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## Missing inaction

GAO: Military needs to outline clear steps to follow for absent personnel  
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## COVER STORY

# Clear rules needed when troops go missing

## GAO: Better guidance could help save lives

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

Giving U.S. military commanders clear, specific procedures to follow in the critical hours after service members unexpectedly go missing could improve the odds of saving their lives, a government watchdog agency says.

Air Force and Navy guidance on facilitating the search for absent personnel should designate a timeline for certain actions, such as notifying law enforcement or family members, the Government Accountability Office said in a report released last month.

Also, the Marine Corps still has not issued formal guidance for locating missing service members despite a 2022 recommendation by the GAO that it do so, according to the report.

“Clear formal guidance for the command-led response process during the first 24 hours following an absence can help to prevent harm and save lives,” the report’s authors said.

The agency noted that only the Army has specified when certain actions, such as notifying law enforcement or family members, should take place.

That and other gaps in guidance for commands in locating and tracking absent personnel could result in missed opportunities, the report stated.

“A timely and well-coordinated response to a service member’s absence between unit commanders and law enforcement is critical to establishing the facts and helping to ensure the service member’s safe return, if possible,” the GAO said.

The Marine Corps will issue an interim directive this month addressing the GAO recommendations, with full implementation by January 2028, the report stated, citing service officials.

The report findings follow updates to the Army’s missing-soldier process in the aftermath of the killing of Spc. Vanessa Guillen in 2020.

Guillen was reported missing from Fort Hood, Texas, in late April of that year. She was last seen working in an arms room on base. Her remains were found over two months later more than 20 miles from the base.

Authorities believe she was bludge-



ROSE THAYER/Stars and Stripes

**A mural of Army Spc. Vanessa Guillen standing outside the Vanessa Gate of Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, in October 2020.**

oned to death with a hammer by fellow soldier Spc. Aaron Robinson and then taken in a large plastic box to the place where her remains were found. Robinson fatally shot himself during a confrontation with law enforcement.

The case led to Defense Department policy reforms on sexual harassment and sexual assault.

The GAO recommendations also come amid questions about the Navy’s handling of the disappearance of now-Petty Officer 3rd Class Angelina Resendiz last year.

Her badly decomposed body was found in a wooded area near Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia in early June, 12 days after family members and fellow sailors raised concerns about her well-being on May 29.

But it wasn’t until June 3, five days after she was last seen or in contact with family and friends, that a state-wide alert was issued, a lag that occurred because the Navy initially considered her absent without official leave.

That response has drawn criticism from her family and congressional inquiries into the handling of her disappearance.

Seaman Jeremiah Copeland, who was assigned to the same ship as Resendiz, is charged with premeditated murder



Resendiz family

**The body of Seaman Angelina Resendiz was discovered June 9, 2025, in a wooded area about 10 miles from Naval Station Norfolk, Va.**

in her death, along with several crimes involving three other women.

Service members can be absent from their duty stations for varying reasons, which may be either voluntary or involuntary.

For example, 295 service members were listed as involuntarily absent in a nonhostile setting from 2015 through 2024, with 93% of those absences resulting in a declaration of death, according to the GAO report.

About 78% of those deaths were from accidents, including service-related ship collisions and aircraft crashes. A further 10% were from suicides. The causes behind the remaining involun-

tary absences were not identified in the report.

In its assessment, the GAO said the Navy and Air Force should augment their processes to include greater specificity in the timing for taking certain actions.

For example, Army guidance requires commanders to notify service law enforcement officials of a soldier’s absence within three hours of discovery and to inform family members within eight hours, the GAO said.

Navy and Air Force officials interviewed by the GAO recognized the importance of locating a missing service member quickly, but the guidance issued by each service outlines response time frames with varying specificity, according to the report.

That gap results in “different interpretations among officials regarding how quickly certain actions should be initiated,” the report stated.

For example, some officials said they would alert the appropriate higher-level command of an absence within a few hours, while others said they would wait until the end of the day, the following day or potentially longer.

Some indicated they would contact installation law enforcement within a few hours of being unable to locate a service member, while others preferred to wait until the following day to give the service member an opportunity to return to duty without escalating the issue.

The GAO made 12 recommendations, including that the services also better address the role of mental health in unexpected absences and potential safety issues that could arise during the response process.

The watchdog agency also wants the Defense Department to issue a policy requiring guidance that commanders presume a service member’s absence indicates they may be in danger and that they consider absences most likely involuntary after a specific time period unless available information indicates otherwise.

