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Indo-Pacific gap?

Analysts raise concerns about moving Marines to Mideast as security burden increases in Asia
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Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team take positions at the Central Training Area on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on March 6.

RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Gap seen as Marines deploy to Mideast

Analysts: Move comes as Pacific burden increases

By **BRIAN McELHINEY**
Stars and Stripes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

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

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

Grant Newsham
Japan Forum for Strategic Studies

Sending the unit out of the Pacific “certainly sends a negative message to U.S. allies and partners about U.S. commitment and focus” on the region, said retired Navy Lt. Luke Collin, former director for Japan and Australia at the U.S. National Security Council and principal at the Asia Group advisory firm in Washington, D.C.

But pulling U.S. combat ships, aircraft, long-range munitions or in-

tegrated air and missile defense systems out of the Pacific “could have more significant impacts on U.S. deterrence,” he said by email.

“Although I don’t expect China, Russia, or North Korea to push aggression further in the near-term, they will certainly seek to exploit this situation to press the narrative that the U.S. is a declining and unreliable power in Asia,” Collin wrote.

The outcome of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific may not hinge entirely on the Marines’ absence, said Benjamin Blandin, a research fellow with the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies.

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

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

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

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

A-10 Warthog back in action in Iran war

Congress put brakes on Air Force plans to retire attack aircraft

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

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

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

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

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

U.S. Central Command on March



U.S. Air Force

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

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

cute a mission whenever needed.”

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

to ground troops, capable of loitering near hot spots and operating under 1,000-foot ceilings. Its firepower includes a seven-barrel Gatling gun that can deliver nearly 4,000 rounds a minute, according to the Air Force.

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

In 2011, an A-10 engaged two small Libyan watercraft in the country's port of Misrata, destroying one and forcing the Libyans to abandon the other, U.S. Africa Command said in a statement at the time.

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

Congress in this year's National Defense Authorization Act directed the Air Force to keep at least 103 of the aircraft, with 93 to be designated as primary mission.

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

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Army pushes for yet another newer, lighter service rifle

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

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

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

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

Since awarding a 10-year Next Generation Squad Weapon contract to Sig Sauer in early 2022, soldiers have tested the M7 — formerly the XM5 — and the M250 automatic rifle, intended to



DUKE EDWARDS/U.S. Army

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

replace the M4 and M249, respectively. The “X” designation indicates the weapons were in the experimental phase before standardization.

The program aimed to move away from decades-old 5.56 mm and 7.62 mm ammunition in favor of weapons that chamber 6.8 mm, which the Army's contract release in 2022 said

would “increase accuracy and (be) more lethal against emerging threats.”

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

Still in early development, the XM8 is being designed as a carbine — which is typically lighter and shorter — version of the M7, making it easier for soldiers to move in tight spaces while using the Army's new 6.8 mm ammunition.

The XM8 is about five inches shorter and roughly one pound lighter than the M7 and features a fixed buttstock, a Sig Sauer spokesperson confirmed to Task & Purpose.

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

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

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

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

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MILITARY

US seeks to expand Greenland presence

DOD eyes 3 areas to help with missile defense, special operations forces

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is working to expand its military presence in Greenland to three additional areas as it seeks to add locations for special operations and establish permanent access to Arctic waters, the commander of Northern Command said March 19.

The expansion would take place on defense areas that were created by a 1951 agreement with Denmark, which controls the semiautonomous territory, and allow the U.S. to close vulnerability gaps in an increasingly contested part of the world, according to Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot.

“The need there is very real,” he said during testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Guillot said he wants to add numerous capabilities: space systems to enable the proposed Golden Dome missile defense system; the ability to launch fighters and tankers to be “the first line of defense” against cruise missiles that could be launched from the Arctic; and ports for special operations forces and the Navy.

“We’re very well established in Canada and Alaska and having more capability along what I call the 2 o’clock approach would be key,” he said, referring to Greenland’s location on the eastern side of the Arctic.

Pituffik Space Base in the northern part of Greenland, the only U.S. military base on the island, provides a lot of space capability but limited capacity for fighters and tankers, Guillot said.

He described the discussions with Greenland and Denmark as “very productive” and said the 1951 agreement, which allows the U.S. to construct military installations, house troops and operate with broad operational authority within defense areas, is “very favorable to our operations or potential operations in Greenland.”

The negotiations came after Presi-



BENJAMIN KIMBALL/Arctic Edge

Air Force Special Operations Forces airmen and Danish Frogmen navigate the ice sheet during a simulated search and rescue for Arctic Edge 2026 in Kangerlussaq, Greenland, earlier this month.

