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## 'Pattern of unpreparedness'

Problems with Wasp-class amphibious warships concerning to defense analysts  
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The amphibious assault ship **USS Wasp** pulls into port at Naval Station Rota, Spain, in June.

DRACE WILSON/U.S. Navy

## COVER STORY

# Wasp-class warship woes draw concern

## 3 breakdowns have analysts questioning ships' preparedness

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Three Wasp-class amphibious warships have suffered mechanical problems at sea in recent months — a pattern that some defense analysts said projects a message to other countries that the U.S. Navy might be unprepared for a fight rather than a powerful fleet ready to strike.

“As these instances keep stacking up, that certainly demonstrates a pattern of unpreparedness. Any potential bad actor out there might factor that into their decision making,” said Dan Grazier, a senior fellow for the National Security Reform Program at the Stimson Center, a Washington think tank.

Naval Surface Forces Atlantic confirmed that the USS Iwo Jima experienced an engineering problem last month while conducting training off the coast of Virginia. The Wasp-class amphibious ship was observed limping back to Naval Station Norfolk by Aviation and Naval Assets, a ship spotter based in Hampton Roads, Va. Three tugs met the Wasp-class ship off the coast, with a fourth joining the group further inland, according to the ship spotter.

“The ship returned to Naval Station Norfolk under its own power to conduct repairs and is currently back underway continuing basic phase training events,” Lt. Cmdr. David Carter, a spokesman for Naval Surface Forces Atlantic, said.

The ship spotter speculated the issue was rudder related based on the way that the Iwo Jima moved.

“All of her turns were to port after 01:58 Zulu or 9:58 p.m. Eastern Time. From then on, there were no turns to starboard. Also, as she was approaching the pier, she was angled into the wind like the tugs couldn’t keep her from going out of the main channel,” Aviation and Naval Assets shared on X.

Carter did not say if the mechanical issue was rudder related as the ship spotter suspected. Carter indicated that the issue was resolved, stating the



U.S. Navy

**The USS Iwo Jima, a Wasp-class amphibious assault ship, conducts routine operations in the Atlantic Ocean. Wasp-class ships have broken down three times this year.**

Iwo Jima was back at sea conducting basic phase training events. Typically, basic phase training is conducted in preparation for deployments.

“We are fully committed to delivering amphibious warships on schedule that are properly organized, trained, equipped, evaluated, and certified to execute maritime expeditionary warfare and amphibious operations,” Carter said.

The Iwo Jima is the third Wasp-class amphibious ship to break down this year.

A different ship spotter in March said the USS Wasp came into port on one shaft due to an engineering problem. A few weeks later, Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the chief of naval operations, said the Wasp’s deployment was likely to be delayed due to mechanical problems.

The Wasp ultimately deployed on time in June, but the news of the Wasp’s issue came about the same time that the USS Boxer was forced to make a U-turn for repairs on its long-delayed Indo-Pacific deployment. The Boxer, also a Wasp-class amphibious ship, deployed April 1 from San Diego but returned to port 10 days later because of a problem with its starboard rudder. The Navy elected to repair the rudder pier side with divers, USNI reported, and the ship returned to its deployment in July.

Wasp-class amphibious assault ships are flat-top warships that act as helicopter landing docks at sea. The warships are also used to deploy Marine expeditionary units, which are described by the Navy and the Marine

Corps as a global 911 force that responds to humanitarian crises and conflict.

“They are supposed to be out there standing by, ready to respond to any potential crisis around the world. Seeing problems like this, watching MEUs turn around and come back to port for maintenance issues is pretty disturbing,” Grazier said.

The strain of readying amphibious ships for deployment is a lingering effect of the USS Bonhomme Richard fire of 2020, according to Mark Cancian, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, another Washington think tank. The Wasp-class Bonhomme Richard, which was undergoing maintenance in San Diego, burned for more than four days. Soon after, the ship was declared a total loss.

Eight Wasp-class amphibious ships were built, leaving the Navy with seven active ships following the loss of the Bonhomme Richard. The Navy also has two America-class amphibious assault ships, with a third under construction.

