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Printing cheaper barracks

Fort Bliss building 3D-printed housing

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Robots 3D-print barracks at Fort Bliss, Texas, on March 26.

ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

3D-printed barracks to open by August

Fort Bliss barracks cost about $87M, 5 times less than traditional buildings

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

FORT BLISS, Texas — Massive construction robots are working around the clock here to transform a vacant stretch of land into 10 barracks buildings capable of housing 560 soldiers in open bays within six months.

With just the hum of generators heard from the construction site on March 26, workers carefully watched as the arms of the robot laid a special blend of concrete — forming walls one thin layer at a time. Every 15 minutes, the concrete formula was adjusted to adapt to the climbing temperature.

The work of 3D printing began last month and by August the buildings will house soldiers deployed to the west Texas Army base as part of the southwest border mission. ICON, an Austin-based company that specializes in 3D-printed construction, is building the housing. It constructed similar barracks for a Texas National Guard training site in 2021.

"Last year, the Secretary of the Army [Dan Driscoll] challenged us to break free from legacy processes and embrace speed over bureaucracy," Maj. Gen. Curtis Taylor, commander of the 1st Armored Division and Fort Bliss, said. "Today, the project behind me stands as visible proof that real change is happening across the Army."

Taylor spoke during a ceremony to mark the construction of the barracks, which comes roughly one year after soldiers moved into two 3D-printed buildings nearby as a pilot program to test how the structures would serve the Army.

The two buildings, with their distinct walls that show the individually placed layers of concrete, house soldiers in bunk beds with locking cabinets for their personal items. Each building has bathrooms and showers, and the concrete is naturally resistant to mold growth.

These and the under-construction barracks buildings are within walking distance of gyms, dining halls, a shopping center and a recreation area, Taylor said.

ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Maj. Gen. Curtis Taylor, right, commander of the 1st Armored Division and Fort Bliss, Texas, observes construction using 3D printing at the base on March 26.

Construction is seen through the breezeway of an existing 3D-printed barracks building at Fort Bliss, Texas.

When President Donald Trump sent troops to the southwest border last year, Fort Bliss was tasked with housing some of the troops, which created an "acute shortage" of barracks, Taylor said. This meant soldiers moved into housing intended for short stays that was unsuitable for the nine-month rotations of troops.

The Defense Department Inspector General reported in December that troops were living in facilities with leaking sewage and inadequate electricity. Soldiers have been moved from those barracks, Taylor said.

The new 3D-printed housing was already under discussion when the need for replacement housing became more urgent. The Army had initially asked ICON to get new barracks operational within a year but then came back asking if it could be done in six months, said Jason Ballard, ICON CEO.

To make it happen, Ballard said he brought out a larger fleet of robots to work 24 hours a day — something not possible with traditional construction because of the physical capabilities of a crew and because of the sound.

"We have been building the same way for a thousand years. It has gotten us this far, but we're running into the limits of those ways of building," Ballard said. "The way we are building is too slow, too expensive, too frail, and now holding us back from our potential as a society and a military. We have service members living in quarters decades past their lifespan."

The barracks cost about $87 million. A traditional build of similar size would have been five times that amount, said Jordan Gillis, assistant secretary of the Army for installations, energy and environment.

"Most of us can attest to the fact that delivering barracks has taken far too long, cost far too much, and is not always delivered to the standard that our soldiers deserve," Gillis said. "Quality of life is not separate from readiness, it's foundational to it, and one of the clearest places where that shows up is in our barracks."

Once the Fort Bliss barracks are completed, the robots — there are 10 Vulcan printers on site — will move to Fort Polk, La., where ICON will build housing for soldiers doing rotational unit support at the Joint Readiness Training Center.

ICON recently unveiled technology to allow it to build multistory buildings and is in talks with the Army to create barracks for long-term housing of troops.

Once the border mission ends and the troops leave Fort Bliss, Taylor said the base will continue to have a need for the housing because it supports up to 50,000 deploying troops each year.

"At any given time, I have several thousand soldiers right in this area, many National Guard and reservists," he said. "We want every guest and resident who comes and spends a little bit of time with us on their way to a deployed location to have a high-quality place to rest their head."