That recommendation, also made to the Navy and Air Force, is in line with recent changes to Army policy.

The Defense Department concurred with the recommendations.

## MILITARY

# Recognizing ‘a real sense of moral clarity’

Soldier who shielded Jewish POWs from Nazi guards to receive the Medal of Honor

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Chris Edmonds knew his father, Roddie, served during World War II, was captured and came home.

“He never told us anything about his experience ... and took it to the grave,” Edmonds said.

Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds died in 1985. Chris learned about his father’s actions in 2013 from a prisoner of war who said Edmonds deserved the Medal of Honor.

And on Feb. 3, Chris received a call from President Donald Trump to inform him that his father would posthumously receive the nation’s highest award for courage under fire.

“He said, ‘Well, I’m surrounded by a bunch of high-level military leaders now, and so they are very excited about this and they look forward to meeting you,’” Edmonds said.

The White House confirmed Feb. 19 that Edmonds would receive the Medal of Honor.

Edmonds, of Knoxville, Tenn., was serving in the U.S. Army’s 106th Infantry Division, 422nd Infantry Regiment when he was captured by the Germans in December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge. He, along with other Americans, were taken to Stalag IXA, a camp near Ziegenhain, Germany. Edmonds was held captive for 100 days.

A Nazi officer ordered Edmonds, the senior American noncommissioned officer, to line up more than 1,200 American troops in the camp and for Jewish soldiers to fall out separately. Edmonds ordered all POWs — Jews and non-Jews alike — to stand together.

When the German officer in charge saw that all the camp’s inmates were standing in front of their barracks, he turned to Edmonds and said, “They cannot all be Jews.”

“We are all Jews,” Edmonds fearlessly pronounced.



Chris Edmonds

**Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds will posthumously receive the Medal of Honor for protecting about 200 Jewish American prisoners of war and daring a German officer to shoot him at Stalag IXA, a camp near Ziegenhain, during World War II.**

The German took out his pistol and threatened Edmonds.

“Dad looked at him in the eyes, square in the eyes, because he was that kind of a guy that always made eye contact,” Chris said. “He looked him in his eyes and said, ‘Major, you can shoot me, but you’ll have to kill all of us because we know who you are, and you’ll be a war criminal when we win this war.’”

Edmonds then added the dagger in his heart, Chris said. “And you will pay.”

“He basically turned the tables on that major and said, ‘You know you’re gonna pay for this, and you don’t want to do this,’” Chris said.

The German gave up, turned around and left. Edmonds saved about 200 Jewish Americans.

Edmonds again stood his ground months later in a showdown with Nazi guards who ordered the POWs to evacuate the camp into a death march, according to his son.

“He was just an ordinary guy, just like the rest of us, but he had a real sense of moral clarity about right and wrong because of his faith,” Chris said.

Edmonds also served in the 1st Cavalry division during the Korean War, earning the combat infantryman’s badge, according to the Knox County (Tenn.) Archives.

And Chris, an interim pastor at Oakwood Baptist Church in Knoxville, said he never knew much about it.

Edmonds was still in the National Guard when he was called back. He served in Korea for at least eight months before coming home.

“It was bloody, brutal and cold once it turned to winter. And you know that’s what he experienced at the Battle of the Bulge,” Edmonds said. “He’s probably thinking, ‘What in the world? You know, God, I love you, but I’ve had enough.’”

On Feb. 10, 2015, Edmonds was posthumously recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, a title awarded by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from extermination by Nazis during the Holocaust.

He is one of five Americans, as well as the first American service member, to earn the honor.

Chris said he hopes to get a moment in Heaven to ask his dad why he didn’t tell the family about his actions. He recalls that he did press his father about it.

“‘Son, the heroes are buried over there,’” Chris remembers Edmonds saying about troops who paid the ultimate sacrifice. “‘They’re the ones who saved my life.’ He said, ‘I wouldn’t be here if some of the men, some of my boys, hadn’t have died for me.’”

Chris worked with then-Rep. John “Jimmy” Duncan and then-Sens. Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker for a recommendation to remove a five-year statute of limitations rule so his father could be considered for the nation’s highest honor. The package of information was submitted in 2014.

He knew the award was likely to happen because the Army and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had signed off.

Chris was given a head’s up that a “high-ranking military official” would call, but he did not expect it to be the president.

## MILITARY

# Trump orders release of DOD info on UFOs

President tells Pentagon to open its files, citing 'tremendous interest'

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Documents detailing what the U.S. government knows about whether intelligent life exists beyond Earth may not be under wraps for much longer.

