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Struggling to take off

Black Hawk's tiltrotor
successor deals with political,
military turbulence **Page 2**



The V-280 Valor — as the MV-75 was known while under development — performs a flight demonstration in Arlington, Texas, in 2020.

LUKE J. ALLEN/U.S. Army

COVER STORY

Black Hawk's tiltrotor successor struggles

Army's new MV-75 hitting political, military turbulence

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Army has announced the future of air assault: the MV-75 tiltrotor.

The MV-75 is designed to sweep into battle at more than 320 mph, skimming over the treetops before seeming to stop mid-air as its rotors pivot to a vertical for landing.

Up to 14 soldiers could spill out into a firefight. Litters carrying wounded could be loaded for the return flight. In less than five minutes, the MV-75 could lift off, shift to horizontal flight, and race miles away from danger.

"This aircraft changes how we move forces — it changes the geometry of ground combat," Gen. James Mingus, the Army vice chief of staff, said recently.

But that future isn't here yet.

The Army chose the "Screaming Eagles" of the 101st Airborne Division as first in line to fly the new aircraft. But the 101st won't get the MV-75 tiltrotor until 2030 — though Army officials said they hope to shave a year or more off the timeline through acquisition reforms announced last month by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

The MV-75 is part of the Army's Future Vertical Lift (FVL) program to replace all of its helicopters by mid-century.

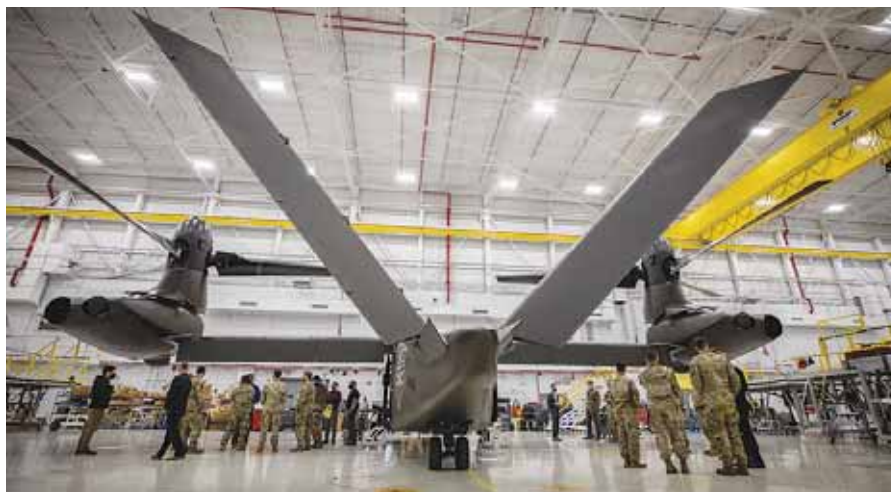
While the MV-75 was given a boost by Mingus' announcement, the FVL program has already seen one project canceled at a cost of \$2 billion and others being questioned as outdated by the Army's recently announced "transformational rebalancing" of its air assets.

Hegseth announced in April that the Army would review its warfighting abilities with an eye toward downplaying manned helicopter use and instead focusing on the use of uncrewed drones.

"The Army must transform at an accelerated pace," Hegseth said.

The MV-75 aircraft is so new, it doesn't even have an official name.

The prototype from Bell and Lockheed Martin is called the V-280 Valor.



LUKE J. ALLEN/U.S. Army

A rifle squad visits Bell Flight's Arlington, Texas, facility in 2020.

At the Army Aviation Association of America conference, Army officials said the new aircraft would carry the designation "MV" for "multi-mission vertical" takeoff and landing.

The numerical change from 280 to 75 is a salute to 1775, the year the Army was founded.

In the past the Army has named its helicopters after Indian tribes. Even the UH-1 Huey is officially named the "Iroquois" although the name didn't stick like Black Hawk and Apache.