“We’re very well established in Canada and Alaska and having more capability along what I call the 2 o’clock approach would be key.”

Gen. Gregory Guillot
U.S. Northern Command

dent Donald Trump vowed to take over Greenland “the easy way” or “the hard way,” arguing it was vital for American security in the Arctic, where Russia and China are vying for military and commercial dominance.

The threats prompted a flurry of diplomatic activity and sparked fears that the U.S. would invade the territory of a NATO ally. Danish public broad-



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Gen. Gregory Guillot, the commander of U.S. Northern Command, testifies during a Senate Armed Services committee hearing on March 19.

caster DR reported March 19 that Denmark flew bags of blood to Greenland in preparation for a possible invasion and planned to blow up runways to prevent American military aircraft from landing.

In late January, Trump backed off his demand to control Greenland and announced there was a “framework of

a future deal.”

Guillot told senators that he has maintained a strong relationship with the Danish military and is seeking “new and improved” ways to work together.

The U.S. included Denmark for the first time in its annual Noble Defender air defense exercise with Canada this year and partnered with Danish forces again for Arctic Edge, a training exercise in locations throughout Alaska and Greenland.

“The cooperation and participation by the Danes in special operations as well as in fighters was outstanding,” Guillot said.

To maintain trust, the U.S. needs to be open and transparent with Denmark, he said, and explore partnership opportunities.

“I want to show that we are a valued partner and we can be trusted and I think we’ve been very successful in that,” Guillot said.

MILITARY

IG: Army struggles to maintain Bradleys

Soldiers in Europe confronted with systemic problems

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Army is struggling to ensure that Bradley Fighting Vehicles used by troops in Europe are mission-ready, according to a new Pentagon watchdog report that found a brigade's worth of the vehicles initially reported as fit to fight were unusable.

The Defense Department Inspector General said last week that deployed units are confronted with systemic problems when it comes to keeping their armored vehicles in working order in connection with persistent shortages of mechanics and an intense operational tempo.

The IG audit examined a fleet of Bradleys used during the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division's 2023 deployment in support of efforts aimed at deterring Russian aggression on NATO's eastern flank.

"The Army did not effectively manage the repairs of the BFVs," the report, dated March 16, said. Moreover, when the brigade ended its deployment it "improperly reported the condition of the BFVs turned in as fully mission capable."

The Pentagon watchdog audit found that 96 of 117 Bradleys (about 82%) were initially reported by the unit as fully mission-ready. However, a subsequent joint inspection determined all 117 vehicles were unfit for use and riddled with mechanical issues, the report said.

One Bradley alone had 36 different faults, rendering it inoperable despite being listed as fully mission capable, the IG said. As a result, the Army had to pull 97 replacement Bradleys from its prepositioned stocks warehoused in Germany to equip the next incoming unit's 2024 rotation.

U.S. Army Europe and Africa maintains numerous locations where key pieces of equipment, such as Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Abrams tanks, are stored for use by incoming units. The idea behind the program is to ensure that forces, either arriving



DELIAH COTTLE/U.S. Army

An M2A3 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle prepares an assault as part of the Army's Transforming in Contact initiative in May at Hohenfels, Germany.

"The Army did not effectively manage the repairs of the BFVs ... [and] improperly reported the condition of the BFVs turned in as fully mission capable."

Pentagon Inspector General report

for planned drills or in a crisis, can quickly fall in on combat-ready gear.

The IG said that subsequent Army efforts to repair the 117 Bradleys lagged. As of July 2025, only 51 of the 117 vehicles had been repaired to the Army's maintenance standard, the report said.

Among the initial challenges was a lack of sufficient mechanics within the deployed brigade, which commanders said could increase repair times by 50%. Troops were also spread across multiple locations during the deployment, complicating maintenance work, the report said.

The commander of the brigade told

the IG that during their deployment, most of the Bradleys were able "to run, shoot, and communicate" and were therefore deemed mission capable. However, that outlook "provided a false readiness level" and "gave the impression that the BFVs would not need extensive repairs," the report said.

Meanwhile, Army sustainment units based in Europe also lacked the capacity to absorb the workload after the brigade returned to the United States, the IG said. Maintenance teams were stretched thin by competing demands that included ongoing efforts related to supporting and equipping Ukraine in

its war with Russia.