Citing "tremendous interest" in the subject, President Donald Trump on Feb. 19 said he's instructing the Pentagon and other government agencies to identify and begin releasing files related to extraterrestrials and unidentified flying objects.

Trump made the announcement in a post on Truth Social, saying his order applies to all "information connected to these highly complex, but extremely interesting and important, matters."

Trump's order came on the heels of former President Barack Obama's remarks about aliens several days earlier. Asked about aliens in an interview with podcast host Brian Tyler Cohen, Obama said "they're real, but I haven't seen them, and they're not being kept ... in Area 51."

The place Obama referred to is a classified Air Force installation in



U.S. Air Force

**Volunteers remove rivets from an Avro Canada VZ-9AV Avrocar, a Cold War-era experimental aircraft resembling a flying saucer, at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, in 2017.**

southern Nevada initially built as a test facility for the Lockheed U-2 spy plane.

In recent decades, it's become the topic of various conspiracy theories

about whether the government is using the secretive site to hide alien bodies and recovered UFOs.

Obama made a subsequent clarifying post on Instagram saying he had not seen any evidence during his presidency "that extraterrestrials have made contact with us."

Trump's post did not give a timeline for the release of the files.

He told reporters on Feb. 19 on Air Force One that he doesn't have an opinion on whether aliens exist, according to The Associated Press.

The Pentagon in recent years has stepped up efforts to investigate unidentified and unexplained aerial phenomena, the government's term for UFO-type sightings.

An intelligence report released in 2023 revealed that there were hundreds of new reports of these sightings and many of them were unexplained.

Most of the new sightings came from Navy and Air Force aviators and operators who had witnessed such objects while flying.

In a 2024 report, the Pentagon said there was no indication suggesting that what observers had reported seeing was extraterrestrial.

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## GAO: ICBM test flight unlikely until 2028

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Software delays related to the U.S. Air Force's future LGM-35A Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile could pose "significant risks" to the program, requiring the U.S. to continue using the existing LGM-30G Minuteman III arsenal for longer than expected, the Government Accountability Office said Feb. 18.

The first flight of the new Sentinel is unlikely to occur before March 2028, according to the GAO report.

The timeline runs counter to a U.S. Air Force news release issued Feb. 17 that said the Sentinel could receive a new Milestone B rating, allowing for a prototype, by the end of the year. The Air Force said that it believed the missile's first flight could occur in 2027.

The Air Force said Feb. 18 that it was aware of the GAO report but felt confident that the accelerated timeline it presented was accurate.

"The Air Force has made tremendous progress since the GAO reports were written, and the Sentinel program is on track to complete its restructure by the end of 2026," the service said in a statement.

The new missile would be the land-based piece of the United States' nuclear triad, along with submarine-launched ballistic missiles and manned bombers.

The Sentinel program's cost is now pegged at about \$141 billion, including construction of 600 silos and other facilities.

The new ICBM program exceeded statutory cost thresholds in January 2024, delaying the development of a

prototype. The so-called Nunn-McCurdy unit cost limits created by Congress govern the pace of spending on defense programs. Specifics were not immediately available at press time.

The GAO said the delay could allow the service time to address issues in the program.

The GAO report said the Sentinel program is four years behind schedule, requiring a 14-year life extension of the Minuteman.

The Los Alamos Study Group Exchange Monitor, a publication for nuclear weapons experts, reported in January 2025 that the last Minuteman III would likely not be decommissioned until 2050 or later, as the two programs overlap during the Sentinel rollout.



MICHAEL RICHMOND/90th Missile Wing

**An unarmed LGM-30G Minuteman III sits inside the silo of U-01 at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo.**

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## MILITARY

# Navy project target of commendation, condemnation

## Trump's 'Golden Fleet' plan, short on details, has been scrutinized, praised

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

President Donald Trump's plan for a "Golden Fleet" has been short on details so far — its official website says "Webpage currently under construction. Check back soon for updates."

But the lack of specifics hasn't stopped the project from drawing praise and scorn from politicians and military analysts.

Trump announced the concept Dec. 22 during an event at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Palm Beach, Fla., highlighting a proposal for a new "battle-ship" that would field firepower he said was "100 times more than anything built."

The battleships, as currently planned, would be armed with 128 MK-41 vertical launch system cells, 12 Conventional Prompt Strike long-range hypersonic missiles, an electromagnetic railgun, conventional five-inch guns and be protected by AN/SPY-6 radar.

