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## More than smoke and mirrors

Army tests devices to improve survival  
rate of engineers clearing path to the front  
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A smoke machine attached to a TRV-150  
unmanned aircraft is tested during a train-  
ing scenario March 5 at Fort Hood, Texas.

ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

## COVER STORY

# Tech moves combat engineers from breach

Training showed how new machines can help save lives

BY ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT HOOD, Texas — Clearing the path to the front lines of combat only has about a 50% survivability rate for Army combat engineers.

Challenged to improve that, Fort Hood's 36th Engineer Brigade trained this month in breaching operations using more than a dozen pieces of new technology to find the right mix that will make sure all soldiers survive.

"We are executing in concert with a maneuver formation to remove soldiers from the breach and get the armored formation through," said Maj. Michael Caddigan, operations officer for the 36th Engineer Brigade. "One of the most complex things we do is breaching a complex obstacle."

The efforts of the engineer brigade began last year on the periphery of the Army's Transformation in Contact initiative that pushes the service to rapidly field new technology, Caddigan said. It's all about saving lives and being ready for what the next war will look like.

"We would put 150 soldiers against this problem set behind us. We would expect to lose about 75 of them with the old ways of doing things," he said. "Now, using our [machine assisted] capability, our expectation is that we keep those 150 soldiers alive for the next fight."

To do that, the brigade re-created a historical obstacle line seen in World War II and Desert Storm and incorporated elements of the ongoing battlefield seen in Ukraine's war against Russia. A line of barriers known as "dragon's teeth" stretched across a swath of dusty Texas training ground as members of the Army, Marine Corps and Air Force watched from a nearby cliff.

The brigade then brought in 16 new technologies — some of which the Army is considering for purchase, said Lt. Col. Nick Rinaldi, from the Army Applications Laboratory, part of the Transformation and Training Command.



PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

**Soldiers from the 36th Engineer Brigade carry a TRV-150 unmanned aircraft capable of moving up to 150 pounds during a training scenario March 5 at Fort Hood, Texas.**



**The 36th Engineer Brigade at Fort Hood received two M5 RACER unmanned vehicles to breach obstacles without soldiers directly on the line from a retired Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency program.**

"If we wait to practice until we've acquired a final product, we won't have enough repetitions," Rinaldi said. "We have to stay relevant and on the edge of capability, but the only way to do that is if we're training with our equipment."

This month's scenario included the TRV-150 unmanned aircraft capable of carrying up to 150 pounds — for this it carried a smoke machine to provide cover — and remotely operated track vehicles and bulldozers.

One autonomous vehicle, known as the M5 RACER, came to the brigade last year through a retired Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency program. The unit took ownership of the green, rubber-tracked vehicle, which pulls a trailer with a mine clearing line charge that soldiers remotely detonate.

Some of the additional equipment tested was not available to be discussed or photographed publicly.

The closest soldiers got to the dragon's teeth obstacle during breach operations was about 500 meters, Caddigan said. The goal is to move that back to 3 kilometers or farther.

Spc. James Clubb, a combat engineer, operated the RACER using a laptop and a modified video game controller. It took him just a couple hours to learn, he said.

"I absolutely love the fact that I can sit down, do my job and make sure that not only I'm safe, but my teammate is safe, and the mission is still getting executed," he said.

Typically, Clubb said he works as part of a team to breach an obstacle. His job is to get out of the Bradley



**Spc. James Clubb, a combat engineer with the 36th Engineer Brigade, operates an M5 RACER unmanned vehicle to breach an obstacle during a training scenario on March 5.**

about 100 meters out, set the explosives and ignite them from a safe distance.

"Mind you, all this is while we're being shot at by the enemy forces," Clubb said. "I have approximately eight seconds of survival while on the breach."

The brigade will next take selected technologies from this home-station training to a 2027 rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., alongside 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, Caddigan said. Then, to a future deployment to Europe.



