulator," he said. "We are very excited to get the aircraft here and start flying it."

Trott first went to St. Louis — site of a Boeing plant — to train with Boeing pilots before one accompanied him for the flight to Texas.

The new plane bears a distinct red tail, which emphasizes its name honoring the Tuskegee Airmen, the mil-

itary's first Black pilots and support personnel who served during World War II. American bomber crews nicknamed the planes of the Tuskegee Airmen the "Red Tails" because they had the color painted across the vertical stabilizers of their fighters.

"We intend to continue the legacy of breaking barriers and challenging assumptions by utilizing the advanced capabilities of the T-7 training system," Trott said. "The 99th will rewrite what pilot production looks like and shape the future of pilot training for the next generation of warfighters in America."

Before his flight, Trott spoke with reporters about his own preparations to be the squadron's first pilot to fly the Red Hawk and what the next two years of preparation will look like to get the platform ready to host its first wave of training in fall 2027.

After getting through paperwork and maintenance required to receive a new aircraft, preparations will focus on the support infrastructure needed to get the plane into a flying state, Trott said. Pilots will then begin to fly the Red Hawk locally.

"We've got a game plan and training plan for what that looks like. That'll also include the [simulators] that are here already delivered and set up. There will be a training plan that we do from the aircrew side to get all of the initial cadre qualified on the aircraft," he said.

Meanwhile, the maintenance side of

the house will kick off training in January for the first 39 maintainers to work on the Red Hawk.

The course runs through June, said Jillian Watson, a member of the senior executive service and the director of logistics, engineering and force protection.



Trott

"We're looking forward to starting them off with the basics of things like crew chief, so that will involve some classroom time for standards, procedures, normal maintenance safety operations, things like that," she said.

"Then we will actually use the aircraft that will be stationed here as part of the maintenance training curriculum for them as they do familiarization training."

When that is completed, the service will start looking toward other bases that will receive the Red Hawk.

Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi is next in line with a 2027 arrival estimate, followed by Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas in 2032. Vance Air Force Base in Oklahoma will get the Red Hawk in 2034, and Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas a year later.

"I have to say, from a maintenance perspective, we're very much looking forward to an airframe of this century," Watson said.

The Red Hawk is replacing the

T-38C Talon, which was originally designed in the early 1960s. Over time, it has become less suited to prepare pilots to fly the platforms in use now, and those expected in the future.

"The T-38, it's old enough [that] people's grandparents have worked on that plane. From a maintenance perspective, it's nice to be working with a glass cockpit aircraft with new systems," Watson said.

Eventually, the Air Force will have more than 350 Red Hawks, and the program will grow to replace the service's other training platform, the T-6 Texan, which came into use in 2000.

Randolph will receive a second Red Hawk in January, Watson said.

By August 2027, Randolph should have 14 planes, Trott said. That fall, future instructor pilots will begin training on the Red Hawk.

Those newly minted instructors will then go to the service's undergraduate pilot training bases to begin integrating the Red Hawk into the Air Force's pilot training.

But before the first class of future instructors arrives at Randolph, the 99th squadron will work with the aircraft to learn how it performs and what the syllabus should look like, Trott said.

This work, he said, will build out the next three to four decades of pilot training.

thayer.rose@stripes.com
@Rose_Lori

MILITARY

Navy lauds launch of attack drone from ship

BY SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

A Navy warship's successful launch of a one-way attack drone was a watershed in the Defense Department push to get hundreds of thousands of the transformational aircraft into the field, according to the service.

The LUCAS drone was deployed last month from the littoral combat ship USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf in what was the first launch of the unmanned system from a ship at sea, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command said in a statement.

U.S. Central Command assigned the drone to Task Force Scorpion Strike, a unit created to develop and deploy one-way attack drones at scale. The task force, based in the Middle East, works to deliver autonomous strike capabilities to deployed forces.

"This achievement demonstrates the power of innovation and joint collaboration in this critical region," Vice Adm. Curt Renshaw, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, said in the statement.

The launch was a "significant milestone," Renshaw added.

Last month, CENTCOM announced the deployment of the military's first operational squadron built around one-way attack drones.

LUCAS is an abbreviation for low-cost unmanned combat attack system. The drones have an extensive range and are designed to operate autonomously, CENTCOM said.

They can be launched in various ways, including ship-based means, catapults and platforms mounted on the ground or a vehicle.

The one-way attack drones recently deployed by U.S. forces are meant to act as a foil to an Iranian model known as the Shahed, which has wreaked havoc on the battlefield in Ukraine and has been employed by Iran-backed militias throughout the region.