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MILITARY

US deploys drone boats in Iran conflict

By Alison Bath
Stars and Stripes

U.S. drone speedboats capable of surveillance and military strikes are patrolling Middle East waters as part of Operation Epic Fury, according to a news agency report.

The unmanned surface vessels, known as Global Autonomous Reconnaissance Craft or GARC, have logged more than 450 hours and traveled more than 2,200 nautical miles during maritime patrols in support of U.S. operations against Iran, Capt. Tim Hawkins, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command, told Reuters on March 26.

Hawkins did not identify other drone systems potentially in use, according to the Reuters report. CENTCOM did not immediately confirm use of the drones in operations against Iran or answer related questions.

News of the Navy's use of the uncrewed boats comes as the U.S. considers options to reopen the Strait of Hormuz for oil tankers and other commercial ships. Tehran has effectively closed the strait since hostilities began in late February, attacking ships in the strategic waterway with missiles and drones.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly rebuked European leaders, most recently in a March 26 post to his Truth Social account, for refusing to send military resources to help open the strait amid sharply rising prices for petroleum-based products.

The average price for a gallon of regular gasoline at the pump in the U.S. had risen by about $1 over the past month to nearly $4, the American Automobile Association reported. Prices were higher on the West Coast, where costs were nearing $6 a gallon in some cases, AAA said.

The revelation about the surface drones also comes amid reports the U.S. is weighing sending as many as 10,000 additional ground troops to the Middle East as it negotiates with Iran to end the war that began Feb. 28.

It's not clear exactly where the U.S. drone boats are patrolling in the Middle East, but the Navy has previously used underwater, surface and aerial unmanned vehicles to track Iranian military vessels in and around the Strait of Hormuz.

The service has maintained a drone presence in the region for years, standing up Task Force 59 in 2021 with a focus on integrating unmanned systems and artificial intelligence into Navy operations.

Jasmin L. Aquino/U.S. Navy

A U.S. Navy Global Autonomous Reconnaissance Craft patrols the ocean.

In recent years, the Bahrain-based task force has experimented with armed drones.

For example, a Navy littoral combat ship coordinated with unmanned surface and aerial drones to identify and destroy a target boat during an exercise in November 2023. That exercise involved a MARTAC T-38 Devil Ray surface drone armed with missiles, Stars and Stripes reported at the time.

There have been no announcements or other indications that U.S. surface drones have been used in strikes against Iranian naval forces. U.S. strikes have destroyed 92% of the Iranian navy's largest vessels, Adm. Brad Cooper, CENTCOM commander, said in a recent post on X.

The unmanned boats being used by the U.S. in operations against Iran can travel as fast as 46 mph and carry a payload of as much as 1,000 pounds, according to their Maryland-based manufacturer, BlackSea Technologies.

In addition to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, the vessels can be used for communication relay, anti-submarine warfare, mine countermeasures, and deploying aerial and underwater drones, a specification sheet on BlackSea's website states.

The surface drones have more than 5,000 operational hours in U.S. Navy fleets, according to BlackSea.

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Military tests Curtain Call drone swarm for defense

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. military is testing a new way to shield troops deployed to Africa from unmanned aerial attacks, relying on commercial technology to produce swarms of counter-drones and sensors that serve as a protective wall.

The U.S. Africa Command initiative, dubbed Curtain Call, comes as U.S. troops in Africa contend with a growing drone threat at forward locations.

"The (drone) threat exists in the AFRICOM AOR today, and we've been posturing to enable an integrated force protection architecture that can handle those threats," said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jared Bindl, AFRICOM's chief innovation officer. "This concept and its associated capability are one of many we are looking at to reduce the risk to our joint forces."

While Bindl didn't specify where precisely U.S. forces have dealt with drone threats, AFRICOM has long been involved in supporting Somalia in its battle against multiple Islamic extremist groups. Over the years, U.S. troops have been drawn into combat after coming under attack there and near Somalia's border in Kenya.

The Stuttgart-based AFRICOM said it is developing Curtain Call in collaboration with a Joint Staff innovation program.

In January, AFRICOM ran its first trial during a field exercise in the United States in which engineers worked on technical problems. The command is now taking lessons learned from that drill and applying them to a second test.