Initial schematics of the first battleship — which Trump said should be named USS Defiant — include an array of weapons, including yet-to-be-developed energy weapons and anti-drone defensive systems.

Trump's proposed 20 or more Golden Fleet BBG(X) battleships would cost \$15 billion to \$22 billion for the lead ship, according to a Congressional Budget Office report. Later ships would cost more than \$9 billion each once production is well underway.

The battleship is projected to have a displacement of about 35,000 tons. The last battleships built by the United States, the Iowa-class, launched near the end of World War II, weighed about 57,000 tons. The new battleship would be significantly smaller than the Navy's largest ships, including the new Ford-class aircraft carriers, with a displacement of 100,000 tons.

The design is similar to the DDG(X) — the Navy's previously planned next-generation destroyer. But the Trump-class battleships are larger.



CHRISTOPHER MATASSA/U.S. Navy

**Secretary of the Navy John Phelan speaks at the Surface Navy Association National Symposium in Arlington, Va., next to models of Golden Fleet ships.**

Navy Secretary John Phelan has recently attempted to flesh out the Golden Fleet plan, saying it is an umbrella term for an overhaul of the size and mix of ships the Navy will have in the future, including uncrewed ships operating in concert with manned vessels. The profile would include the Ford-class carriers, new Virginia-class attack submarines and Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines already joining the fleet.

Phelan touted the Golden Fleet as putting more "hulls in the water" at a faster pace, during a speech Feb. 13 at the West 2026 conference on naval defense in San Diego.

"High-end platforms — Next-generation battleships, continued production of destroyers, carriers and submarines that deliver survivability, magazine depth and sustained fires," he said. Phelan said the "low-end mix" would include the new class of frigates based on a Coast Guard cutter design, as well as unmanned surface and submersible vessels.

While warships are the center of debate, Phelan said the Golden Fleet would also be the proving ground for what he called upgraded Navy's logistics and auxiliaries, "sustaining power across distance." He touted a streamlined procurement system and the use of artificial intelligence for planning and design.

Phelan said in January that the Golden Fleet would boost job growth.

"Over the next decade, shipbuilders and suppliers will need to hire roughly 250,000 skilled workers to meet de-



Naval Sea Systems Command via Facebook

**A rendering of the proposed Trump-class USS Defiant.**

mand," he said during the Surface Navy Association's national symposium, in Arlington, Va. "That means apprenticeships, vocational training, accelerated pipelines and partnerships with local communities."

Phelan reiterated his support for a possible \$1.5 trillion defense budget, which Trump has suggested he will request for the 2027 fiscal year. That figure, at least 50% higher than the 2026 budget, is likely to face significant opposition from many Democrats and Republican fiscal hawks in Congress. But Phelan promised to push on with the plan.

"American industry is resurgent, and the Golden Fleet exists because the president looked at the world as it is, not as we wish it to be, and said plainly: Move faster. Build smarter. Deliver capability now."

The Golden Fleet garnered early support from some experts who said naval strategy has been too rooted in the past of the Cold War and the post-9/11 wars against terrorism.

Brent Sadler, Senior Research Fel-

low for Naval Warfare and Advanced Technology in the Allison Center for National Security, wrote an article for the conservative Heritage Foundation titled "The U.S. Navy Must Build the 'Golden Fleet.'"

While lamenting a lack of details so far, Sadler said an overhaul of the Navy's ship types and purposes was long overdue. He listed several types that he believes the Golden Fleet will bring to American power projection at sea.

"A new frigate based on U.S. Coast Guard's National Security Cutter, large unmanned corvettes armed with long-range weapons, and logistics ships," Sadler wrote.

The idea, Sadler said, could lead to the construction of smaller escort carriers like those used in World War II to supplement today's large main carriers.

But for some analysts, the "Golden Fleet" is less a boon to Navy planning than a boondoggle that will lead to more planning U-turns, pushing several surface fleet proposals farther into the future.

Ronald O'Rourke, who recently retired after 42 years with the non-partisan Congressional Research Service, including as lead defense analyst, spoke this month at a panel on shipbuilding at the West 2026 conference.

O'Rourke said the Navy can ill afford another major course change in ship production, another reversal for the Navy that has left in its wake discontin-

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## MILITARY

# IG: Kennel conditions put working dogs at risk

Report cited issues with extreme heat, inattentiveness in care, aging facilities

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

At least four military working dogs died after being housed in kennels that a recent Defense Department inspector general report called unsatisfactory.