In 2025, the Air Force asked manufacturers to make a handful of exact replicas of the Shahed to assist in testing and training.

LUCAS was developed by Arizona-based defense contractor Spektre-Works and is designed for long-range, autonomous missions.

The aircraft is being introduced amid a broader U.S. military initiative



KAYLA MCGUIRE/U.S. Navy

A LUCAS one-way attack drone is launched from the flight deck of the USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf.

to scale up use of low-cost unmanned strike systems. The intent is to increase

operational flexibility and reduce production timelines and unit costs, defense officials say.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in November announced a \$1 billion, multiyear drone buy that will require manufacturers to compete against one another in "gauntlet" challenges to procure drone contracts.

Last month, DOD published its initial request for solutions outlining the parameters of the first challenge, scheduled for February.

Military operations are to run a number of tests on the vendors' UAVs and grade them on their ability to locate targets.

The launch from Santa Barbara was handled by Task Force 59, a Navy unit focused on integrating drones into fleet operations. The task force has overseen a series of tests and demonstrations involving unmanned platforms in the Middle East.

NAVCENT did not say whether the drone carried a live payload during the launch.

Stars and Stripes reporter Lara Korte contributed to this story.

Navy will build new frigate based on Coast Guard cutter

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Less than a month after killing the bulk of the Constellation-class frigate program, the Navy announced last month plans to build a replacement "FF(X) frigate" based on a Coast Guard cutter already in service.

"I have directed the acquisition of a new frigate class based on HII's Legend-class national security cutter design, a proven American built ship," Navy Secretary John Phelan said in a video announcement on X.

The Navy said in a statement, "The FF(X) will be a smaller, more agile surface combatant designed to complement the fleet's larger, multi-mission warships and enhance operational flexibility around the globe."

Phelan said President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have already "signed off" on the "smart, quick, affordable" build. His announcement did not include information on the number of ships to be purchased or the



ANDERSON W. BRANCH/U.S. Navy

Coast Guard Cutter Calhoun sails on the Hudson River during New York Fleet Week in May.

dollar amounts of the initial and long-term contracts.

The FF(X) will be built at HII shipbuilders' Ingalls Shipbuilding 800-acre plant in Pascagoula, Miss., Phelan said.

Using the Coast Guard cutter design for the new Navy frigates would fast-track getting hulls into the water by 2028, Phelan said.

While HII would be the lead builder on the cutters-turned-frigates, Phelan said an open competition would likely be

held to build in other American shipyards.

Phelan did not specifically say if Wisconsin-based Fincantieri Marinette Marine would be involved. The company won the 2020 competition to build the Constellation-class frigates. Originally based on a slightly modified version of a frigate already in service with France and Italy, the program has been plagued by cost overruns, delays, worker shortages and dozens of design changes. A Navy report last year said the project was 36 months behind schedule on its \$22 billion contract.

In canceling the program in November, the Navy said it would accept the first two ships already under construction, USS Constellation and USS Congress. But the program would be terminated for additional ships. The Constellation is projected to be delivered in 2029.

At the time of the program cancellation, Fincantieri said it was counting on new work from the Navy to keep its

Wisconsin plant open and its workforce in place. Phelan did not mention Fincantieri in the video.

"Shipyards will be measured across one outcome — delivering combat power to the fleet as fast as possible," Phelan said.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, Chief of Naval Operations, said in the same video that the program would follow what he said was the successful development and construction of the Arleigh Burke-class of destroyers.

Phelan said the new ships would fit into the overall Navy strategy for "the Golden Fleet," a Trump administration initiative under development that would include larger ships, including a possible new generation of battleships, along with larger numbers of smaller surface ships. The ships would be augmented by uncrewed ships that would support the defense of the major warships.

warnar.gary@stripes.com
@TheGaryWarner

MILITARY

Mattresses, fixes part of barracks spruce-up

Navy, Marine Corps detail projects for improvements at dozens of bases

By **ROSE L. THAYER**
Stars and Stripes

All Marines living in barracks can expect a new mattress and furniture, while sailors will see housing improvements at 50 Navy bases as the services invest \$615 million to improve housing for junior enlisted troops.

“Quality of service is inseparable from readiness,” said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, said in a news release.

“Providing safe, comfortable, and clean housing is not optional. It is a responsibility we owe to every sailor who volunteers to serve.”

The new funding stemmed from a Defense Department-wide barracks task force stood up in October to overhaul the military’s aging housing for junior enlisted and unaccompanied service members. Government reports and the military’s own assessments have found substandard conditions including mold, non-working appliances and air conditioning, plumbing issues and broken locks and windows.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in November announced \$1.2 billion for barracks renovations across all service branches provided through the massive spending package signed into law earlier in 2025 commonly referred to as the “One Big Beautiful Bill.”