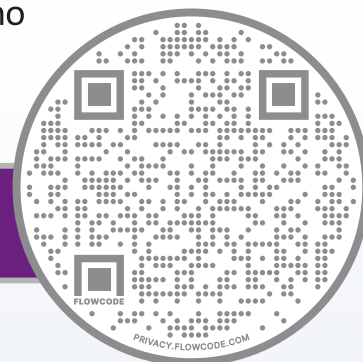
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## MILITARY

# Congress clears path for Medal of Honor

## Legendary Marine officer cited for actions in Vietnam

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Senate cleared the way for a legendary Force Reconnaissance Marine to receive the Medal of Honor for his lifesaving actions in April 1967 that spared the lives of his nine-man team during a vicious fight in Vietnam.

The unanimous approval of the bill on March 3 waived time restrictions to consider the Medal of Honor for retired Maj. James Capers Jr., who despite his own horrible injuries cleared the way for his Recon team to safely evacuate the village of Phu Loc after it was ambushed by North Vietnamese soldiers. Capers, 88, helped his Marines — all of them wounded in the attack — board a helicopter and fought off the assaulting force to ensure the bird's escape.

The Senate vote came about one month after the House approved the measure, sending the bill to President Donald Trump. Trump will have the final say on if the Silver Star awarded to Capers in 2010 for his actions at Phu Loc will be upgraded to the nation's top military honor.

"I'm proud Congress has acted to send this legislation to the President's desk to ensure Maj. Capers receives the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award for valor, and the gratitude of a nation he served with honor," Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C., who introduced the legislation to allow Capers the Medal of Honor in May 2025, said in a statement. "We applaud you, and our nation thanks you for your service."

Norman has lobbied Trump since the beginning of his second administration to award Capers the Medal of Honor. Many other supporters, including several veterans' groups and filmmakers, have worked even longer to see Capers' award upgraded.

Capers, in a 2018 interview with Stars and Stripes, said he was proud to receive the Silver Star, the military's third highest award for battlefield valor.



PATRICK KING/U.S. Marine Corps

**Former Marine Corps Maj. James Capers Jr. salutes during a ceremony at Camp Lejeune, N.C., in June 2021.**

That award came after he was nominated for the Medal of Honor, but the Marine Corps downgraded the decoration after review. Receiving the top award for heroism, he said, would mean more for the men with whom he fought and bled that day at Phu Loc. Capers also said it would alleviate any concern that his skin color influenced the downgrade decision.

Capers, the first Black man to lead a Marine reconnaissance company and receive a battlefield commission, had been in Vietnam about a year when his unit — known as Team Broadminded — was ambushed that day in April 1967. The team had already conducted dozens of highly classified commando

raids, often behind enemy lines.

But the fighting that day at Phu Loc was perhaps more intense than any had ever seen, Capers said.

The attack was initiated by claymore mines that ripped Capers' abdomen open and broke his leg, but he was undeterred. He charged ahead to free his injured men from the assault.

"If I was going to die there in Vietnam, I was going to die fighting," Capers said.

He fought off the attacking force — an entire NVA regiment — for nearly an hour, taking bullet wounds to both of his legs, as his team escaped to a landing zone for helicopter extraction.

When the chopper arrived, Capers



Courtesy of MJC Ent.

**Capers is pictured during his time in Vietnam as a team leader in Third Force Recon.**

**"If I was going to die there in Vietnam, I was going to die fighting"**

**Retired Maj. James Capers Jr.**

ordered his men and their dead war dog — King, who was killed in the attack — loaded first. Then he jumped off the helicopter as it struggled to take off.

"I figured it's better to lose one man than to lose the whole team," Capers said. "Any commander worth his salt would care for his men before his self."

But his men objected, ultimately, pulling Capers back aboard the helicopter, which after two attempts escaped the battle. All nine members of Capers' unit survived the enemy ambush, each injured but alive.