The effort currently utilizes as many as 25 flying counter-drones but has the potential to be built up into a swarm of hundreds, defense officials said.

After a second trial run, the next step will be to experiment with the system at operational locations in Africa. Additionally, anything tested in the AFRICOM theater will likely fill capability gaps for other combatant commands, defense officials said.

Jacob Slaymaker/U.S. Army

Army personnel unbox and test drones at Fort Stewart, Ga. The U.S. military is exploring a new way to defend troops in Africa using commercial technology to field swarms of drones and sensors that act as a protective shield.

AFRICOM's entry into the development of drone and counter-drone capabilities showcases how the war in Ukraine has sparked an across-the-board push by the U.S. to adapt to a transformed battlefield dominated by unmanned systems.

The Iran war, which also has featured relatively low-cost drones, has shown how such systems can sneak past sophisticated air defenses.

For the Pentagon, a key aspect in its drive to better prepare for drone warfare is to develop defense systems that can counter large numbers of cheap drones with something equally as cheap. The Pentagon and military services also have emphasized the need to get the defense industry to move faster when it comes to fielding new equipment.

If Curtain Call passes upcoming tests, speed is of the essence for AFRICOM, Bindl said.

"There's absolutely an impetus for us to challenge the status quo regarding traditional timelines we see, from problem identification to capability delivery, and compress this down to a year or less," Bindl said.

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MILITARY

Record number of Tomahawks fired in Iran campaign

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military has fired more Tomahawk missiles during the month-old Operation Epic Fury than in any other military campaign in history, according to a think tank analysis of reported strike data.

"Replenishing inventory after this campaign will take time and creates near-term risk for the United States," the Center for Strategic and International Studies said in a new analysis.

The findings come after The Washington Post reported that the U.S. Navy has fired more than 850 Tomahawks since the Feb. 28 start of the military operation against Iran. The report, citing unnamed U.S. officials, noted that some in the Pentagon had raised concerns about the usage rate.

If the 850-strike figure is accurate, that puts Operation Epic Fury ahead of 2003's Operation Iraqi Freedom, which involved 802 Tomahawk strikes during the invasion, according to the CSIS analysis.

Operation Desert Fox, a 70-hour bombing campaign in Iraq in 1998, was next on the list with 325 Tomahawk strikes.

Operation Desert Storm, launched in 1991 against Iraq, marked the first time the weapon was used in combat. During that 42-day campaign, the Tomahawk was launched 288 times, CSIS reported.

The Tomahawk, built by Raytheon, is a precision cruise missile launched from ships, submarines and ground launchers and can hit targets around 1,000 miles away.

CSIS said 850 missiles would likely account for around half of currently available launchers in the Middle East region.

"These launchers cannot be reloaded at sea. Ships would need to return to port with requisite infrastructure once they are out of missiles," the CSIS analysis stated.

The think tank said the Navy is set to receive 110 Tomahawks in fiscal year 2026 and that existing stockpiles are estimated to be in the low-3,000s.

White House and Pentagon officials have stressed that the U.S. military has enough munitions to conduct the Iran war.

However, the CSIS report said, the "high expenditure of Tomahawks and other missiles in Operation Epic Fury creates risks for the United States in other theaters—particularly the Western Pacific."

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U.S. Central Command

The guided-missile destroyer USS Thomas Hudner fires a Tomahawk missile in support of Operation Epic Fury on March 1.

Air Force breaks ground in Utah on ICBM silo prototype

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force has broken ground in Utah on the prototype for 450 launch silos to be built for its next-generation intercontinental ballistic missile.

The LGM-35A Sentinel will replace the Cold War-era LGM-30G Minuteman III. The nearly $141 billion program is expected to stretch into the second half of the 21st century.

The silo prototype near Promontory, Utah, will be built using digital designs in partnership with missile maker Northrop Grumman and construction company Bechtel Corp., the Air Force said.

The Sentinel project calls for building a network of new silos rather than placing the new missiles inside the hundreds of existing Minuteman III silos.

"The shift to building new silos — rather than refurbishing legacy Minuteman III infrastructure — preserves uninterrupted alert coverage while enabling a modern, adaptable architecture," the Air Force said in a March 27 statement.