“If we just had one more amphib, it would take some of the stress off the others so there would be a little more time for maintenance,” Cancian said.

The U.S. military, Cancian said, is facing an increased operational tempo around the globe that is pulling its available forces from one area of responsibility to another. The U.S. can maintain a virtual presence by monitoring areas of responsibility from afar, and quickly deploy forces to respond to acts of aggression. For example, he said, the Army’s 82nd Air-

borne Division, based at Fort Liberty, N.C., specializes in parachute assault operations into hostile areas.

“But virtual presence is actual absence,” Cancian said.

Potential enemies, he said, are “not impressed” by a virtual presence.

“Other countries notice when the U.S. forward presence declines,” Cancian said. “This is a problem because it means the U.S. will not be as ready to respond to crises.”

Grazier pointed to a shortage of sailors at sea and an inability to get necessary parts that can create a “cascading effect of problems.”

“Big machines have big problems and for really big machines like an amphib, those problems are just magnified. It is important the Navy recruit enough people to fully flesh out their crews or we are going to continue seeing problems like this,” he said.

The Navy is facing more than 18,000 vacancies at sea as of 2024. Wasp-class ships across the Navy fleet are operating with about 20% fewer sailors than required, according to a Government Accountability Office report. The labor shortage, exacerbated by a lack of in-depth and hands-on training for sailors in maintenance and repair techniques, makes it difficult for the ships to complete regular routine maintenance and repairs at sea.

The watchdog report also found the Navy has a persistent shortage of spare parts and materials necessary to complete sailor-led maintenance.

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## EUROPE

# US Army general touts training changes

War in Ukraine has forced transformation of focus in Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Fake command posts, electromagnetic decoys and fast-moving mission control hubs are some of the ways the war in Ukraine has transformed U.S. Army training in Europe, according to a top American general in the wake of a rotation on NATO's eastern flank.

The new focus is on getting troops to adapt faster to a more complex battlefield, the 3rd Infantry Division's Maj. Gen. Christopher Norrie said in an Army statement recently.



Norrie

His team wrapped up a nine-month deployment this spring overseeing Army units across Poland and the Baltics.

The Army's approach to training has evolved over the past couple of years with an emphasis on so-called "transforming in contact," which involves drawing lessons learned by troops in the field that are rapidly tested by the larger Army.

"We're observing the world, and then we're transforming in contact," Norrie said.

In the past, ensuring the mobility of a brigade command post wasn't a major priority for the Army, which during two



ANTHONY FORD/U.S. Army

**U.S. Army Cpl. Austin Douglas, front, and Pvt. Thomas Bryd, both with 2nd Armored Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, maintain a defensive position during a NATO drill at Bemowo Piskie Training Area in Poland in March.**

decades of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan didn't face adversaries with long-range strike capabilities.

However, the war in Ukraine and the widespread use of drones and precision strikes have revealed how exposed command posts can become.

During the 3rd Infantry Division's deployment, which concluded in May, soldiers coordinated with the U.S. European Command's Security Assistance Group – Ukraine team and learned about how Ukrainian forces carried out combat operations against Russian counterparts.

That information was delivered to other units preparing in the United States for their own deployments to

Europe. The arrangement resulted in combat scenarios that incorporated technology such as tethered drones and electromagnetic decoys to assist in protecting U.S. forces from becoming targets, the Army said.

The deception tactics included creating fake command posts to lure in the simulated enemy. "This allowed them to destroy the adversaries' assets while preserving the real command post," the Army statement said.

Before his time in command of the 3rd Infantry Division, Norrie did multiple stints in Europe that included leading the 7th Army Training Command in Grafenwoehr, Germany. That has given him an up-close look at how the Army's

mission on the Continent has changed.

"In just a few short years, we have command posts that move in minutes," Norrie said, adding that the Army also has gotten faster at issuing mission-style battlefield orders.

In 2017, he convoyed a full armored brigade of soldiers from a port in Germany to locations in Poland, marking the beginning of the Army's effort to establish a continuous rotation of tank power in central and Eastern Europe.