IG investigators visited a dozen military kennels across the U.S. and assessed 10 of them as substandard. The report cited problems such as overexposure to extreme heat, caregiver inattentiveness and aging facilities.

Between 2021 and 2023, there were four fatalities as a result of the dogs' stay in one of those 10 kennels, the IG said in the report, which was issued Feb. 17.

Service officials told investigators that the poor conditions stemmed from command decisions to prioritize other mission requirements over renovating existing kennels or building new facilities.

Part of the review keyed in on military dogs in nontraining status, meaning they were either in initial training, awaiting an assignment or under some type of assessment.

That focus was chosen because dogs



SARAYUTH PINTHONG/U.S. Air Force

**An animal caretaker makes her rounds in the military working dog kennels at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas.**

in an operational environment generally receive more stimulation, the report said.

Dogs under the purview of the Air Force's 341st Training Squadron experienced higher rates of diseases, injuries and behavioral problems than those in operations units, the IG said in a report released earlier this month.

The Air Force is the executive agent

for the Pentagon's working dog program.

Because of understaffing, some dogs received only a few 10-minute walks per week rather than the five hours of daily physical and mental activity required by regulations, the report said.

German shepherds and Belgian Malinois are the most common breeds

in the ranks of military working dogs, which help in activities ranging from explosive detection, drug discovery and search-and-rescue operations.

Multiple service components failed to consistently protect dogs from extreme weather conditions and kennel mold issues, the report said. Managing quarantine and isolation areas in the kennels also was problematic, according to the IG.

During an August 2024 visit to the 341st Training Squadron's facilities at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas, investigators said they saw signs of dogs under stress.

Among the troubling behaviors they saw were continuous spinning, jumping, chewing on metal water buckets and "excessive vocalization." They also found signs of heat stress, the report said.

The IG recommended that the Air Force coordinate with the other services on a plan to upgrade kennel facilities to meet current DOD standards.

The Air Force agreed with the recommendation and said steps were being taken to address the issues.

In addition, the Air Force should reduce the number of military working dogs in nontraining status until enough caretakers are in place, the IG recommended.

Air Force officials responded that efforts are underway to fix the staff shortages.

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## Battleship would rely on yet-to-be-developed tech

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ued programs and abandoned ship types.

"They're all well intentioned," O'Rourke said. "But in some cases, it's resulted in people learning just enough about shipbuilding to get things wrong. And the discussion about shipbuilding has suffered from bad information, magical thinking, hand waving, arguments and confusion about causes, effects and solutions."

O'Rourke pointed to the "sustained churn" in surface ship designs that has occurred over the past 25 years, across programs for littoral combat ships,

frigates and destroyers, which has left some projects to be abandoned or truncated.

He pointed to the recent cancellation of the delayed Constellation frigate program, which will end after the first two of the six initial ships have been completed at a Fincantieri Marinette Marine shipyard in Wisconsin.

Marc Cancian, a former Marine officer now an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says flatly that the Golden Fleet — at least the battleships at the center of its concept — will never be built.

"There is little need for said dis-

cussion because this ship will never sail. It will take years to design, cost \$9 billion each to build and contravene the Navy's new concept of operations, which envisions distributed firepower," Cancian wrote in January on the CSIS website.

Phelan has countered critics by saying the Golden Fleet addresses churn by casting a hard eye on delayed Navy programs approved by earlier administrations and by putting AI and a business-style approach into building and operating the fleet.

"We've been locked in a perpetual state of triage, diverting attention to

shipbuilding programs that fall behind schedule and grow in cost," Phelan said.

Phelan told the naval defense industry audience in San Diego that support for the Golden Fleet would bring an upgraded Navy.

"The modern fight favors those that can rapidly prototype, test under fire, incorporate operator feedback and scale successful innovations on the front lines in real time, faster than their opponents can react," Phelan said.

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## MILITARY

# Guard airmen stay connected in Antarctica

## Starlink helps NY troops keep in touch with loved ones during deployments

By **SETH ROBSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Starlink is helping American airmen stay in touch with loved ones during deployments to one of the most isolated spots on Earth, according to members of the New York Air National Guard working in Antarctica.

Before the low-earth-orbit satellite service came into being, personnel in Antarctica had limited contact with the outside world. At McMurdo Station — the largest U.S. base on the frozen continent — news commonly came from editions of Stars and Stripes printed on computer paper and displayed in the dining facility.