Will the new tiltrotor follow or break the naming tradition?

"That is TBD — to be determined," said Col. Marty Meiners, a spokesman for the 101st Airborne Division.

The MV-75 is the first aircraft the Army announced in 2009 that it planned to field by mid-century under the Future Vertical Lift program.

The program was launched in 2009 to find replacements for U.S. military helicopters that the Pentagon said had aged more rapidly than anticipated due to the high tempo of deployments and operations in the wars against terror following the 9/11 attacks.

The pipeline for new designs had also become so extended that the military primarily relied on updated versions — blocks — of existing designs, some of which were more than 50 years old.

"I don't want my grandchildren flying the AH-64 Apache Longbow Block 80," Army Maj. Gen. Anthony Crutchfield quipped at the Army Aviation Association of America conference in 2011.

The Army plan called for replacing its aging inventory of UH-60 Black Hawk, CH-47 Chinook, AH-64 Apache and OH-58 Kiowa helicopters.

If the designs proved successful, the Pentagon said the aircraft could be adopted by other services, possibly replacing up to 25 helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft types across all branches.

Two programs were first up.

The Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) competition to replace the UH-60 Black Hawk was decided in December 2022. The Army selected the V-280 tiltrotor from Bell and Lockheed Martin, beating out the SB>1 Defiant, a coaxial rotor helicopter submitted by Sikorsky and Boeing.

The win for the V-280 has the potential for \$72 billion in orders from the Army. Coming in second meant the SB>1 will be displayed at the Army Aviation Museum at Fort Novosel, Ala.

The Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA) competition to replace the OH-58 Kiowa reached a key point in 2020 with the Bell 360 Invictus and Sikorsky Raider X chosen as finalists.

After spending \$2 billion on developing the FARA, the Pentagon pulled the plug on the program in February 2024.

Pentagon officials have said that lessons learned from combat between Russian and Ukrainian forces had shown battlefield tactics had changed, particularly in the use of cheap but deadly drones. Critics argued that crewed helicopters were vulnerable to drones and shoulder-launched mis-

siles.

Until the future arrives, soldiers will go into battle, search for downed pilots, hoist stranded ship crews at sea and drop sonar on submarines much the way they have for the past half-century — with one of the 5,000 UH-60 Black Hawks and its variants built for the U.S. military.

For some, that's just fine.

"The Black Hawk today is something like the Huey in the old Vietnam days — everybody has been in it, knows it, trusts it," said Chief Warrant Officer 5 Barry Sledd of the 7th Infantry Division at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

Sledd has been in the Army since 1989 and believes that modernization is a key to success on the battlefield. But so is familiarity and trust.

"I had 2,000 combat hours in Iraq and Afghanistan," Sledd said. "There were several times we were shot at and came back with bullet holes to prove it. The Black Hawk performed as advertised — it got us home."

Sledd recalled serving with Col. Derek A. Smith when he was commander of the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade, 7th Infantry Division.

At his July 2024 retirement ceremony, Smith called out his family's history with the Black Hawk.

"My dad was a UH-60 pilot, and he retired as a brigadier general," Smith told the audience.

The first Black Hawk flew on Oct. 17, 1974

Black Hawk variants have flown in every U.S. military conflict since the Invasion of Grenada in October 1983. Another 36 nations have purchased the Black Hawk for their militaries, rescue or emergency services.

The UH-60 isn't going away.

Until — or unless — the MV-75 wins over congressional budget writers and troops in the field, the Black Hawk is available to step up — or even step in.

"The reliability of the aircraft, the affordability of the aircraft, having an aircraft that is proven, that has been fielded, is great to have," said Jay Macklin, business development director for Sikorsky, which manufactures the Black Hawk.

"Keeping the Black Hawk reduces risk for future vertical lift needs."