Since then, Army operations along NATO's eastern flank have steadily evolved.

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## US SOCEUR is reorganizing to take on a NATO role

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — A leadership makeover aimed at improving how U.S. special operators work with allies in Europe is in the works, military officials said recently.

The change involves turning the Stuttgart-based U.S. Special Operations Command Europe into a three-star headquarters with its commander serving in a dual role as head of NATO's special operations command.

The change "will better align SOF operations, activities and investments,"

SOCEUR spokesman Lt. Col. Peter Bogart said in a statement.

"Furthermore, it ensures a more efficient allocation of resources and personnel, where SOF assets can be rapidly deployed in support of NATO or U.S. missions as needed," he said.

The move is in line with how other top positions are structured, such as U.S. European Command, whose leader also serves as NATO's supreme allied commander from an office in Belgium. The heads of the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force in Europe lead corresponding NATO commands.

The Pentagon recently announced that Army Maj. Gen. Richard E. Angle had been nominated for a third star to head up SOCEUR and the Allied Special Operations Forces Command.

If confirmed, he will command from NATO's military headquarters in Belgium.

Since August, he has served as a special assistant to Gen. Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and NATO's Allied Land Command, according to the Army.

Meanwhile, Army Brig. Gen. Joseph

Lock, who took over SOCEUR in July, will remain in Stuttgart and serve as Angle's deputy upon confirmation.

The reorganization for SOCEUR is the latest development for a command that's been adapting how its forces are positioned in Europe.

SOCEUR is moving some of its operators from Stuttgart to Baumholder, a more rural area with access to larger training grounds. Army officials have said the move, which will add about 1,000 people to the service's Baumholder garrison, is expected to happen by 2026.

## MILITARY

# Marine squadron's first F-35 opens up path to reactivation

By LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

A Marine Corps aviation unit's return to action is waiting in the wings, pending delivery of enough additional F-35C Lightning II jets to allow it to get going.

The first of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251's planes arrived last month in Cherry Point, N.C., the new home of the squadron nicknamed the Thunderbolts. It was formerly based at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina.

A fully staffed Marine Corps F-35 squadron consists of 10 aircraft, according to the service. Neither Marine Corps headquarters nor 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing spokesman 2nd Lt. John Graham provided a timeline for the arrival of the remaining jets.

The Thunderbolts could still restart without their full inventory of F-35s, Graham said recently.

"The squadron's official reactivation is dependent on the arrival of more aircraft," he said. "However, achieving full operational capability is not a prerequisite."

The fifth-generation fighter jet is the first model of its kind to reach the Corps' East Coast air wing. The squadron is set to support the Navy's Carrier Air Wing 8.

For 34 years, the unit was an F/A-18 Hornet squadron, but the Marine Corps is replacing its aging fleet of Hornets with the state-of-the-art F-35C.

The squadron was deactivated in 2020 after returning from a deployment in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S.-led fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

In addition, the service's transition to the F-35 will eventually spell the end for the AV-8B Harrier jets in its fleet. They will give way to the F-35B, a short-takeoff-and-vertical-landing aircraft.

According to the service's 2022 aviation plan, the Harrier will remain in operations until 2027 but is slowly being phased out.

Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542, which is the Thunderbolts' sister squadron at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, will fly the B variant of the F-35. Their activation in April marked the completion of their transition from the Harrier, Graham said.

The F-35 is more stealthy, maneuverable and has better sensor network and fuel capacity, according to the service.

"The one-two punch provided by the F-35C's increased range and the F-35B's (short takeoff and vertical-landing) capability will give ... a significant advantage in the future fight," Col. Benjamin Grant, commander of Marine Aircraft Group 14, the squadrons' parent command, said in the statement.

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DARIN RUSSELL/U.S. Navy

F-35C Lightning IIs and F/A-18E/F Super Hornets fly over Nevada.