The IG called upon USAREUR-AF to conduct a theaterwide study to determine what Bradley Fighting Vehicle repair capabilities are needed to meet mission requirements and develop a program to address any gaps.

USAREUR-AF, in a response to the IG, said units often have insufficient time between training events and their deployment dates for maintenance and that "severely limits their ability to fully reconstitute combat power," the report said, adding the situation causes "a persistent readiness challenge."

USAREUR-AF said it has implemented several initiatives to address the problems, such as establishing a forward-stationed maintenance augmentation team that can surge support when needed.

The command also said it would comply with the IG's request for a formal study.

MILITARY

DOD sets stricter rules for beard waivers

Religious exemptions to require more detailed reviews, documentation

By **MARC CASTANEDA**
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is tightening regulations governing religious exemptions to military grooming standards, requiring more detailed reviews and stricter documentation across all service branches.

A March 11 memo from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth directs the military to standardize how religious accommodation requests are submitted, reviewed and approved, with an emphasis on consistency across the services.

Under the policy, troops are expected to remain clean-shaven unless granted an exemption on a case-by-case basis for sincerely held religious beliefs.

Applicants must submit detailed documentation demonstrating the sincerity of their beliefs and how grooming requirements conflict with their religious practices.

Required materials include a sworn written statement affirming the belief, a description of the belief and its basis, an explanation of how shaving interferes with that belief and supporting evidence, such as statements from religious leaders.

False statements could result in disciplinary action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Service members whose requests are denied may leave the military, according to the memo.

The guidance follows earlier moves



RAYONNE BISSANT/U.S. Army

Army Sgt. Clay Stephens, a medical logistics specialist with the 101st Airborne Division who identifies as a Nordic Pagan, helps move a mock casualty to a field hospital during an exercise in Romania last year.

by Hegseth to tighten grooming standards. In September, he ordered an end to permanent medical shaving exemptions and signaled limits on religious waivers that have allowed some troops to wear beards in recent years.

At a gathering of senior military leaders that month in Quantico, Va., Hegseth criticized what he described as widespread abuse of shaving exemptions.

“No more beardos,” he said. “The era of rampant and ridiculous shaving

profiles is done. Simply put, if you do not meet the male-level physical standards for combat positions, cannot pass a [physical training] test or don’t want to shave and look professional, it’s time for a new position or a new profession.”

The new policy requires unit commanders to evaluate requests for sincerity and assess whether facial hair could interfere with mission requirements or protective equipment. Reviews must include input from immediate supervisors, chaplains and other

sources at the commander’s discretion.

Requests will be evaluated under the legal standard of “compelling government interest” and “least restrictive means.”

Commanders must consider potential impacts on readiness, including whether facial hair could affect the seal of gas masks or other protective gear, as well as broader safety risks and mission demands.

Army Sgt. Clay Stephens, a medical logistics specialist with the 101st Airborne Division who identifies as a Nordic Pagan, said the new process appears more rigorous than previous policies.

“Now it’s more thorough to make sure you are truly sincere,” he said by Facebook Messenger on March 19. “Does it suck for people trying to get one for the first time? Absolutely. Will it stop Soldiers from BSing the system? Absolutely.”

Stephens said he believes everyone should have a choice of growing a beard.

“Other countries do it, why shouldn’t we?” he wrote. “However, just don’t step on those truly trying to follow their religious beliefs.”

Officials who deny requests must provide written explanations outlining operational risks and why alternative accommodations were insufficient.

Previously approved religious accommodations must be reviewed within 90 days. The policy takes effect immediately, with implementation plans due within 30 days.

Stars and Stripes reporter Janiqua Robinson contributed to this report.
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All commissaries to start charging for plastic bags

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

All commissaries will begin charging shoppers for single-use plastic and paper bags on April 6, to encourage more people to bring in reusable bags, the Defense Commissary Agency said March 16.

“This change will allow the Defense Commissary Agency to continue to offer its eligible patrons significant

savings while strengthening its fiscal stewardship and reducing operating expenses,” according to a statement about the change.

The transition began in Europe more than a year ago.

It will cost 5 cents per plastic bag and 10 cents for each paper bag in store and through curbside and delivery orders, the agency said.

Customers using curbside and deliv-

ery can note when they intend to use their own bags.

The military’s 235 commissary stores are a benefit for service members, their families and specific veterans.

Each is mandated to provide 23.7% average savings to shoppers, though in September 2022, a Pentagon memo called on the stores to push that to 25% savings.

In fiscal year 2025, the most recent year of information available, the agency said customers’ average savings were 25.2%, according to the agency’s annual report.