Antarctic internet service has made great strides recently, according to Col. Steven Slosek, commander of the Guard's 109th Airlift Wing.

Four ski-equipped LC-130 aircraft and 250 airmen from the wing have been supporting operations in Antarctica during the Southern Hemisphere summer research season, which kicked off in October and wraps up this month.

Starlink terminals are a "game changer" in Antarctica, Slosek said.

Starlink, a subsidiary of SpaceX and

founded by Elon Musk, is a constellation of orbiting satellites that provide internet access from space.

"Folks are able to use their phones (to access the internet)," Slosek said of the Wi-Fi service available to members of his unit in Antarctica. "They are able to have very regular contact with family."

Troops working at Williams Field, the runway that serves McMurdo, can use about 2 gigabytes of data each week and there's a possibility of increasing that, perhaps through a paid subscription, Slosek said.

The wing tested the \$400-a-month internet service at the airfield last season. During this year's mission it added additional network equipment to allow access to all buildings at Williams Field, Maj. Geoffrey Garrett, the wing's executive officer, said by email.

Starlink internet service is available at McMurdo, but with many more people there, the service is less accessible, he said by email.

Staff Sgt. Rebekah Johnson, a crew chief with the wing, said she used Starlink internet at Williams Field.

"I was able to make Wi-Fi video calls



GABRIEL ENDERS/New York Air National Guard

**An LC-130 Hercules of the 109th Airlift Wing is loaded with cargo at Williams Field, Antarctica, on Dec. 22.**

and use Facebook and YouTube and other music apps without any restriction on performance and no lagging," she said by email.

Starlink allowed personnel to update gaming systems that wouldn't work with the older internet service at McMurdo, she said.

Johnson said she has used Starlink to pay bills, do online classes and communicate with people back home and in New Zealand.

"In previous seasons, I was not able to watch any videos for my college classes because they were blocked or were too

large of a file to play," she said.

An entire shift of 30 maintainers, along with around 20 civilian support personnel, were able to use the Starlink service at one time, Johnson said.

"Starlink was an important element to morale and vital to family communications," she said. "I could carry on life as a normal person and did not have to struggle to communicate back home to family (and) friends and conduct other business as was the case in previous seasons."

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# Guard brigade steps into role training Ukrainians

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**  
*Stars and Stripes*

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — A new Army National Guard unit took over the training of Ukrainian forces in Bavaria this month amid the latest breakdown in peace talks seeking to end Kyiv's 4-year-old war with Russia.

About 150 soldiers from the Vermont Army National Guard's 86th Infantry Brigade (Mountain) replaced a Tennessee National Guard cavalry regiment Feb. 19 during a change of responsibility ceremony at Tower Barracks, an Army statement said. The Vermont-based troops, collectively known as Task Force Alpine, arrive on a nine-month rotation to train Ukrainian forces in joint maneuvers and combined arms at 7th Army Training Command facilities and ranges.

Col. Frank Tantillo, commander of the

Army's only true mountain brigade, vowed to bring toughness, adaptability and teamwork to the role.

"We understand operating in demanding terrain, complex conditions and uncertain environments," he said. "We're going to take this forward."

Brig. Gen. Terry Tillis, leader of the training command, lauded the outgoing Task Force Saber and encouraged the mountain troops to support the Ukrainians as they try to wrest back territories that are "rightfully theirs."

"We have a very dynamic mission," Tillis said. "Don't settle for what we just did before. I want you guys to be innovative, think outside the box and take it to the next level."

Rotating National Guard units have trained Ukrainian troops for more than 10 years as part of the Joint Multinational

Training Group-Ukraine mission, which falls under U.S. European Command, U.S. Army Europe and Africa and the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine.

The operation relocated to Germany in 2022. Since then, more than 23,000 Ukrainian military personnel have received instruction across 47 platforms and special events, the statement said. The efforts have been hailed as a crucial factor in Ukrainian success.

Ukrainian chaplains, for example, are participating in a two-week course at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Bavaria, 7th Army Training Command spokeswoman Lacey Justinger said.

Russia has been accused of sponsoring a campaign of surveillance and sabotage in European nations that support Ukraine's war effort, either by providing material support or through the training

of its armed forces.

Three dual German-Russian nationals were convicted in October of charges related to their work with a Russian intelligence agent. They were accused of spying on U.S. military bases in Germany, including Grafenwoehr, and plotting attacks on U.S. troops to disrupt NATO logistical support. The ringleader was sentenced to six years in prison.