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

**Soldiers with the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade prepare to load rockets into idling Apache helicopters at a forward arming and refueling point at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany.**

## Army looks to robotics, AI to refuel in combat

By LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — The Army has begun revamping outdated aircraft fueling and rearming procedures to make the process quicker and safer for service members in combat zones.

The Helicopter Expedited Refueling Operations project, or HERO, will introduce faster pump systems, robotic fueling and elements of artificial intelligence, an Army statement said.

A team from the Army Applications Laboratory, which is running the project, recently observed a 12th Combat Aviation Brigade exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, to better inform their work.

Forward Arming and Refueling Point protocols have remained unchanged for decades, even as the pace of combat has increased.

In the best-case scenario, the site takes 40 to 60 minutes to stage and equip. It takes another hour to arm and fuel the aircraft and more time to pack up and move out, said Capt. Justin Thomas, distribution platoon leader for Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment.

"Overall, you're looking at a three-hour time of exposure for both the soldiers on the ground and the aircraft," Thomas said.



**A soldier operates a truck refueling Apache helicopters.**

The revamp would include unmanned ground support systems, said Sgt. 1st Class Dayne Martin, Echo Company's distribution platoon sergeant.

"I think it's going to really streamline all the processes ... and really minimize that time on station for the personnel," said Martin, who added that the ultimate goal is to minimize the enemy threat to the soldiers and aircraft.

The pumps and robotics are in development, said Capt. Lydia LaRue, a 12th Combat Aviation Brigade spokeswoman.

The HERO project is in its early stages. The Army's goal is to have technology prototypes sent to soldiers in less than 30 months, LaRue said.

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## MILITARY

# Food insecurity in military highlighted

Lawmakers, veterans group place flags on National Mall to raise awareness on issue

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — When Rep. Chris Houlihan was a little girl growing up on naval bases, it was drilled into her how precious military pay was.

“My mother would walk around with envelopes of cash every month that this was for food, and this one was for clothes and this one was for medicine. She would open her envelopes for food at the commissary,” the Democrat from Pennsylvania said recently. Houlihan’s father was a Navy aviator.

Rand Corp. published a study in 2023 showing more than 25% of active-duty service members lack consistent access to enough food for their households. The study, which Congress directed the Pentagon to sponsor as part of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, also found 15.4% of troops would be classified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as not having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

Houlihan, along with six other lawmakers, placed 325 flags on the National Mall to represent and bring awareness to the 325,000 service members who are considered food insecure, according to With Honor Action, a



MATTHEW ADAMS/Stars and Stripes

**With Honor Action, a nonprofit that looks to promote veteran leadership in public service, and lawmakers place 325 flags recently on the National Mall.**

nonprofit that promotes and advances veteran leadership in public service. The group hosted the event with lawmakers near the Capitol.

“I know that there’s a lot of pushback right now. Fixing things like housing might be a priority, which is great but you can’t eat housing. It’s really, really important that we emphasize just the vastness of this,” said Houlihan, who was an Air Force captain.

The fiscal 2025 NDAA, an annual bill that outlines defense priorities and spending, gives troops a 4.5% pay raise. The House version of the legislation includes an additional 15% pay raise for junior enlisted service members. The Senate Appropriations Committee in August unanimously advanced a

version of the Pentagon spending bill that includes funding to cover a 5.5% pay bump for E-1s through E-3s and a 4.5% raise for all other troops.

“I’ve said this in hearings before that we have junior enlisted who make at the poverty level or under the poverty level. So, I think it is important that we are here to bring attention to this matter and that for members of Congress to understand it is really important [that] lives are affected when we can’t bring our act together and pass our budgets on time,” said Rep. Marianne Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, after placing several flags.

The findings in the Rand study are at odds with the conventional wisdom that those most prone to food insecurity

in the ranks are junior enlisted members with large families. Instead, the report found the majority of those affected, 67%, were early- to mid-career enlisted personnel between the pay grades of E-4 and E-6.

The call for attention to troops struggling to feed their families comes as congressional lawmakers agreed to a deal to avert a looming government shutdown Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year.