The Navy will invest \$375 million into safety, comfort and cleanliness projects across the shore enterprise. About \$75 million of that amount will support 95 prioritized projects across 50 installations and will meet the specific needs at each base. This money will go toward kitchen updates, heating and cooling systems, new floors and new furniture, the Navy said.

The remaining \$300 million is flagged for major work at six bases:

Naval Support Facility Indian Head in Maryland: \$22 million toward the Marine Corps barracks for the Joint Chemical-Biological Incident Response Force will modernize barracks with



JESLIANNE TORRES/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Nick I. Brown, left, and U.S. Navy Capt. Jeffrey Richer address barracks discrepancies during Operation Clean Sweep at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., in October 2024.

structural, mechanical, electrical and fire suppression upgrades.

Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia: \$91.8 million toward the Center for Naval Aviation Technical Training Student Housing for a comprehensive renovation with roof replacement, HVAC, plumbing, electrical, fire system updates, mold remediation, cabinetry replacement, new flooring, closet upgrades and painting.

Oceana Dam Neck Annex: \$78.3 million toward Marine Corps Intelligence School Mardet Student Housing for a full restoration and modernization of HVAC, plumbing, electrical system replacement, new flooring, closets, paint, updated bathrooms, new furniture and in-room refrigerators and microwaves.

Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam in Hawaii: \$30.3 million toward Building 1489 for repairs to plumbing, exterior, roofing, interior finishes, HVAC and electrical. Interior renovations include upgrading kitchens, lounges, flooring, windows and shower areas.

Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story in Virginia: \$13.5 million for Shields Hall will support major HVAC system work, dropped ceiling replacement and the installation of lockable access doors.

Naval Base Kitsap in Washington state: \$12.1 million to Keppler Hall to

“This is not a one-time fix, but a sustained commitment.”

Vice Adm. Scott Gray
Navy Installations Command

the release. “We are dedicated to continuous improvement and ensuring our sailors have the quality housing they deserve throughout their careers.”

The Marine Corps said it will spend \$22 million across all installations to fund “self-help programs” and other minor repairs. Officials said this will empower commanders to act on local improvements.

Another \$55 million will purchase new barracks furniture and mattresses across all installations, and \$10 million will buy new door locks and a standardized barracks access control system.

The Marine Corps also designated \$218 million for improvements and renovations of 16 barracks across six installations: Camp Lejeune, N.C.; Camp Pendleton, Calif.; Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C.; Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif.; Quantico, Va.; and Camp Fuji in Japan.

Those renovations will cover HVAC repairs, mechanical repairs and work on major building systems.

The barracks task force also covers the Army and Air Force, though neither provided as granular a breakdown of the work to be done.

The Army will push \$50 million to local commanders for barracks improvements and another \$65 million to soldier self-help programs, the service said. Another \$405 million will fund major renovations. Officials said they are still inspecting all barracks to find what work needs to be prioritized.

The Air Force will put \$41.5 million toward immediate dormitory fixes of door locks, sinks, exhaust fans, lights, toilets, HVAC components, mold remediation, roof, flooring and window repairs. Another \$89 million will support larger projects.



NICHOLAS V. HUYNH/U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, inspects a house ceiling at Naval Air Station Key West's Sigsbee Park Annex during a visit to the Florida site in October 2024.

repair damage from an August fire and sprinkler flooding, upgrade fire alarm system and interior restoration of flooring, new ceilings, updated bathrooms and electrical updates.

“This is not a one-time fix, but a sustained commitment,” Gray said in

MILITARY

NCO on mission to urge cancer screenings

Service members at disadvantage in getting checkups to spot problems

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Matt Vitale had just completed air assault school with the Missouri National Guard in 2017 and was weeks away from mobilizing to the Middle East, when he noticed blood in his stool.

Vitale, who at the time was a 37-year-old sergeant first class, was in top physical shape and assumed he injured himself in training. But the bleeding did not stop; it grew worse.

He took a photo of the problem and showed it to his supervisor, who referred him to a doctor. A colonoscopy was ordered that same week. When Vitale followed up for the results, he was days away from deployment.

“I walked into the doctor’s office with the thought I needed to wrap this up. My bags were packed. But he sat me down and said, ‘I have some bad news. You have Stage 3 colon cancer,’” said Vitale, who asked if he could put off treatment until he returned.

“The doctor said, ‘If you don’t start treatment now, you could possibly die,’” Vitale said. “I was in shock. Everything changed for me in that moment.”