The Air Force said the prototype silo would help validate plans for "a modular, repeatable" construction of the new silos, which would potentially shorten the timeline of fielding the Sentinel and reduce costs, which have ballooned since the replacement program for the Minuteman III was announced in 2016.

Construction is also underway on a new 90th Missile Wing Command Center at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo., a key ICBM control installation.

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MILITARY

Army shelves laser, joins Navy project

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army has shelved its "Valkyrie" laser anti-missile system, shifting instead to the newer Joint Laser Weapon System, to be built with the Navy as part of the Pentagon's Golden Dome missile defense strategy, according to a congressional report.

The Indirect Fire Protection Capability-High Energy Laser system, or IFPC-HEL, nicknamed "Valkyrie," is designed to deliver 300 kilowatts of energy that developers had hoped could knock cruise missiles and drones out of the sky.

A March 9 report by the Congressional Research Service said the Army's decision to move on from the Valkyrie system reflects technical challenges researchers have encountered with a continuous-wave beam capable of tracking and holding a fast, hardened cruise missile target long enough to destroy its warhead or scramble its inertial guidance system.

The newer Joint Laser Weapon System "represents the next step in the evolution of counter-cruise missile laser weapons," the CRS report states.

President Donald Trump announced the Golden Dome anti-missile "shield" last year. Congressional estimates put the initial cost of the system at $185 billion, with an operational target of about 2035. If the entire system, including space-based interceptors, were built, the cost would be over $1 trillion over several decades, according to Aviation Week magazine.

The "Valkyrie" program has been reduced to a single prototype for testing only, according to the CRS report. The prototype isn't expected to be fully delivered to the Army until September. At that point, the prototype will be used to "inform the Joint Laser Warfighting System" rather than move into operational production, the CRS report said.

The Army awarded Lockheed Martin $220.8 million to develop four "Valkyrie" prototypes, according to the report.

The decision on "Valkyrie" comes after the Army's earlier decision not to field the Directed Energy Maneuver-Short Range Air Defense system. The experimental program would have mounted a 50-kilowatt power laser weapon on a Stryker armored combat vehicle.

Though laser weapons remain a major priority in U.S. weapons development, the current technology is likely insufficient to reliably defend against attacks by numerous cruise missiles, the CRS report said.

Russia and China have developed hypersonic cruise missiles capable of traveling more than five times the speed of sound, according to the Army. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported in 2025 that cruise missiles launched from Russian aircraft or Chinese ships and submarines represent a significant risk to American personnel, ships and installations around the globe.

The report notes that cruise missiles travel at high speed with hardened warheads and guidance systems that can make them more difficult to target long enough with beamed weapons to destroy or disorient the missile.

"Valkyrie" isn't the Pentagon's sole anti-cruise missile defense program, the report said.

The Navy is working on countermeasure programs, such as the High Energy Laser Counter-Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (HELCAP-ASCM) program.

The program would use more powerful lasers to defend against potential hypersonic threats.

The Army is working toward fielding the Enduring High Energy Laser system, which could be the first Army program of directed energy weapons.

The EHEL system has been designed with feedback from troops who used energy weapons. They found shortcomings in handling weather variations, maintaining charging power, cooling and parts maintenance. The EHEL is being designed for durable operational use by soldiers and is not planned to go through an extensive prototyping period.

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Prim Hibbard/U.S. Army

Army Sgt. Aidan Hanson holds up a 3D-printed washing machine latch on Fort Bragg, N.C. Hanson developed the latch to replace worn-out parts in barracks machines. The manufacturer no longer produces the parts.

Soldier turns to 3D printer to fix broken barracks washers

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

It took an 82nd Airborne paratrooper armed with a paperclip-sized piece of plastic to fix what Big Army couldn't.

Sgt. Aidan Hanson, a soldier with the Fort Bragg, N.C.-based division, said he had enough of the out-of-order signs attached to dozens of washing machines in the barracks where he lived.

"We were getting to a point where almost all of our washers within the (division artillery) barracks were unserviceable and couldn't be used because the latch was broken," Hanson said in an Army statement.