MILITARY

Indispensable ship on decommission list

USS Mount Whitney a command vessel with unique abilities

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE USS MOUNT WHITNEY — The Navy wants to mothball the only ship in the fleet that allows a U.S. commander to simultaneously lead U.S. and NATO forces in Europe and Africa, a move critics say would weaken combat flexibility and American influence abroad.

USS Mount Whitney, flagship of the Naples, Italy-based 6th Fleet, provides capabilities that no other Navy facility or platform — including aircraft carriers, amphibious groups or even sister ship USS Blue Ridge — can match, sailors aboard the vessel said.

Simply put, “we are a floating Pentagon,” said Lt. Cmdr. Jonathan DeSimone, a communications information systems officer assigned to the ship.

The one-of-a-kind status lies in its dual, secure command centers for U.S. and NATO forces, allowing sailors to operate jointly without compromising sensitive information, DeSimone said.

Recent communication upgrades give Vice Adm. Jeffrey Anderson, who leads both 6th Fleet and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO, the flexibility to direct operations from sea without traveling ashore to command centers in Italy and Portugal.

“In a crisis or conflict, I have to be able to have the ability to simultaneously do it from one location,” Anderson said. That capability isn’t possible in Naples or Lisbon, he said.

Yet in its 2023 budget, the Navy said it wanted to decommission Mount Whitney next year to save some \$179 million annually. The ship’s functions could be handled ashore, the service said at the time without specifying how.

That date was extended to 2027, a Navy spokesperson said last month.

However, sailors aboard Mount Whitney said they believe the ship actually will be in service for a decade or more in a series of incremental extensions.

In recent years, the Navy has submitted budgets calling for the retire-



JOSEPH BULIIVAC/U.S. 6th Fleet

The command and control ship USS Mount Whitney, the 6th Fleet flagship, departs Praia, Cape Verde, in support Oban-game Express 2025.



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

Sailors and civilian mariners aboard USS Mount Whitney man the bridge May 13, as the ship comes into port at Naval Station Rota, Spain.

ment of a sizable number of older vessels to make way for a more advanced, lethal fleet, a divest-to-invest strategy that often draws the scrutiny of Congress.

In 2023, the Navy sought to retire 16 ships early, but Congress approved only six.

The plan to decommission Mount Whitney has raised alarm among advocates and analysts, who say it defies common sense. It limits options during crises, undercuts diplomacy and strains operational readiness, they say.

Sebastian Bruns, a maritime expert at the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, said Mount Whitney can project naval power and diplomacy better in some instances than an armed destroyer or cruiser.

The window of opportunity to use the ship in that capacity appears to be closing “if one assumes that Mount

Whitney will be decommissioned, will not be replaced, and if one assumes ... the moving away of the United States from Europe is going to continue,” Bruns said.

Despite its strategic use, Mount Whitney is ineligible for congressional funding for critical needs because it’s on the decommissioning list. The ship, which entered service in January 1971, needs upgrades to its defensive systems to ensure it remains mission-ready, shipboard officials said.

In comparison, the Navy has extended the service life of Blue Ridge, its oldest operational warship, until 2039.

The ship “is not going to get the real services and help she needs to really stay modern and to be able to keep pace with the threats of the times,” said Lt. Cmdr. Kenyon Cowart, a combat systems maintenance officer.

Even before Mount Whitney’s com-

munications overhaul, analysts and retired Navy officers argued that the ship’s maritime operations center and versatility couldn’t be matched.

A shore-based replacement facility would eliminate the ability to move into international waters if another country, potentially Italy, objected to military decisions within its borders.

The ship traveled about 12 miles offshore in 2011 to support multinational forces during Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya, the precursor to the fall of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi. It deployed to the Black Sea during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and was there again in 2021 amid tensions over Ukraine.

And in the fall of 2023, Mount Whitney was stationed in the eastern Mediterranean Sea for about six weeks as the U.S. worked to keep conflict in the Middle East from spreading after Hamas’ attack on Israel.