In addition, countries including Poland and Belgium, both of which host a significant U.S. troop presence, have seen suspicious fires, railway attacks and drone sightings. Those events have spurred accusations that Russia is waging hybrid warfare against Ukraine's backers.

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## MILITARY

# Americans freed with a plea over power

Jesse Jackson found success negotiating releases of troops held by adversaries

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Navy Lt. Robert O. Goodman marked Christmas Day 1983 under detention of Syrian forces. The A-6 Intruder, a fixed-wing attack plane he was flying with Lt. Mark Lange, had been shot down by Syria on Dec. 4, 1983, while on a retaliatory mission over the mountains east of Beirut, Lebanon.

Lange did not survive the ejection from the aircraft. Syrian troops took Goodman into custody, holding him first in a basement cell, then in a bedroom of sorts near an office, he recounted in a 2023 article he co-wrote for *Windscreen*, a magazine for the A-6 Intruder community.

Soon after Christmas, a group of men came to his room and asked, "Do you know Jackson?"

Unsure what they were getting at, Goodman wrote that he responded, "Jesse, Michael or Reggie?"

The language barrier left him confused, but Goodman soon learned that the men were referring to the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Jackson had written the Syrian president about Goodman and led a delegation to Syria in what he called a "mission of mercy" that ultimately freed the pilot.

"I've been eternally grateful to Rev.



HRVOJE KNEZ/Associated Press

From left, Spc. Steven M. Gonzales, Staff Sgt. Christopher J. Stone, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Staff Sgt. Andrew A. Ramirez on May 2, 1999.

Jackson and his family for his efforts in securing my release," Goodman, 69, now a retired commander, said Feb. 17 after learning of Jackson's death at age 84.

Jackson's presence and influence throughout decades of American history and politics have sometimes overshadowed the significant role he played negotiating the release of military service members held overseas.

Twice he secured the release of American troops, first helping Goodman and more than a decade later helping three soldiers held by Serbian forces.

James Thomas Jones III, associate professor of African American History at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, said Jackson's secret sauce may have been his ability to come in with a plea and a reminder that the entire world was watching — not presenting a

military perspective.

"If you've had war, conflict, and what have you, this little token, this one moment, is something that can prove to be very valuable to you as far as the historical memory goes, and also in regards to how you're viewed by your contemporaries at this present moment," Jones said. "Are you willing to work with anyone? And to deny Jackson would be a missed opportunity for a lot of people."

As Jackson worked to release Goodman, he was also running for president in the Democratic primary, which led to a tense but celebratory White House news briefing Jan. 4, 1984, with President Ronald Reagan, who was up for reelection.

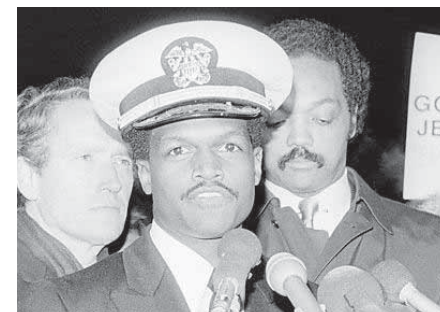
Goodman had been freed one day earlier with no concessions from the U.S. government. Jackson worked outside of it.

In Jackson's decision to go, Jones did not see Jackson's motivations as related to race — because Goodman is a Black man — but more about politics and strategy.

"In many ways, he was going to show that he was capable of being presidential and accomplishing things that the sitting American president could not do," Jones said.

Jackson described his three days of negotiations with Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus to CBS on the 30th anniversary of Goodman's release.

"I leaned heavily upon him to not let us go back empty-handed," Jackson said. "Our mission was noble. It was for



National Archives

Lt. Robert O. Goodman, center, with Jackson, right, in January 1984.

the best in our own country and for the best of Syria at the same time and because of that, Mr. Assad let him go."

This sat in contrast to the efforts made by the Reagan administration, Jones said.

"You have Reagan, and you have American military leaders who believe that might is right," he said.

Jackson instead presented an opportunity "where humanity can show it can reign," Jones said.

Jackson continued from there to get involved in negotiating the release of Americans held in Cuba, Iraq, Gambia and during the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985. His work again involved detained military troops in 1999 when three soldiers were captured by Serbian forces.

Staff Sgt. Christopher J. Stone, Staff Sgt. Andrew A. Ramirez and Spc. Steven M. Gonzales were on a NATO observation patrol on March 31, 1999, when Serbian troops took them by force and accused them of crossing illegally into Yugoslavia along the Macedonia border.