Capers "demonstrated extraordinary courage and leadership during the Vietnam War, risking everything to save his fellow Marines while severely wounded," Norman said. "His heroism has been known for decades, but the recognition he deserves has been far too long in coming."



## MILITARY

# GAO cites challenges affecting readiness

## DOD has not fully implemented earlier recommendations

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Years of delayed maintenance and staffing shortfalls continue to drag down overall readiness, according to a Defense Department watchdog agency report that acknowledged the military's ability to carry out specific missions despite those limitations.

The Government Accountability Office report released earlier this month drew on years of studies examining issues such as the condition of ships and aircraft, personnel levels and training.

The report was assembled before the U.S. launched its most recent attacks on Iran and makes no mention of the ongoing war. But its findings are less focused on the immediate needs of a major campaign than on long-term sustainability.

The GAO said the Pentagon has yet to fully implement more than 150 recommendations from earlier reviews intended to improve equipment availability, strengthen personnel pipelines and support better decision-making on readiness.

Many of those recommendations span multiple administrations and remain open years after they were issued. The GAO said the Defense Department generally agreed with its recommendations.

"U.S. military readiness has been degraded over the last two decades due to a variety of challenges, including maintaining existing systems while acquiring new capabilities," the report says.

One of the most persistent problems involves a shortage of trained maintainers for ships and aircraft.

Technicians and mechanics are responsible for keeping complex systems operating safely, and the GAO said many units lack enough qualified workers to keep up with required repairs.

Short staffing has contributed to long-running maintenance backlogs, with aircraft and ships spending extended periods out of service.



OLIVIA COWART/U.S. Army

**Soldiers perform maintenance work on a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Ford Island, Hawaii. A Government Accountability Office report noted that the Army's heavy-lift helicopter did not meet its availability goals between 2015 and 2024.**



JUAN SERRATOSGUZMAN/U.S. Navy

**A Navy aviation mechanic performs maintenance on an MH-60R Sea Hawk aboard the USS George H.W. Bush in the Atlantic Ocean last month. Many vessels don't have enough sailors available to complete maintenance work while at sea, the GAO report said.**

Across the Army and Air Force, only two of 27 aircraft types reviewed met their availability targets in most years between 2015 and 2024, the report said. The Army's CH 47F Chinook heavy-lift helicopter and the Air Force's C 130J transport plane failed to meet availability goals for much of the past dec-

ade, as units struggled with parts shortages and delayed depot work.

The Navy reported similar problems, the GAO found.

Executive officers surveyed by GAO said many ships did not have enough trained sailors to complete required maintenance while underway, leaving

some tasks deferred until vessels returned to port.

Safety concerns also weighed on readiness. The report noted an increase in serious accidents involving the V-22 Osprey in 2023 and 2024, including crashes that resulted in deaths, serious injuries or aircraft destruction.

Gaps in oversight and information sharing limited the Defense Department's ability to fully understand safety risks involving the aircraft, the GAO said.

The report also highlighted readiness challenges in specific regions.

In Europe, it pointed to problems with moving equipment and supplies quickly across the Continent in the event of a conflict with Russia.

In the Indo-Pacific, challenges include maintaining and repairing equipment in contested areas and ensuring reliable fuel supplies for military operations.

The report emphasizes that many of these problems are long-standing and will require continued attention from military leaders and lawmakers.









## MIDEAST

# 'The mother of all commando raids'

## US forces may need to secure uranium in Iran, analysts say

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. special operations forces may be needed to secure Iran's uranium stockpiles, analysts say, as uncertainty over missing nuclear material persists amid American airstrikes on Iranian military targets.

Thousands of U.S. and Israeli attacks have destroyed warships, missile launchers, facilities and weaponry. But questions about the fate of canisters containing enriched uranium could trigger action on the ground.

In June, the U.S. carried out bunker-busting attacks on Iran's nuclear program that were believed to set the program back years. Still, nuclear proliferation experts warn that nearly 1,000 pounds of uranium could be weaponized if centrifuges remain operational.