However, food prices rose 2.9% in 2025, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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MILITARY

'Smorgasbord of danger' in carrier laundry

Blaze aboard Ford reportedly took over 30 hours to put out

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A potent mixture of flammable materials, equipment pushed beyond its limits and human error could be behind a fire this month aboard the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, according to a shipping expert.

"It's just a smorgasbord of danger all put together," said Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

The Ford, along with nearly 4,500 personnel, was operating in the Red Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury, the ongoing joint American and Israeli military campaign against Iran.

The carrier left Norfolk, Va., in late June for a then-routine deployment to Europe that unexpectedly included duty in the Caribbean Sea and the Middle East.

That extended time at sea also could have been a factor in the March 12 fire in the main laundry areas, Mercogliano said.

"Equipment that normally would be serviced and taken down may be running at levels past when they need to run," Mercogliano said. "Anytime you go past normal operating hours, the chances of mechanical and human error increase."

Three sailors aboard the ship were injured as a result of the fire, which the Navy said was fully contained the same day.

None of the injuries were life-threatening, and two of the sailors have since returned to duty, while the third remains in stable condition after being flown off the ship for treatment.

It's not clear how the fire started, and the Navy has released few details. The fire did not impact the ship's propulsion plant, and Ford remains fully operational, the Navy said at the time.

The cause of the Ford fire is under investigation, a U.S. military official said.

"As it is being investigated, the ship's forces are inspecting and overhauling affected spaces," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because



ALEXIS FOWLER/U.S. Navy

A sailor checks dryer vents in a laundry room aboard the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford, in November. Three sailors were injured as a result of a fire this month that started in the ship's laundry room, according to the Navy.

"Equipment that normally would be serviced and taken down may be running at levels past when they need to run."

Sal Mercogliano
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

of they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The official didn't say whether crew living quarters had been affected. But there are indications the fire may have displaced hundreds of sailors, potentially destroying bedding and personal possessions.

On March 17, the Navy Exchange said it had liquidated its inventory of black boots available for sale at several bases in Europe in support of Ford.

The New York Times reported that more than 600 sailors and crew mem-

bers had been uprooted by the fire, sleeping on the floor and on tables. It took more than 30 hours to fully extinguish the fire, according to the NYT report.

The Ford arrived at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete on Monday following operations in the Red Sea, the U.S. 6th Fleet said in a statement the same day.

The port call in Greece allows the carrier to "undergo efficient assessment, repairs, and resupply," the 6th Fleet said, adding that the Ford remains "fully mission capable."

Shipboard laundry and dry-cleaning facilities on aircraft carriers are vast areas situated in the lower deck areas of vessels.

They house industrial washers capable of extracting dirt, grease and other gunk from fabric and powerful dryers that can churn out as much as 100 pounds of clean uniforms and other items per cycle for thousands of personnel.

The facilities also include pressers, irons and other equipment and piles of clothing, bedding and other items in various stages of laundering.

They require huge amounts of electricity and generate significant heat, requiring ample air conditioning to keep

sailors and equipment cool.

Electrical problems and delayed maintenance of equipment, including uncleaned lint filters in laundry areas, are among the chief causes of fires on ships, said a Navy sailor not authorized to comment publicly who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Those fires most commonly happen in mechanical spaces, laundry areas and berthings, where high temperatures and combustible materials are factors, the sailor said.

If Ford's firefighters, known as damage controlmen, couldn't immediately put out the fire, they would have sealed the area to isolate the blaze, Mercogliano and the sailor said.

That method takes time for flames and heat to subside.

It's also why any adjacent compartments, such as a berthing area, would have been evacuated, Mercogliano said, adding that smoke and heat damage may also have affected adjacent compartments.

Mercogliano compared the length of time it may have taken to completely extinguish the fire on Ford and ensure there were no hot spots to that of a similar event in August aboard the USS New Orleans near Okinawa, Japan.

In that case, it took 12 hours before a fire aboard the amphibious transport dock ship was fully extinguished. Two sailors were slightly injured.

Ensuring that a fire is fully extinguished, inspecting affected areas and making sure there is no chance of a re-flash isn't an easy, quick process and can take hours, the sailor said.

Indications that the Ford fire was limited to the main laundry areas and potentially a berthing space are signs that damage controlmen and sailors quickly responded defensively to the fire.

In the aftermath of serious ship fires, such as the one on the amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard in July 2020, the Navy has redoubled its focus on firefighting and training, Mercogliano noted.