Jackson led a religious delegation that secured their release on May 2, 1999.

Maj. Gen. David L. Grange, then-commander of the 1st Infantry Division, stated in an Army release he was grateful for Jackson's help.

"[Jackson] had told me it was a 'tough sell,' but that he would be successful — and he was," Grange said.

Gonzales later told PBS about his release and said he didn't believe it was real until "we were able to walk across that floor, and go hug Rev. Jackson, and then call our families."

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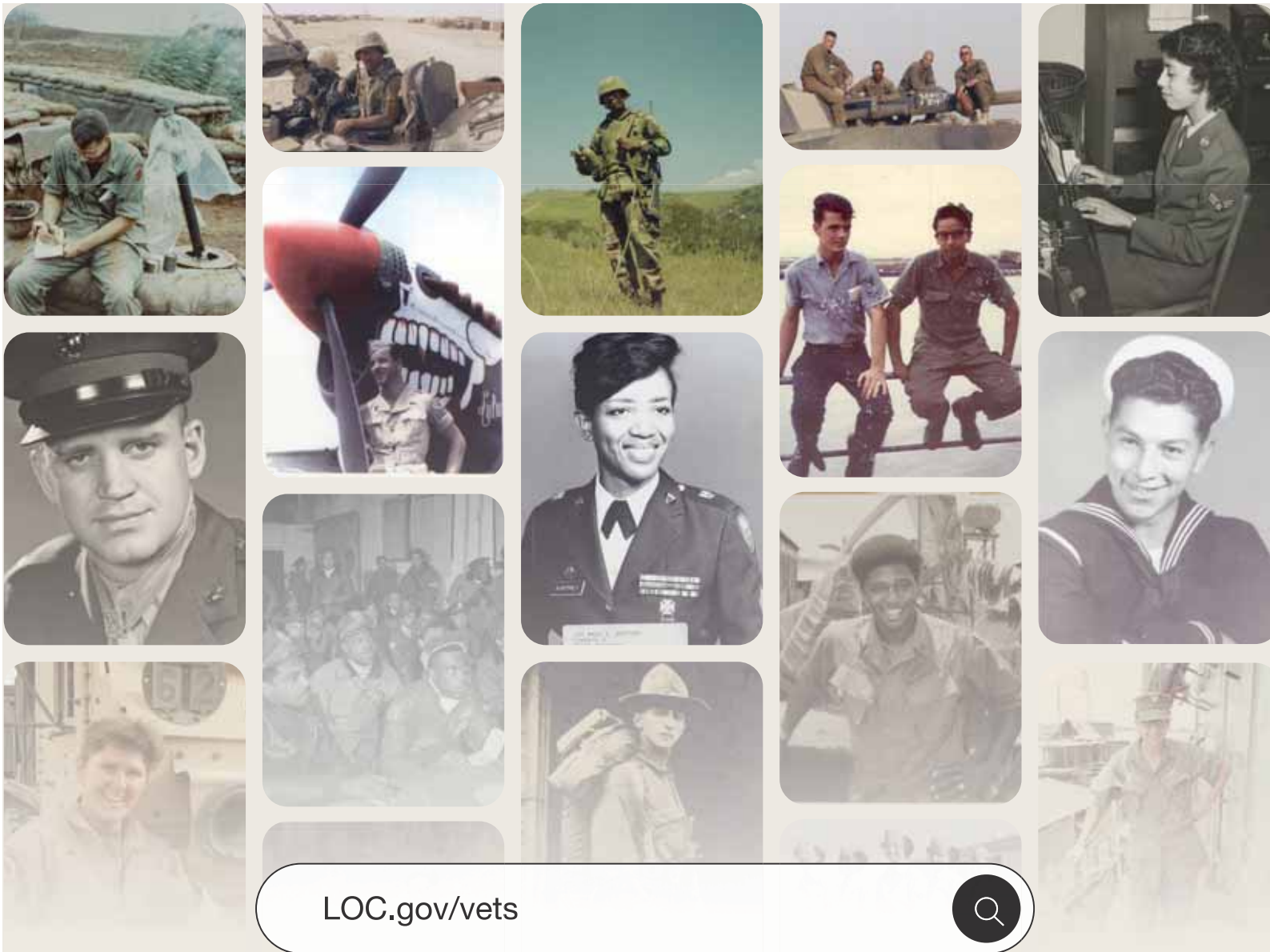
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