The Pentagon has long balked at the use of stopgap funding measures, which Congress has passed to begin new fiscal years in 15 of the last 16 years. In 2024, Congress did not pass a full Pentagon budget until late March.

In a letter to Congress last month, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin wrote a six-month continuing resolution would cost the Pentagon more than \$6 billion compared to his 2025 spending proposal, and it would stall some \$4.3 billion in research projects and delay some \$10 billion in expected military construction projects.

“It’s unfortunate that it takes a display like this to highlight an issue that can be detrimental to our national security, and that’s our food security amongst the ranks of our military members. So making sure that we not just come out here and plant flags but that we actually do something in the United States Congress,” said Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif.

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## Report: Financial complaints in military up nearly 100%

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Money matters are becoming a growing problem for the military community as complaints of veterans’ scams rise and service members say they’re unable to access essential financial services, according to the federal government’s consumer agency.

The annual report of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s Office of Servicemember Affairs shows that the number of complaints fielded by the office has almost doubled in two years.

The report highlights the financial

struggles of service members, veterans and military families.

The 84,600 complaints the bureau received in 2023 from people it considers part of the military community represented a 27% increase from the previous year. And it was 98% higher than the 2021 figure.

There were significant increases in the number of complaints about credit reporting, debt collection, credit cards, bank accounts and mortgages, according to the report.

Active-duty service members were particularly affected, with mortgage

complaints from them up by 47%, and credit card and bank account complaints rising by 41%.

The varied issues raised in the complaints could jeopardize service members’ credit, security clearances, career advancement and ability to focus on their missions, the report warns.

Veterans and retirees experienced similar spikes, with checking or savings account complaints up by 34%, credit and consumer reporting issues up by 31%, and credit card complaints up by 30%.

Credit or consumer reporting re-

mained the most frequent complaint category among service members, accounting for 55.3% of all complaints.

However, this was one area where the general public filed a higher percentage of complaints, with 79% of all consumer complaints related to credit reporting.

Debt collection complaints were more common in the military community, making up 13.8% of all complaints, compared with 6.6% for the general public.

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## MILITARY

# Navy seeks to boost training, testing at Hawaii missile range

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Navy intends to significantly increase the level of training on Kauai and an uninhabited island that would exponentially step up the tempo of missile and rocket launches, amphibious and drone operations and airport use by helicopters by the joint force.

The Navy laid out its plans for the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai in a draft environmental assessment issued in August.

The plan would increase the frequency of 13 types of training and testing activities that take place on the Barking Sands installation on Kauai and on Kaula, an uninhabited Hawaiian island to the southwest.

Barking Sands lies on a coastal strip on the west side of Kauai and is part of a missile range with an operational area that includes more than 1,100 square miles of underwater range and more than 42,000 square miles of controlled airspace, according to the Navy.

The range is capable of simultaneously supporting surface, underwater, air and space operations.

The Missile Defense Agency routinely uses the range for testing ballistic missile prototypes.

Under its proposed plan, the Navy would continue using the range as it has

in the past but increase training and testing conducted by the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and the Missile Defense Agency.

“Training and testing activities may also include the participation of foreign militaries under U.S. sponsorship and oversight,” the draft assessment states.

The assessment concludes that the added activities would not significantly affect air quality, climate change and greenhouse gases, noise, public health and safety and biological and cultural resources.

The Navy is not proposing new types of training or testing at Barking Sands or Kaula, a 135-acre crescent-shaped isle about 55 miles southwest of Kauai.

Kaula would see increases in air-to-ground bombing exercises, and air-to-ground gunnery exercises.

About 11 acres in the south of the island is used for those exercises. Live fire is prohibited on Kaula.

The number of bombing exercises, which involve training of strike fighter aircraft delivering inert ordnance on the island, would increase from 12 to 31.

In gunnery drills, strike fighters and helicopter crews use guns and inert rockets to attack the island. Those exercises would increase from 14 to 24 per year.

Some activities on Kauai would increase far more dramatically, in certain



U.S. Navy

**A hypersonic glide body launches from the Pacific Missile Range Facility on the Hawaiian island of Kauai in 2020 during a Defense Department flight experiment.**

cases by more than 2,100%.