"It would take the mother of all commando raids — plus heavy equipment — to retrieve the canisters," Barbara Slavin, an expert on Iran with the Stimson Center think tank, wrote in an email.

President Donald Trump didn't rule out such a move in the future.

"Right now, we're just decimating them, but we haven't gone after it," Trump said aboard Air Force One on March 9, referring to Iran's nuclear sites. "But (it's) something we could do later on. We wouldn't do it now."

Suspected locations for the material include damaged tunnel complexes at Iran's Esfahan site and inside facilities at Fordow and Natanz.

Recovering the material could require digging through rubble in harsh terrain while a war is underway, analysts say. Given uncertainty over who ends up controlling Iran's nuclear sites, the U.S. could face a scramble to seize enriched uranium and centrifuges.

"If the current conflict leads to the erosion and eventual loss of control by the Iranian regime, and the emergence of instability or a power vacuum, the security of nuclear materials,



Residents look on and take pictures as flames and smoke rise from an oil storage facility struck as attacks hit the city during the U.S.-Israeli military campaign in Tehran, Iran, on Saturday.

ARILEZA SOTAKBAR, ISNA/AP

## "To truly effect both regime change and secure the vulnerable WMD-relevant material in Iran, the United States may yet have to put boots on the ground."

Stimson Center think tank

technology and knowledge will be a major issue," wrote Daniel Salisbury and Alexander Bollfrass, experts with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in an analysis.

A regime downfall could create an opening for theft of centrifuges and materials by groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic State, Slavin wrote in a Stimson Center analysis co-authored with proliferation experts Richard Cupitt and Christina McAllister.

Attempts by the U.S. military to recover the material likely would



An image from Vantor shows the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran on March 2, after U.S. attacks.

AP

involve elite special operations forces supported by heavy equipment and technical experts, analysts say.

"To truly effect both regime change and secure the vulnerable WMD-relevant material in Iran, the United States may yet have to put boots on the ground," the Stimson Center report said.

"Verifying compliance with dismantling its nuclear enrichment, missile, and drone programs, and investigating potential biological and chemical weapons programs and, if confirmed, dismantling them, will

certainly take large numbers of investigators and inspectors at the very least," the report said.

Trump has shown a willingness to launch high-risk operations with special operations troops.

In January, the U.S. Army's Delta Force swooped into Venezuela in a daring operation to capture dictator Nicolás Maduro. Last month, Trump awarded U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 5 Eric Slover with the Medal of Honor for his heroics during the raid.

For the Pentagon, the stated main objective of Operation Epic Fury is the dismantling of Iran's ability to project military power, including the destruction of its missile and drone programs.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Power Studies, said many of the administration's goals can be achieved by airstrikes.

What stands out so far is the level of detailed intelligence on Iranian targets that has enabled the U.S. and Israel to achieve air dominance and operate at will, he said.

"It is the intelligence with respect to knowing where the systems and capabilities that you want to have an effect upon are located. And it's not just simply a question of destroying every single missile that the Iranians possess, but it's also affecting their ability to use them, and we demonstrated over and over again how that is possible with air power," Deptula said.

How prepared the U.S. is to move quickly to secure Iran's nuclear material is an open question.

The overall attack "appears to have been planned for months with the explicit goal of encouraging the overthrow of the government. It is less clear, however, that there has been any associated forethought given to securing the stockpiles," the Stimson Center report said.

But when it comes to a plan for containing Iran's nuclear program, and making sure the material doesn't fall into the wrong hands, Deptula said it is a virtual certainty that military commanders have been planning through scenarios.

## MILITARY

# Facility may reopen for hypersonic tests

## NASA wind tunnel retired since 2007

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force may revive a shuttered wind tunnel to test hypersonic systems in realistic atmospheric conditions, according to a recent offer published on the government contracting site.