Hanson, a barracks manager, consulted with the local public works office and learned it was unable to procure the needed part because it was no longer in production. Rather than give up, Hanson paid a visit to the division's "Innovation Lab," where he looked for a solution.

Working alongside the division's engineering team, Hanson used a 3D printer to develop multiple prototypes, with a focus on durability and affordability, the Army said. The final result was a 3D-printed piece roughly the size of a big paperclip that was "far superior in structure and can be produced in hours," the Army said.

"Simple solutions like this help improve Soldier quality of life while driving smarter, more efficient ways of operating across the Corps," according to the Army statement, which noted that Hanson had discovered around 200 washing machines in the Fort Bragg area with the same problem.

Problems in the barracks have been a long-standing quality-of-life issue for service members. The issues range from big to small, whether it is raw sewage overflows and mold or broken-down washing machines.

In January, Army Secretary Dan Driscoll told a room full of soldiers at Fort Drum, N.Y., that the service was trying to overcome a long history of doing too little, too late to make barracks life better for junior soldiers.

"We've gone to bases all over the world [during the last year, and found] there are many, many, many things where we are failing you. … We have got to get [solutions] for you much faster," Driscoll said during the town hall event.

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MILITARY

New tanker has not passed all benchmarks

DOD: Components of refueling system have not yet passed tests

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force's KC-46A Pegasus tanker has not reached full operational standards despite being deployed in restricted service, a key Pentagon report said.

The Pentagon's Director, Operational Test and Evaluation annual report on March 24 said two components of the refueling system have yet to pass tests meant to remove limitations on its use.

The issues are with the Remote Vision System and the Boom Telescope Actuator.

In-flight refueling system operators use the Remote Vision System to connect with a plane needing fuel. Unlike other refueling aircraft, the KC-46A uses a tail-mounted camera that feeds an image to the refueler, with software that creates a depth perception image that gives a daylight, night and infrared image. The boom operator sees this image on a 3D display and uses the Boom Telescope Actuator to extend and retract the refueling boom to the receiving plane.

"The KC-46A has not been able to meet several suitability metrics in past years, and this trend has continued through FY25," the report said.

U.S. Air Force

A KC-46A Pegasus refuels an F-22 Raptor, and an F-16 awaits a turn over the Mojave Desert near Edwards Air Force Base in California on March 3.

"The operational availability and mission capable rates are still well below their threshold requirements."

The Air Force said the tanker has already been deployed by Air Mobility Command in some situations but passing full operational testing certifications would allow for a less restrictive use of the KC-46A.

The first 183 KC-46A to be built are to begin replacing the aging fleet of more than 400 legacy KC-135 and KC-10 Extender refueling aircraft.

The KC-46A is a military tanker based on an extended-range variant of the Boeing 767 commercial airliner, with military upgrades for carrying fuel, defensive countermeasures, communications, rescue, medical transport and cargo roles.

The Air Force expects the KC-46A Pegasus to support combat and rescue missions, including delivering cargo to service members in the field and evacuating wounded personnel.

With corrections to the flaws noted in the report, the Pentagon expressed optimism that the KC-46A would rapidly reach full operational standards.

"Most flight testing has already been completed, but final testing depends on finishing the remaining fixes," the report said. "The aircraft can be deployed today, but with limits."

The KC-46A is capable of refueling 26 of 27 aircraft variants, according to the report — but with restrictions on "certain environmental conditions and aircraft configurations."

The report did not identify the 27th aircraft type that can't currently be used with the KC-46A, but the report said the Air Force will "resume testing" on the variant's use of the KC-46A in the near future.

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'Hyperscale data centers' coming to Texas, Utah bases

By Corey Dickstein
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army selected two commercial companies to build AI data centers on Fort Bliss, Texas, and Dugway Proving Ground, Utah.

The Army will enter exclusive negotiations with Carlyle, an investment firm, and CyrusOne, a data center developer, to build "hyperscale data centers" on the Army posts as the service seeks to expand its use of AI in combat and other military applications. The agreements would allow the companies to build, operate and maintain the data centers on land leased from the Army, according to service news release from March 26.

Carlyle and CyrusOne would be responsible for financing the projects, and taxpayers would not see an upfront cost to their development, Army officials said. The Army Corps of Engineers will conduct final lease negotiations and oversee the projects, including conducting environmental reviews, according to the Army.