Among the plan's expected annual increases for activities are:

- Drone and counter-drone operations, from two to 45, a 2,150% increase.

- Movements by units over land to new locations, from one to 22, a 2,100% increase.

- Helicopter and Osprey landing-zone operations at airport, from one to 12, a 1,100% increase.

- Establishing and operating tactical field command posts, communication systems, radar tracking and surveillance systems, optical tracking systems and electronic warfare equipment, from nine to 70, a 678% increase.

- Amphibious operations, from four to 26, a 550% increase.

- Launches of missile, rockets and aerial-target drones, from 25 to 35.

- Non-live fire missile or rocket system launch preparations, from one to six.

- Establishing and operating forward arming and refueling points for

fighter jets, helicopters, cargo planes and Ospreys, from one to 20.

The Navy's plan was developed with the joint services and the MDA “to identify training and testing activities that were not being supported at other locations and for which [the missile range] was already supporting due to the availability of facilities and range assets,” the assessment states.

Then, taking into consideration factors such as safety, range capability and test scheduling, the Navy determined the tempo of training and testing activities the range could support into the “reasonably foreseeable future,” the assessment states.

The draft assessment is posted at [www.pmrflbt-draft-environmental-assessment-august2024.pdf](http://www.pmrflbt-draft-environmental-assessment-august2024.pdf).

A final environmental impact statement is expected to be released next year for public review and comment.

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## Navy issues contract to begin USS Nimitz's retirement

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has begun the process of retiring its oldest aircraft carrier, the USS Nimitz, which was commissioned in 1975.

Huntington Ingalls Inc. has received an \$18.4 million contract from U.S. Naval Sea Systems Command to handle preliminary planning to deactivate the nuclear power plants on the Nimitz, the first step toward decommissioning and eventual

disposal.

The contract calls for a deactivation plan to be submitted to the Navy by November 2024. The Nimitz is still on active duty, homeported at Naval Base Kitsap in Washington state, with deactivation planned for 2026 and to be completed in 2027.

The contract for the Nimitz was included in an Aug. 28 roundup of projects approved by the Defense Department. Naval Sea Systems Command will over-

see the project.

The Nimitz completed a six-month maintenance at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in June and shares a portion of Naval Base Kitsap with the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

After the Ronald Reagan completes its six-month overhaul, the ship is scheduled to take up the Nimitz's role as the Navy carrier homeported in the Pacific Northwest.

The Navy's plan for the Nimitz calls for

it to transit down the West Coast of the United States and South America, around Cape Horn, and proceed to Newport News, Va., where the deactivation work would begin, according to the contract.

The Nimitz is the first of the class of 10 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers based on the same design. It's named after Adm. Chester Nimitz, who served in World War II.

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## MILITARY

# Carrier USS Truman deploys to Mideast

## Family and friends gather to wish crew well on its potential mission in Red Sea

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

NORFOLK, Va. — “Just one more!” Cecilia Gamboa shouted, throwing her arms around her daughter, Machinist’s Mate Gianna Rodriguez.

“Seven months is nothing compared to a lifetime,” Rodriguez said, hugging her mother.

Then, after smoothing out her dress whites and saying her final “I love you,” Rodriguez disappeared into a group of sailors making their way down the pier toward the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman.

Dozens of family members and friends gathered recently at Naval Station Norfolk to wish the crew of the Truman fair winds and following seas ahead of a deployment that is expected to take the warship’s strike group into the Middle East.

Sailors stoically stood on the flight deck, manning the rails in their dress whites, as the carrier was pushed off the pier. The warship will be joined at sea by its strike group, which includes Carrier Air Wing 1 with nine aviation squadrons, guided-missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, and two guided-missile destroyers, the USS Stout and the USS Jason Dunham.

For now, the Truman strike group is deploying to the 6th Fleet area of responsibility, which spans approximately half of the Atlantic Ocean, from the North Pole to Antarctica, as well as the North, Adriatic, Baltic, Barents, Black, Caspian and Mediterranean seas, senior leaders said.