The service's test center at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., is researching whether there are any contractors, including small businesses, to lead a project to reactivate a NASA hypersonic test center in Sandusky, Ohio.

Located at the Neil Armstrong Test Facility, the tunnel is capable of testing hypersonic vehicles and engines at speeds up to Mach 7 and altitudes up to 120,000 feet, according to NASA.

Hypersonic flight is generally defined as speeds at or beyond Mach 5. The F-35 Lightning II's top speed, by contrast, is Mach 1.6, or about 1,200 mph, according to Lockheed Martin.

Hypersonic weapons are considered key to future military conflicts, with faster speeds giving targets less time to evade or defend themselves, an Atlan-



NASA

**The hypersonic wind tunnel at NASA's Neil Armstrong Test Facility in Sandusky, Ohio, is shown in this undated photo. The facility was designed for research, development and acceptance testing of hypersonic aircraft systems.**

tic Council report last year said.

The wind tunnel reactivation process is expected to take 18 to 24 months, according to the solicitation published last month. Responses are due by March 19.

The facility is designed to create a synthetic air test medium that chemically and thermodynamically mimics the composition of the atmospheric air, according to the document.

An inventory and inspection of the wind tunnel indicates that it is still viable, the solicitation states.

"The facility has been in a mothballed status since 2007, and its reactivation presents a unique opportunity to fill a critical national testing capability gap," the announcement says.

It also notes that the Pentagon is committed to the development of scramjet technologies in support of

hypersonic flight.

Unlike conventional jet engines, which use moving parts like compressors and turbines for combustion, scramjets use external air to combust and ignite fuel, making them ideally suited for hypersonic flight within the atmosphere, according to NASA.

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# Air Force successfully test launches Minuteman III

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

An unarmed LGM-30G Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile carrying two reentry vehicles was successfully test-launched at Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, according to the Air Force.

The Air Force Global Strike Command said the March 3 launch was part of a years-long schedule of test flights of ICBMs and not tied to the current war with Iran.

"This launch, designated GT 255, was scheduled years ago, and is not in response to world events," the Air Force said in a statement.

The launch from the Western Test Range at the base near Lompoc on the central California coast was a continuation of routine testing of ICBMs randomly selected from existing weap-

ons stockpiles.

During the test, the ICBM's two reentry vehicles traveled across the Pacific Ocean to a predetermined target at the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The Air Force said the long-range flight allows engineers and weapons systems analysts to collect data on the missile's accuracy and reliability.

The Minuteman III is the land-based leg of the country's nuclear triad, which also includes Trident II D5 nuclear-tipped missiles carried by the U.S. Navy's 14 Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines at sea, and nuclear weapons-carrying manned B-2 Spirit and B-52 Stratofortress bombers of the U.S. Air Force.

When armed, each Minuteman III carries a single nuclear warhead with an estimated atomic yield equivalent to



U.S. Air Force

**An unarmed Minuteman III ICBM is test-launched from Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif., on March 3.**

more than 300 kilotons of TNT, more than 20 times the estimated yield of the 15-kiloton bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, during World War II. The

missiles are also capable of deploying multiple smaller bombs with individual reentry vehicles like the ones tested earlier this month.

"It is critical to test all aspects of our ICBM force, including our ability to deliver multiple, independently targeted payloads with absolute precision," Gen. S.L. Davis, commander of Air Force Global Strike Command, said in a statement.

The U.S. plans to phase out the Minuteman III beginning in 2029 with the expected deployment of the new \$141 billion LGM-35A Sentinel ballistic missile system.

The United States maintains about 400 deployed Minuteman III ICBMs in underground silos in the northern tier of states.

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## MILITARY

# Army seeks to privatize more dining facilities

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army will expand its privatization of dining facilities to six more bases, according to a request for proposals.

It came just weeks after the first privately run facility served its first meal at Fort Hood in Texas and held true to Army officials' words that they intended to move quickly to grow this initiative.