About 150,000 cases of colon cancer are diagnosed each year. While rates are declining in people over age 50, they are on the rise in younger adults, a trend called early onset colorectal cancer. Adults in their 20s and 30s are more often diagnosed at advanced stages of colon cancer than older adults, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Younger adults may overlook signs of colorectal cancer, according to Dr. Eric Wargotz, a pathologist and clinical professor emeritus at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. Colon cancer is a type of colorectal cancer. Younger people, who otherwise feel healthy, may dismiss symptoms such as bleeding and abdominal pain until they are severe.



MATT VITALE

In 2020, Matt Vitale, at right, then a sergeant first class, with Erik Brodin, then a staff sergeant, at Fort Leonard Wood, an Army training installation in Missouri. Vitale had completed aggressive treatment for an advanced stage of colon cancer.

“The doctor said, ‘If you don’t start treatment now, you could possibly die.’”

1st Sgt. Matt Vitale

Most colon cancers start with benign growths that can be removed, preventing cancer from developing. When caught early, the cure rate is over 90%. The prognosis for Vitale was different.

Stage 3 colon cancer means the cancer has grown through the colon wall and spread to one or more lymph nodes. It often is managed with aggressive treatment — which is what Vitale required.

Military members and veterans can be at a disadvantage in getting checkups and screenings that can spot precancerous growths and provide earlier diagnoses for colon cancer, Wargotz said.

“The challenge is greater for service members and veterans, who may experience gaps in care due to deployments, relocations or transitions between military and VA systems,” said



MATT VITALE

Matt Vitale, a first sergeant, serves with the National Guard Homeland Response Force in Missouri.

Wargotz, who previously served at the VA Medical Center and the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, in Washington, D.C.

Vitale admitted he was about to skip seeing a doctor altogether if not for pressure from his sister. “She said, ‘Hey, dummy, get this checked out. This isn’t right.’”

Vitale started treatment the day after his diagnosis, which included radiation, chemotherapy and surgery over

the course of several months.

He took medical leave for the more intensive phases of treatment but returned to active duty. “I have a passion for serving. This is my career,” said Vitale, a 47-year-old first sergeant who has served for 27 years.

Vitale’s deployments have included missions to Korea, Iraq, Guatemala and Honduras. During a 12-month deployment to Iraq from 2002 to 2003, his unit was exposed to pollution from burn pits.

Vitale entered his name and health information in the burn pit registry managed by the Department of Veterans Affairs after his cancer diagnosis. The registry tracks health issues connected to airborne hazards.

From 2018 to 2020, Vitale worked in a military police brigade in Missouri. He later transferred to the National Guard Homeland Response Force in Missouri, where he serves today.

Vitale is cancer-free and on a personal mission to urge friends, family and colleagues not to ignore signs of medical problems or put off seeing a doctor. “The last thing I thought I had was cancer,” Vitale said.

Routine colon cancer screenings are recommended for people ages 45 and older, so younger individuals are not included in standard screening programs.

But persistent symptoms such as blood in the stool should not be dismissed on age alone, said Dr. Sam Asgarian, chief medical officer at Guardant Health.

A new generation of colon cancer tests that are less invasive make it easier to detect colon cancer in individuals who are not exhibiting symptoms and at average risk of the disease. The tests involve collecting a stool sample at home and getting bloodwork at a doctor’s office or lab.

Asgarian said the Shield blood test, for example, “is an important innovation that makes colorectal cancer screening easier and more convenient.” Shield is an FDA-approved test for detecting cancer DNA in bloodwork. Positive results require a follow-up colonoscopy.

“There’s no reason to be a hard charger about your health,” Vitale said. “Every soldier is important.”

MILITARY

Marines' new fitness test starts Jan. 1

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps will institute a sex-neutral scoring physical fitness test for Marines with a combat arms primary military occupational specialty, the service announced.

“Our combat arms MOSs require rigorous physical readiness for direct ground combat,” Col. James Derrick, director of the Training Standards Division at the Marine Corps Training and Education Command, said in a statement. “These changes ensure all combat arms Marines meet the same high sex-neutral standards.”

The Marines changes to physical fitness and body composition standards take effect Jan. 1 and are in accordance with the Pentagon’s fitness standards issued Sept. 30.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the time summoned the top military brass to Quantico, Va., and announced a series of directives that included combat field tests for combat arms units, emphasizing “male-level” standards for fitness, and seeing that every member of the joint force — including four-star generals — take a fitness test twice a year and meet



CARLOS PAZ-SOSA/U.S. Marine Corps

Marine Lance Cpl. Ryan Soto Davila low crawls during the maneuver-under-fire portion of the service’s combat fitness test at Camp Foster, Okinawa.

height and weight requirements.