“This crew is ready to answer any call that our nation may have for us to answer,” said Capt. Dave Snowden, commanding officer of the Truman.

The last time that the Truman deployed was in 2022 to provide air support in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This time, the warship is potentially deploying for a different kind of battle — drone warfare. The strike group has spent recent months



Dozens gathered at Naval Station Norfolk, Va., to see the USS Harry S. Truman as it departs for a scheduled deployment.

PHOTOS BY CAITLYN BURCHETT/Stars and Stripes

training in the western Atlantic Ocean for a rare, pre-planned deployment expected to take the ship into the hostile environment of the Red Sea.

U.S. sailors and allies have fought almost daily for months to down drones and missiles launched by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen as tensions in the Middle East have raged on for nearly a year.

“Our world is a dynamic place where threats are emerging everywhere, all across the globe,” said Rear Adm. Sean Bailey, commander of the Truman carrier strike group.

The Truman is deploying with a strike force of 90 aircraft, including F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets, E-2D Hawkeye command and control aircraft, E/A18 Growler electronic warfare jets and MH-60 Seahawk helicopters.

The senior commanders said the Truman strike group trained for a broad spectrum of missions but confirmed the group has leveraged lessons learned from other carrier strike groups deployed recently in the region to prepare for a potential Red Sea mission.

“It has not necessarily changed how we focus our training,” Bailey said, referring to the Red Sea. “But what it has done is it’s given us more increased capability against those threats, as they emerge to ensure that

Norfolk. The Eisenhower completed an eight-month deployment to the region in July, being relieved by San Diego-based carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt.

In August, Austin ordered the extension of the Roosevelt as well as directed the USS Abraham Lincoln, also a West Coast-based carrier, to the Red Sea. The Roosevelt’s and the Lincoln’s time in the region overlapped by about three weeks before the Roosevelt was ordered to return home. The Lincoln and its strike group are still there.

“When we deploy, we never know what is going to be in store for us. It is a testament to previous carrier strike groups that were able to quickly pivot to go from one theater to another, go from one mission to another,” Bailey said.

Hours before the ship departed, sailors lingered by the gates of the pier for last-minute goodbyes.

Seaman Mason Baker wrapped his mother, Clare Baker, with a hug. She traveled from North Carolina to see her son off on his first deployment. An American flag was emblazoned across her shirt, which read, “My kid has your back.”

Nearby, Rodriguez’s family stood in the shadow of the ship’s bow a few moments after she said goodbye. They wanted to watch her climb the brow and board the warship. Her mother, father and two sisters traveled from California to see the sailor off on her first deployment.

“She is proud to protect our country. As a mom, my heart is broken because we never want to let go of our children, but we have got to be proud that we raised them well enough. They are doing something big,” Cecilia Gamboa said, wiping tears from her cheeks.

At about midday, the Truman was guided off the pier by tugboats. Dozens of families trickled down the pier, following the ship as far as the pier would allow.

When the ship turned to transit to the Chesapeake Bay and out to sea, a pod of dolphins appeared in the wake of the warship. It will be at least six months before the Truman Carrier Strike Group and its force of 6,500 sailors return home.



Sailor Gianna Rodriguez hugs a family member before climbing aboard the USS Harry S. Truman.

we are fully trained to be ready wherever we may go.”

In the past year, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has twice ordered two carriers to the region, as well as bolstering U.S. forces with an amphibious ready group and a nuclear-powered submarine.

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, homeported in Virginia, was ordered in October 2023 to sail to the region after a deadly attack on Israel by Hamas militants. The aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, also East Coast-based, joined the Ford in the winter before the Ford returned to



MILITARY

# Report: Construction delays have doubled

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The number of military construction projects delayed for more than a year has doubled in the last five years and the problem could be mitigated through better oversight from the Defense Department, according to a new government watchdog report.