That focus is front of mind for all service members who train daily with the mindset that fighting ship fires is every sailor's responsibility, the sailor said.

"It's not something that can be put on the back burner," they said.

MILITARY

IG: General left classified maps on train

Officer also suffered concussion in night of drinking in Kyiv

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

The Army general responsible for coordinating support for Ukraine left a tube of classified maps behind on a train in Europe and lost control of the sensitive material for 24 hours, according to the Pentagon watchdog.

Gen. Antonio Aguto, a three-star general at the time, was also found to have sustained a concussion following a night of heavy drinking at a social event in Kyiv, leading to incoherence and confusion in a briefing the next day.

The Department of Defense Office of Inspector General report, released March 12, investigated incidents that occurred between April and May 2024. Aguto was commander of the Wiesbaden, Germany-based Security Assistance Group-Ukraine. Aguto relinquished command of the group in August 2024, having presided over its activation in 2022. He retired the same month.

The Inspector General received three anonymous complaints between May 20 and May 24, 2024. The IG initiated an investigation June 6, 2024. The IG also investigated a subsequent allegation that Aguto's counterproductive leadership style created a "toxic environment" within Security Assistance Group-Ukraine headquarters, the re-



JARVIS MACE/U.S. Army National Guard

Lt. Gen. Antonio A. Aguto Jr., the commanding general of Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, visits soldiers on at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, in 2024.

port states.

The IG interviewed Aguto and 33 witnesses.

On March 24, 2024, Aguto and his staff traveled to Kyiv as part of the security assistance mission. Part of the trip required them to travel on the Department of State chartered train from Poland to Ukraine.

Aguto and witnesses said he decided to bring a set of classified maps to Kyiv for this trip. Aguto and a witness told the IG that the maps were not packaged in accordance with directives because the maps were too big to wrap and the map tube was too small.

"I used [sic] these maps quite frequently regardless of where I'm at to brief officials on the status of what's going on in Ukraine, uh, which is my job," Aguto said.

The general and his staff boarded the chartered train on April 3 to begin their journey back to Wiesbaden.

"When they arrived in Poland, the witness performed a quick scan of the train and did not notice anything out of the ordinary, but he did not see the map tube come off the train," the 56-page report states.

Aguto did not recall who discovered the map tube was missing, but his executive officer alerted him. It was found on the train the next day and returned, via staff with the U.S. Embassy Ukraine.

Aguto told investigators he took responsibility for the loss of the maps "because I am the senior guy."

Mishandling of classified information comes with severe penalties. Consequences range from official reprimand and loss of clearance to being fired in the case of nefarious intent.

The second incident involving the general occurred on May 13, 2024. During a nearly six-hour dinner, a military engagement, a witness said Aguto drank two bottles of Chacha "throughout the course of the night." Chacha is a Georgian brandy containing 40-50% alcohol.

One witness said Aguto "appears drunk to me." Aguto told the IG he was "at some level of intoxication."

During a meeting in Aguto's hotel room that night to go over his schedule for the next day, two witnesses reported seeing him fall backward and strike his head on the wall. The witnesses did not see him trip on anything.

"Aguto told us that he remembered being near a table and trying to move a chair just before falling and hitting his head against a wall. He said that he felt 'woozy' after the fall and sat down, and then things got 'a little uhm blurry for lack of a better terms [sic],'" the report states.

Aguto stated that he had medical

conditions that could have contributed to the fall.

One of the witnesses thought Aguto might have had a concussion.

Early in the morning of May 14, Aguto said he had another fall.

"He told us that he could not remember much about the circumstances of the fall and could not remember where he fell or what he hit his head on, but he said it caused a mark on his forehead that he described as 'a bump, probably it was red, about a quarter of an inch long,'" according to the report. When asked to compare the falls, Aguto said that the next morning, he "did not feel well at all," and described that he had a headache and was extremely tired. He also told the IG that he felt a little "woozy," "dizzy," confused, and found it "really hard to focus."

As he met staff in the hotel lobby ahead of a morning meeting with then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken, witnesses reported Aguto acting lethargic and "not himself," and staff said they suggested he cancel the meeting.

Aguto slowly responded, "I got it."

En route to the U.S. Embassy, and running late, Aguto and his staff decided to walk the remaining 50 meters to the embassy's main gate. Shortly after exiting the vehicle, Aguto fell forward, striking his right elbow and jaw, as well as tearing his jacket and shirt sleeve, the report says.