The agreements come after a 2025 executive order from President Donald Trump that sought to make available underutilized federal land for commercial data center projects.

Carlyle was selected to build on about 1,384 acres at Fort Bliss, according to the Army. That project is expected to be functional in 2027.

CyrusOne, a company held by investment giants KKR and BlackRock, was selected to build on about approximately 1,201 acres on Dugway Proving Ground. That project is expected to be completed around 2029.

Each project is estimated to cost about $2 billion, according to the Financial Times.

The Army in January solicited bids for leases to build commercial data centers on Fort Bliss, Dugway Proving Ground, Fort Hood in Texas and Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

Army officials have said working hand-in-hand with the private sector is necessary to leverage ever-advancing technology into soldiers' hands. The service is also seeking private companies to build nuclear microreactors on some of its installations, which officials have said would bolster power needs for the service, including expanded AI capabilities.

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MILITARY

Army increases max enlistment age to 42

Update brings service in line with Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard

By Corey Dickstein
Stars and Stripes

Those in their late 30s and early 40s can now join the U.S. Army.

The Army increased its maximum enlistment age to 42 last month, bringing its accession policy closer in line with most of the United States' other military services, according to updated service regulation documents published last month.

Individuals up to 42 with or without prior military service can enlist in the Regular Army, the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve, according to the updated Army Regulation 601-210 published March 20. AR 601-210 is the regulation that governs policies and procedures for the Army's enlistment process.

The Army in recent years had capped the enlistment age at 35, although it did accept some older recruits with waivers, officials said. The policy did not change the Army's minimum ages for enlisting, which remain 17 with parental permission or 18.

The updated enlistment age brings the Army in line with the Air Force, Space Force and Coast Guard, which all accept recruits up to 42. The Navy accepts recruits up to 41, and the Marine Corps only accepts enlisted recruits up to 28 years old.

It is not the first time the Army has accepted older recruits. The service temporarily increased its maximum enlistment age to 42 in 2006 as it struggled to fill its ranks amid major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The service dropped its enlistment age back to 35 in 2016.

The Air Force and Space Force were the most recent services to raise their max enlistment age in 2023 when they moved it from 39 to 42 amid a years-long recruiting slump that saw Air Force recruiters fall short of their enlistment goals for multiple years.

But the Army policy change comes amid a solid recruiting environment in which its recruiters have reached or surpassed their goals in the last year and report being on track to meet their 2026 recruiting aims.

The policy change is meant to better align the service with Defense Department standards, an Army spokesperson said.

The updated Army regulation also allows recruits who have a single marijuana possession or drug paraphernalia possession conviction to enlist without a waiver. Such convictions previously would have technically barred potential recruits from enlisting, but those with such convictions were often granted waivers to join the service.

All of the U.S. military services also allow exceptions to their enlistment policies via waivers. The Air Force, for example, recently allowed 51-year-old David Goggins to enlist. Goggins is a storied former Navy SEAL who entered the Air Force as master sergeant and was assigned to the Special Warfare Training Wing, according to an Air Force spokesperson.

In 2023, Rand Corp. analysts suggested the Army raise its maximum enlistment age to help it increase recruiting at a time when the service had just missed its recruiting goals by about 25% in 2022.

In a 2022 study, Rand analysts found that older recruits might perform better. It found recruits between 25 and 35 were about 15% less likely to wash out of initial entry training than younger recruits. That age group was also about 6% more likely to reenlist after their initial contract, Rand found.

The company also found that recruiters believed older recruits were "of higher quality, more focused, and more motivated, as well as being ready to ship to basic training more quickly."

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Scott Sturkol/U.S. Army

An Army officer gives the oath of enlistment to new recruits in June at Fort McCoy, Wis. The Army has increased its maximum enlistment age to 42.

Space Command's Alabama headquarters to open in 2031

By Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A permanent headquarters for U.S. Space Command at Alabama's Redstone Arsenal is expected to open in 2031, the head of the command said.

Gen. Stephen Whiting told the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 26 that the timeline for the facility includes a groundbreaking next year, a completion date in five years and an additional year for moving in.