“We can go to where the fight is or where we’re going to be used most effectively to provide (a commander) the most situational awareness,” said Capt. Colin Price, commanding officer of Mount Whitney.

The vessel’s crew of about 300 Navy sailors and civilian mariners can support at least 200 more personnel with workspace, accommodations and high-end technology.

That flexibility allows Mount Whitney to take on many different roles in

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MILITARY

DOD gets hypersonic missile defense radar

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

A radar system that can track missiles flying five times the speed of sound has been delivered to the U.S. military, marking a major upgrade to one of its most essential missile defense systems.

The new version of the AN/TPY-2 radar comes with a complete gallium nitride-populated array, allowing it to track smaller objects at greater distances, manufacturer Raytheon said in a statement announcing the handover of the first system to the Missile Defense Agency.

It's the most advanced version of AN/TPY-2 that the company has built, said Sam Deneke, Raytheon's president of air and space defense systems.

The agency first awarded Raytheon a \$14.9 million contract in 2016 to incorporate gallium into the radar system. In 2020, the company received a \$2.3 billion contract for seven gallium nitride-based radars as part of a foreign military sale to Saudi Arabia.

The radar system has long been the primary tracking device for Terminal



Raytheon

Raytheon delivered a new radar to the Missile Defense Agency recently, the company said in a statement.

High Altitude Area Defense systems, or THAADs, which are deployed in several other countries, including Israel.

Both Russia and China have highly advanced hypersonic missile arsenals, and Iran claims to have developed similar capabilities.

In March, a think tank report said the U.S. must make development of hardware to counter hypersonic missiles a national priority to alleviate what it called an “unacceptable

asymmetry.”

“Russia has developed and deployed a nuclear-armed hypersonic weapon that holds the U.S. mainland at risk from a highly survivable nuclear first strike,” Atlantic Council report author Michael E. White said.

The same month the report was issued, the Missile Defense Agency and the Navy conducted a successful hypersonic missile defense test near Hawaii, tracking a simulated projectile from the USS Pinckney.

Protecting against hypersonic missiles has been a key point of discussion in President Donald Trump's initiative to install a defense system known as the “Golden Dome” over the continental U.S.

The missiles can fly at speeds of Mach 5 or faster and are harder to detect than traditional ballistic missiles because of their low flight paths and ability to maneuver.

In recent years, the defense industry has turned to gallium-based semiconductors to develop advanced radar to track the high-speed projectiles.

The Missile Defense Agency has also been using gallium nitride as part of its effort to modernize radar capabilities in the Patriot defense system.

This is the 13th AN/TPY-2 radar the company has delivered, though it's unclear when the other 12 will receive upgrades.

The agency's 2025 budget called for an additional \$29 million to support replacement of the outdated radars with the gallium nitride versions.

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Hosting visitors gives vessel reputation as ‘party ship’

FROM PAGE 3

the 6th Fleet area of responsibility, which stretches from the Arctic to Antarctica, Price said.

Blue Ridge, which functions as the maritime operations center for 7th Fleet both ashore and at sea, doesn't have the same ability, officials said.

“There is no other ship in the world that can do that like we can,” Price said.

Little more than a day after hosting African military officials and dignitaries in Praia, Cape Verde, last month, Mount Whitney was scheduled to make a port call in the West African country of Mauritania.

But the visit in Nouakchott didn't go as planned.

There weren't enough tugboats available to tow the 634-foot-long vessel into port, and sea conditions made it unsafe to ferry visitors to the ship. Anchoring wasn't a possibility.

Instead, Price and a delegation flew ashore by helicopter for a visit. Maur-

itania's chief of naval operations and other leaders later flew out to the ship.

On-the-fly adaptation is routine, officials said, as Mount Whitney sustains military relationships in countries with limited port infrastructure.

The vessel's frequent role in hosting foreign VIPs has earned it a reputation as a sort of “party ship,” complete with good food, music and fun.