The new proposal asks companies to submit plans to privatize one dining facility each at Fort Bliss, Texas; Fort Campbell, Ky.; Fort Irwin, Calif.; Fort Polk, La.; Fort Riley, Kan.; and Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. Plans are due June 12.

The Army in August selected Compass Group USA to operate facilities at Fort Bragg, N.C.; Fort Stewart, Ga.; Fort Carson, Colo.; Fort Drum, N.Y.; and Fort Hood. Fort Hood's facility held a grand opening Feb. 18, and the others are expected to open this year.

It is all part of the Army's ongoing effort to re-create dining facilities because soldiers choose them less often. Bringing in an outside company is seen as a way to offer more options with less strain on cooks, which the Army has been enlisting fewer of each year.

The facilities, which are inspired by dining operations on large college campuses, are meant to focus on soldiers who live in barracks and receive a meal entitlement of \$39 a day. However, the Army only pays the contrac-

tor for meal entitlements redeemed, so there is an incentive to bring in additional customers who pay out-of-pocket for meals.

One difference between the new proposal and the first that went to Compass Group is the ability for soldiers to reach backward and forward across 72 hours to use meal entitlements. Right now at Fort Hood, soldiers can use \$39 a day split between three meals. They can pull from other meals of that day, but anything not used is lost.

The new proposal indicates that soldiers could have the ability to reach back to missed meals or purchase with entitlements in advance, which could help soldiers buy premade meals in bulk — something they can do by filling out paperwork at a traditional dining facility.

The first two weeks of dining at Fort Hood's 42 Bistro have generated positive feedback, though there have been some issues with wait times for food and congestion in the ordering and pickup area because it has been so popular, said Robert Evans, founder of Hots & Cots, a website and smartphone application where service members can rate their food and lodging.

The bistro has seen an average 1,950 customers a day since opening, said Col. Kamil Sztalkoper, spokesman for III Corps and Fort Hood. The highest count in a day was 2,500.

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TERESA CANTERO/U.S. Army

Cpl. Athen Michael Garrido holds the plank as his squadmates cheer him on during an Army Fitness Test at Fort Shafter Flats in Honolulu.

# Army starts merit-based retention bonus system

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army will kick off its new retention bonus system next month, using physical fitness scores, technical expertise and commander evaluations to determine a soldier's payout to reenlist.

"We were hearing a lot from our exit surveys that individuals want to be recognized for the excellence they bring to the table, and this is one of those ways that we plan on doing that," Col. Angela Chipman, chief of military personnel accessions and retention division, said during a recent call with reporters.

While still driven by the Army's need to best incentivize retention in certain in-demand specialties, the new Quality Tiered Incentive Program will also consider a soldier's job and fitness performance in a way the service had not done prior.

"If they show up and perform better on the physical fitness test, and they volunteer to do some of the harder jobs and go to the harder schools, and they're the ones that are consistently showing up as members of a team, they can expect to be recognized and given a monetary value as a result when it comes to their incentive to be retained," Chipman said.

The bonus overhaul is part of the Army's ongoing transformation to

improve and modernize its human resources programs.

Those efforts range from transferring certain tasks from physical paper forms to online personnel systems to finding ways to get civilians working in high-demand tech industries into a direct officer commission faster.