The Government Accountability Office found the number of projects delayed jumped from 73 to 158 from 2019 to 2024. More so, 25% of all projects in that time delayed for at least a year, which can happen for a variety of reasons, and can increase the construction costs of the project by millions of dollars. GAO investigators focused their review largely on the design phase of projects that is typically overseen by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command.

The Defense Department closely watched a handful of high-profile projects but heavily relied on those two organizations to monitor progress. Some facilities included in military construction are child care facilities, aircraft hangars, roads and barracks.

At the close of fiscal 2023, the military had about 598 ongoing construction projects worth more than \$28 billion, according to the report.

Military officials have requested \$15 billion in funding for fiscal 2025 for new construction.

The report highlighted some of the

majorly delayed projects across the military, such as a communications and crypto facility at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii that was supposed to be completed in April 2021 for a total of \$49.8 million.

Construction is ongoing and the cost for the project has grown to \$124 million, in part because of design errors, material delays and issues with heating and cooling systems.

The financial costs of delayed construction don't quantify the loss to operations from the stalled projects when new facilities are put on hold as building drags on. The Hawaii facility is meant to improve the Navy's ability to conduct information warfare missions.

The delays also contribute to other ongoing problems such as the shortage of child care facilities and housing for junior enlisted.

A GAO report last year found junior troops were suffering with poor living conditions in barracks and dorms.

Problems included sewage overflow, mold, water-quality issues, rodent infestations, broken air conditioning and missing kitchenettes. Some installations, such as Fort Cavazos in Texas, do not have enough rooms in barracks, which has forced some soldiers to double up.

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GEOFFREY L. OTTINGER/U.S. Navy

The aircraft carrier USS George Washington and fleet replenishment oiler USNS John Lenthall conduct a vertical replenishment in the Pacific Ocean in June.

## Navy to buy more oilers, will seek crew for them

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

A Navy plan to buy at least eight more replenishment oilers for \$6.75 billion has raised doubts whether the service will be able to crew the ships when they're ready.

The oilers are critical to keeping the Navy's warships moving in a hypothetical war against an adversary with a large modern military, such as China, analysts say.

But it remains unclear how the service over the long term will address the shortage of skilled civilian mariners needed to man oiler, hospital and other support ships managed by Military Sealift Command.

The temporary fix is to sideline 17 ships. The Navy hopes that a plan to reassign 700 people from those ships to others will fill gaps and allow mariners to take adequate vacation time.

The underlying problem with the proposal is "that they are pulling these crews from vessels that are a lot different than the oilers and the underway replenishment ships," said Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy who has served ashore and at sea for Military Sealift Command.

Many of the mariners being reassigned are coming from cargo ships, Mercogliano said.

Unlike active-duty sailors, civilian mariners are at-will employees, meaning they can quit their jobs at any time.

"They don't have the experience, and some of them may not come," said Mercogliano, who likened the discrepancy in skills to that between taxicab operators and long-haul truck drivers.

Military Sealift operates about 125

civilian-crewed ships that replenish Navy ships, pre-position combat cargo at sea and conduct specialized missions. The fleet's 15 Kaiser-class oilers also are operated by the command, according to its website.

In all, roughly 5,500 civilians fill about 4,500 jobs across Military Sealift Command. But about 10,000 mariners are needed, experts say.

A grueling schedule, along with a policy that forced many civilian mariners to stay on their ships for months on end during the COVID-19 pandemic, led many of them to leave.

Meanwhile, the Navy is replacing the current class of oilers, which were first commissioned in 1987. Three new John Lewis-class vessels have been delivered to the service but not yet deployed. Three others are under construction and another three are under contract, according to the Navy.

The number of civilian mariners freed up for that new construction by moving about 12 expeditionary fast transports, or EFPs, and five other ships to inactive status likely would be insufficient, said Steven Wills, a retired Navy officer and research scientist at the Arlington, Va.-based think tank CNA.

"Each EFP has a nominal crew of 22," Wills said. "It takes 99 such people to crew a John Lewis-class (oiler), so not much additional ship crew bought by that change."

Maritime Sealift Command needs to address the crew shortage by stepping up recruitment efforts at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and six state maritime academies, analysts said.

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