But that perception underestimates the importance of naval diplomacy in regions of the world where the U.S. is challenged to build and sustain relationships, officials said.

The military has long been part of a multipronged strategy to gain U.S. influence in Africa, a role likely to grow with the shuttering of most U.S. Agency for International Development functions, looming State Department cuts and freezes on foreign aid.

The ship's presence in Mauritania helped foster the U.S. security relationship with the country, which sits at the nexus of the Maghreb and sub-Saharan



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

Capt. Colin Price, commanding officer of USS Mount Whitney, middle right, gives officials from Mauritania a tour of the ship on May 8.

Africa. The region is impacted by violent extremist groups, notably in neighboring Mali, according to the State Department.

The U.S. also wants to grow its eco-

nomic ties by encouraging American businesses to invest in the region, said John Ice, charge d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Mauritania. He said cooperative military and economic efforts each contribute to security goals.

Since January, Mount Whitney has made port calls in Cyprus, Tunisia, Libya and Cape Verde. Its recent visits to the Libyan cities of Tripoli and Benghazi, the first by a Navy ship to the country in 56 years, sent a clear message that the U.S. remains engaged in North Africa, analysts said.

The ship can throw a party for dignitaries as well as offer space for high-level discussions around the world while staying focused on operations. And that makes Mount Whitney indispensable, said Ensign Joshua Coatney, an electronics material officer.

“It just all comes together,” Coatney said.

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MILITARY

'We delivered'

USS Truman returns home after a trying deployment filled with conflict, mishaps

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

NORFOLK, Va. — “The ship is coming!” a disembodied voice shouted from a cheering crowd as the USS Harry S. Truman approached the pier.

Thousands of flag-waving, sign-carrying loved ones welcomed the aircraft carrier and its sailors home recently following a brutal eight-month deployment that was marred by conflict and mishaps.

A banner of the combat action ribbon was stretched across the island of the carrier, and on the right side of the ship's flank, large gashes jutted out from a collision — both evidence of what the Truman and its crew had been through.

“These sailors stepped up day in and day out. They did not cower. They did not fall back. They just kept fighting and fighting,” said Capt. Christopher Hill, the commanding officer of the Truman.

The Truman conducted 50 days of continuous strikes, including the launch of Tomahawk land attack missiles and precision airstrikes, meant to degrade Houthi capabilities and disrupt threats to commercial shipping. All in all, Hill said the Truman fired more than 1.1 million pounds of ordnance against enemy targets. Of that, 125,000 pounds were launched against Islamic State terrorists in northeast Somalia in what the Navy has called the largest airstrike in history launched from an aircraft carrier.

“We didn't just deploy. We delivered,” said Rear Adm. Sean Bailey, commander of the strike group. “We were ready to confront any adversary with top-notch warfighting lethality and readiness, and I could not be more proud of what we achieved.”

While leadership characterized the Truman's deployment based on its successes, the strike group was also plagued with mishaps, including the loss of three fighter jets that cost about \$67 million each. The carrier also collided with a cargo ship, and the commanding officer was fired. Leadership declined to discuss the costly incidents, citing ongoing investigations.

“The main takeaway is: We learn lessons. We are a learning organization, not only within the strike group, but within the Navy writ large,” Bailey said.



PHOTOS BY CAITLYN BURCHETT/Stars and Stripes

Jordan Wallace greeted her husband and sailor with a kiss, while cradling the couple's 3½-month-old daughter, Maren. The USS Harry S. Truman returned to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., from an eight-month deployment.

“Everything we did — the unique set of circumstances in the environment — helps inform the future. It will help empower our successes, not only in similar operations, but certainly in the future fight.”

After the Truman was moored, sailors flocked to the right side of the flight deck in hopes of spotting their loved ones. Some sailors, donning their dress whites, jumped and waved at the cheering crowds on the pier.