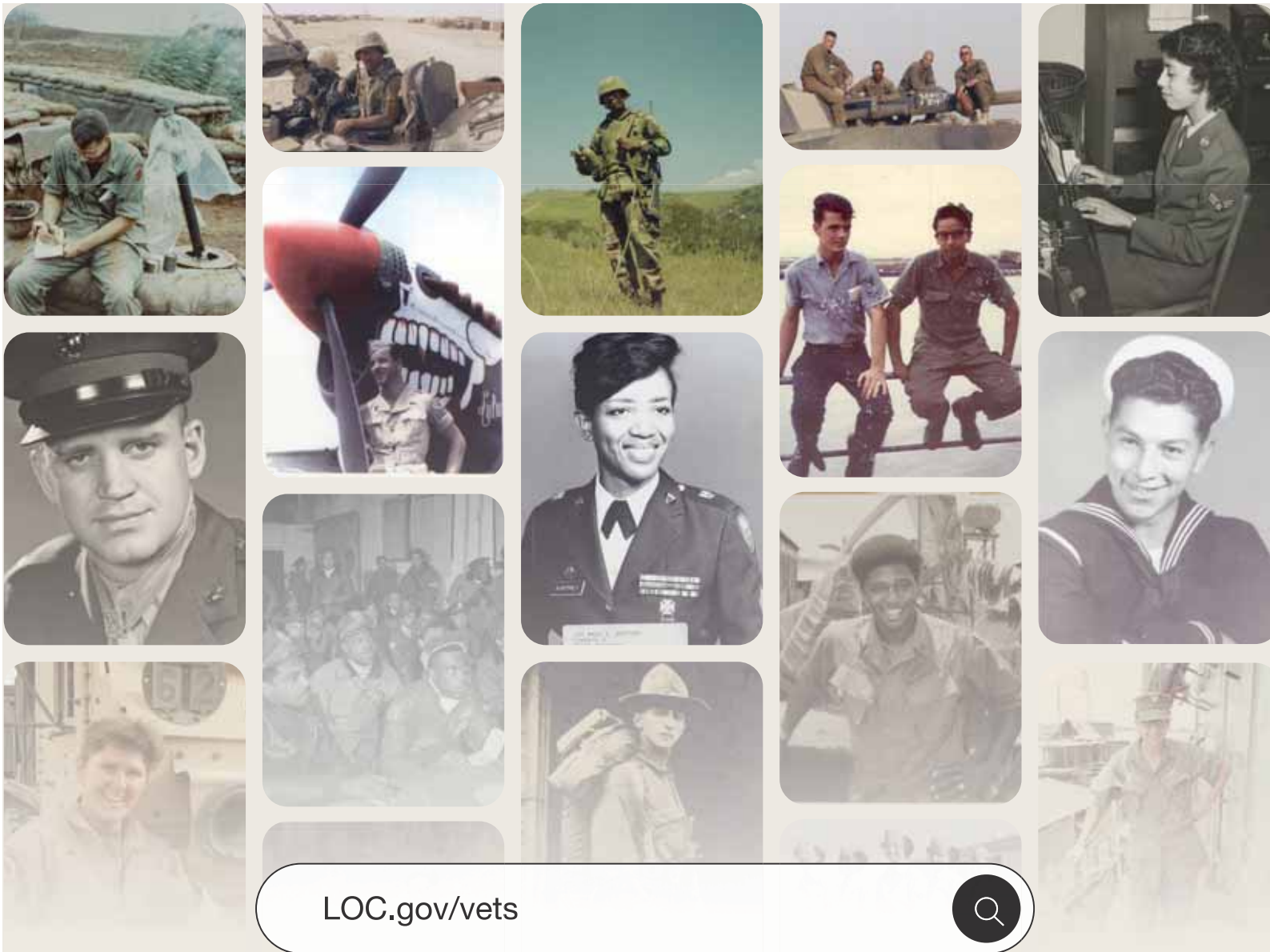
"It's really linked to the rapidly changing operational environment that you see in the world," Brig. Gen. Gregory S. Johnson, director of military personnel management, said. "It's really rooted in technological change, and the Army's continuous transformation is nested there. From the HR perspective, that, that means we have to be agile and responsive as well."

Under the new retention bonus system, a commander will rank soldiers by military occupational specialty and rank.

Then the soldier's physical fitness score and technical proficiency score will add in to determine where each stands in the final ranking for bonuses. Those soldiers with "the most merit" will likely see a bump, Johnson said.

However, the total amount spent on retention bonuses within the Army overall is not set to change.

The Army will track the program's progress through monthly reports, according to a memo.



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