Aguto was later taken to a local hospital and diagnosed with a concussion.

Investigators found Aguto's falls had been a result of "overindulgence" in alcohol, saying he should have considered the effects before drinking so much. Whether he was permitted to consume more than two drinks, the IG report states he knew at the time he had important meetings to attend the following morning.

Aguto disagreed, saying he "acted in good faith" and had received verbal permission from Gen. Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe, to drink at the dinner in light of the "cultural significance" of drinking at such events.

The IG report did not substantiate the allegations of counterproductive leadership during Aguto's time in command.

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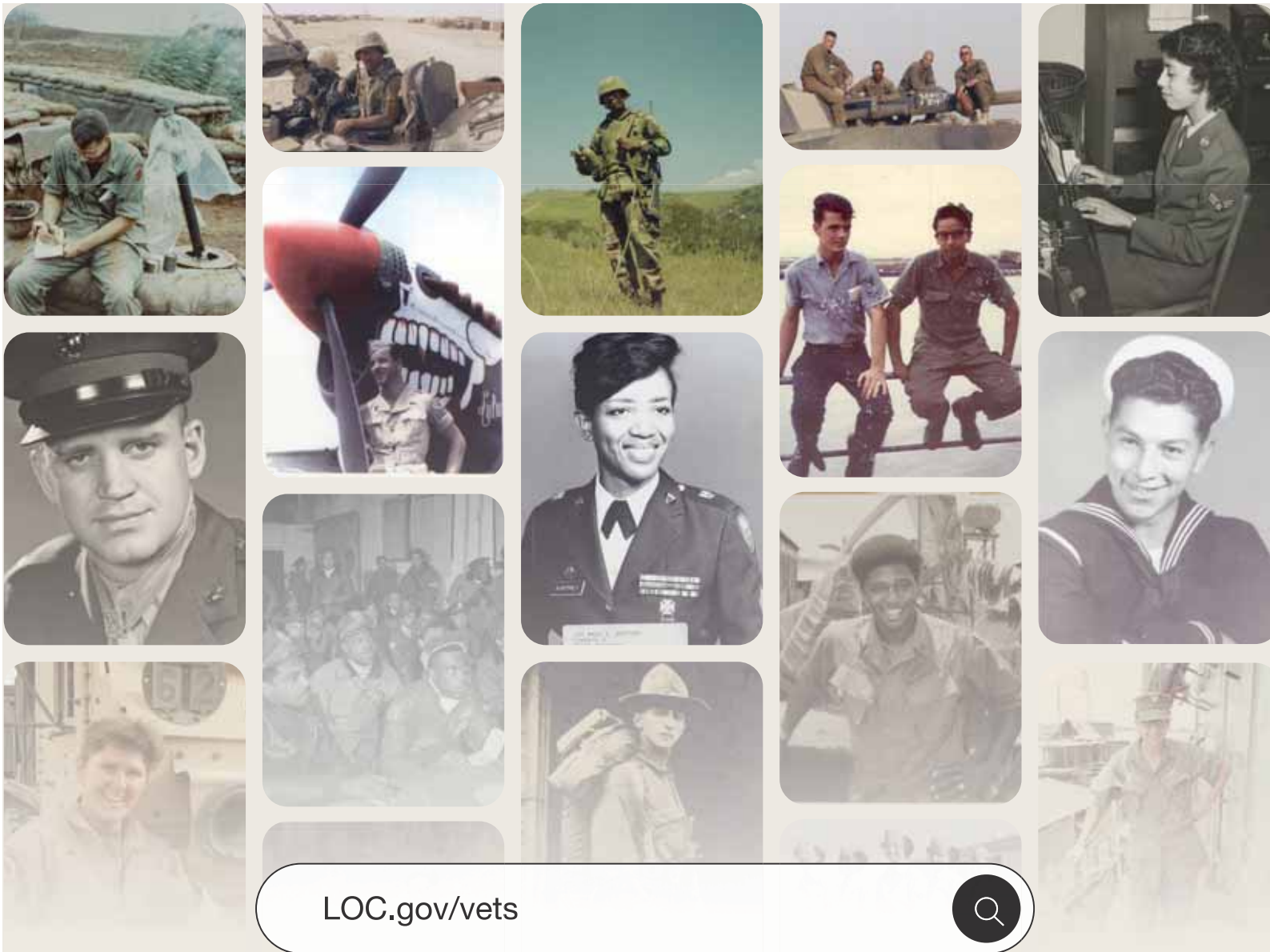
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