“Frankly, it’s tiring to look out at combat formations, or really any formation, and see fat troops. Likewise, it’s completely unacceptable to see fat generals and admirals in the halls of the Pentagon,” Hegseth said.

The physical fitness test will re-

quire combat arms Marines to achieve a minimum score of 210 points — 70% of the total possible points — using the male, age-normed scoring standard outlined in the changes. The physical fitness test will continue to be administered annually Jan. 1 to June 30, the service announced. Non-

combat arms Marines will continue to follow existing sex- and age-normed standards.

The service is also revising its body composition evaluation process. The current height and weight standards, along with the tape test, will be replaced by a waist-to-height ratio methodology. The Marine Corps will publish service-specific standards upon receipt of additional guidance from Hegseth, the service said. In the interim, the current height, weight and tape tests will continue.

Although the new physical fitness test standards will begin on Jan. 1, updates to Manpower Information Systems are expected to take 6 to 8 months, with full implementation projected within a year.

“The Marine Corps is committed to ensuring a smooth transition and will continue to coordinate with stakeholders to support these changes,” the service said. “These changes ensure that the Marine Corps’ physical fitness standards continue to support operational effectiveness and combat readiness.”

adams.matthew@stripes.com
@MatthewAdams60

DOJ pushes states to honor licenses for military families

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Justice Department has issued new explainers about portions of a law that make sure professional licenses held by members of military families

are recognized in different states.

Guidance that came out Dec. 22 includes a pair of letters to state authorities and a fact sheet on the revised license portability provision of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act.

the military community.

The contents of Stars and Stripes are unofficial, and are not to be considered as the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. government, including the Defense Department or the military services. The Guam Edition of Stars and Stripes is published jointly by Stars and Stripes and this newspaper.

The appearance of advertising in this publication, including inserts or supplements, does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Defense or Stars and Stripes of the products or services advertised.

Products or services advertised in this publication shall be made available for purchase, use, or patronage without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, physical handicap, political affiliation, or any other nonmerit factor of the purchaser, user, or patron.

© Stars and Stripes, 2026

The section of the law covered in the DOJ materials allows service members and their spouses who hold professional licenses to use the authorization in a new state when military orders require relocation.

“Military families are the backbone of American society,” Assistant Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon said in a statement Monday. “Servicemembers and their spouses often sacrifice the stability of settling in one place during a critical time in their career.”

The guidance covers a broad range of state-licensed professions, including health care workers, teachers, attorneys, veterinarians and some skilled trades.

Congress added the license portability provision to the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act in 2023 and updated it last year.

The intent of the legislation is to help curb military spouse unemployment.

As of 2023, Labor Department data showed that roughly 34% of military spouses work in occupations that require a license.

Frequent moves across state lines make it difficult for those spouses to quickly transfer their license and find a new job.

The new DOJ guidance can be seen in light of a Texas case from 2023 in which Hannah Magee Portee, the wife of an active-duty Air Force officer, was denied the ability to use school counselor licenses from Missouri and Ohio.

A federal court rejected the Texas Education Association’s position and sided with Magee Portee.

The unemployment rate for military spouses is nearly six times higher than that of the general population, they added.

gordon.lydia@stripes.com
@lydia_stripes

Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher
Erik Slavin, Editor in Chief
Brian Bowers, U.S. Edition Editor
Scott Foley, Revenue Director

CONTACT US

633 3rd Street NW, Suite 116, Washington, D.C.
20001

Editorial: (202) 886-0005

Advertising: (202) 886-0014

Additional contact information: [stripes.com](https://www.stripes.com)

This publication is a compilation of stories from Stars and Stripes, the editorially independent newspaper authorized by the Department of Defense for members of

Rent your furniture. Own your future.

Furnish 3 rooms just \$129/month



CORT[®]

Like your favorite ride share or streaming service, CORT lets you access the furniture you need without owning anything you don't. Allow CORT Furniture Rental to design your space, deliver, set up, and then pick up your furniture at the end of your lease – all starting at \$129/month. We're experts at making military moves easier and helping you travel lighter. Get all the details at cort.com/stripes

Your Team Makes the Game BIGGER. Your Service Makes the SAVINGS Stronger.

Exclusive 25% savings.
Earned by service. Delivered by your Commissary.



Smart. Simple. Affordable.™

START
SAVING
NOW



commissaries.com

   

The appearance of U.S. Department of War (DOW) visual information does not imply or constitute DOW endorsement.