President Donald Trump in September announced Space Command would move from its temporary home at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado to Alabama, undoing a decision by the Biden administration to keep the command permanently in Colorado.

The relocation, which Trump had initially pushed in his first term, is "moving forward," Whiting said in testimony to the committee.

About 20 people from the command are already working at the Army's Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, with plans to grow that number to nearly 200 personnel by the end of the year, he said.

They will work out of upgraded temporary facilities while the permanent headquarters is being constructed.

One of those spaces will include a top secret-level Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, or SCIF, scheduled to open at the base this month. It will accommodate more than 80 people, Whiting said.

"I'm happy at the progress that we're making, and that progress will continue over the next couple of years as we work to get a significant portion of our staff there, even while the permanent headquarters is being built," he told senators.

The command is offering relocation bonuses to entice its personnel in Colorado to move to Alabama and is also offering retention incentives "because I need my workforce to stay with me in Colorado until their function is ready to move," Whiting said.

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MILITARY

Pentagon: Chaplains to display religious insignia, not rank

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is doing away with rank insignias for military chaplains, requiring them to instead display religious insignia as part of broader changes to the chaplain corps, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced.

Chaplains will still retain their ranks, Hegseth said in a video announcement March 24, but the change is meant to highlight the importance of the chaplain's role as a religious leader.

Eliminating rank insignia will also help junior officers or enlisted personnel feel more comfortable approaching officers, or potentially senior officers, about sensitive subjects, like addiction, relationships or struggles with faith, he said.

"A chaplain is first and foremost a chaplain, and an officer second," Hegseth said. "This change is a visual representation of that fact."

The Pentagon late last year announced plans to overhaul the military's chaplain corps, which Hegseth said had become too focused on political correctness and secular humanism.

He eliminated the Army's spiritual fitness guide and vowed to streamline the military's faith and belief coding system.

Since 2017, the Defense Department has recognized 221 groups as religious denominations or belief systems, ranging from mainstream to obscure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

That system was impractical and unusual, Hegseth said. Moving forward, the Pentagon will use 31 religious affiliation codes.

"This brings the codes in line with its original purpose: giving chaplains clear, usable information, so they can minister to service members in a way that aligns with that service member's faith background and religious practice," he said.

More than 80% of service members identify as being religious, Hegseth said, without citing a source.

Hegseth called the latest reforms the first steps toward returning chaplains to their esteemed positions as moral anchors of the armed forces.

"In combat, in crisis, in loss, a warfighter needs more than a coping mechanism," Hegseth said. "They need truth, 'big T truth.' They need conviction. They need a shepherd."

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Missile Defense Agency

A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptor is launched from the Reagan Test Site on the Kwajalein atoll.

DOD inks agreement to quadruple production of anti-missile seekers

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Anti-missile seekers would quadruple in production under an agreement signed between the Pentagon and the anti-missile defense system's builders, the Defense Department announced March 25.

BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin agreed to prioritize the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, a key weapon in fighting missiles and drones fired by Iran at U.S. and allied targets during the current Middle East conflict.

Under the agreement, annual construction of seekers would follow a January deal that saw Lockheed agree to try to increase production of THAAD interceptors from 96 to 400 per year.

The Pentagon released no financial details of the agreement.

Guided by BAE Systems' seekers, THAAD interceptors lock onto ballistic missiles flying as fast as 17,000 mph.

The interceptor strikes the target with sufficient kinetic energy — speed and force — to destroy the incoming warheads.

The system can intercept targets inside and outside Earth's atmosphere.

THAAD can defend a larger geographic area than the Patriot missile, according to a Congressional Research Service report last year. It's part of an anti-missile system used by the United States that also includes the AEGIS Missile Defense System and the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense System.

Michael Duffey, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, said the THAAD deal would ensure the speed and scale needed for anti-missile defense now and in the future.

"We are providing the certainty our partners need to invest, expand and hire. This is how we place the industrial base on a wartime footing," Duffey said.

BAE Systems signed on to a seven-year "framework" to increase production fourfold and accelerate delivery of the infrared seeker for THAAD.

BAE Systems said the THAAD seeker production work would be done at their facilities in Nashua, N.H., and Endicott, N.Y.

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