On the pier, Brian Walker intently looked up at the flight deck — he clenched a bouquet of pink roses for Candice Walker, his wife and an administrative officer on the Truman. His daughter, 11-year-old Brianna, toted a homemade sign. This was the family's third deployment, but it was by far the longest and most difficult, Walker said.

“I just want to hold her, kiss her,” Walker said, tears welling up in his eyes. “It has been so long.”

The twice-extended deployment separated the sailors from their loved ones for 251 days. They spent birthdays, holidays and major milestones apart.



Gashes in the right side of the Truman's flank were visible. The damage occurred when the carrier collided with a cargo ship in February.

Around noon, thousands of sailors began spilling out. Loved ones erupted with cheers, laughter and tears — running to embrace their sailors. The wait was over.

Thomas Whiteley, 10, bounced with excitement while waiting for his father, Jacob Whiteley.

“Finally, my dad is home, and we can be happy,” Thomas said.

The homecoming concludes 24,000 nautical miles sailed across Europe and

the Middle East. Components of the Truman strike group were welcomed in the days prior to homeports and bases across the East Coast. The last to return, cruiser USS Gettysburg, will be welcomed home to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., in the coming days.

The Truman was also supported by destroyer USS Stout, homeported at Norfolk, and destroyer USS Jason Dunham, homeported at Naval Station Mayport, Fla. A nine-squadron air wing with around 80 aircraft deployed aboard the ships.

In total, the Truman launched more than 13,000 aircraft from its flight deck, which logged around 25,000 flight hours. Components of the strike group also made port calls to Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, Spain, France, Croatia and Greece while deployed.

“The warrior ethos demonstrated by the U.S. Navy sailors in the Red Sea will not be forgotten by me or anybody else who witnessed it firsthand,” Hill said. “Absolutely eye-watering.”

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MILITARY



DARIEN WRIGHT/U.S. Marine Corps

Sgt. Maj. Jody Armentrout at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

Marine subdues man trying to open jet door

BY SETH ROBSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — A Japanese airline has thanked a U.S. Marine for subduing a disruptive passenger who allegedly attempted to open an exit door during a recent flight from Tokyo to Houston.

Sgt. Maj. Jody Armentrout, the senior enlisted adviser at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni south of Hiroshima, intervened during the incident on All Nippon Airways Flight 114.

The flight departed Tokyo's Haneda Airport around 10:49 a.m. on May 24. A passenger "tried to open a door while in flight and another passenger apprehended the person," an ANA spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes by phone. Some Japanese officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

The Marine's actions were detailed in an interview with NBC News a day later.

Armentrout said he grew suspicious after observing a passenger with a backpack enter and exit multiple restrooms.

"He came out of that one and began pacing up and down the aisle, so that just threw my radar on," he told the network.

When the man began staring at an exit door, Armentrout said he got up and stood in his path.

The man then ran through the galley toward a different exit on the other side

of the aircraft.

"He grabbed a strap around the door, pulled it off, and about that time is when I took him off and slammed him, put him on the ground," Armentrout said in the report. "And then there was an older gentleman sitting on that side that woke up, and he got up and kind of helped me."

Flight attendants provided zip ties that Armentrout used to restrain the man in a seat, he said.

"His eyes — you could definitely tell there was something going on," he told NBC.

The flight was diverted to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, where it landed at 4:35 a.m. that day.

No injuries were reported, and the unruly passenger was handed over to local authorities, the airline said.

The plane later continued to George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, arriving at 12:55 p.m., approximately four hours behind schedule.

"We would like to express our gratitude to the person, who cooperated on the airplane," the ANA spokeswoman said. "Safety of customers and staff is our highest priority."

Marine Corps officials in Japan did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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Report says NATO airpower likely to overwhelm Russia

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — The U.S. and its NATO allies in Europe would dominate the airspace in a potential conflict with Russia and enjoy a decisive battlefield advantage, a new Air Force-commissioned report says.

A future fight between NATO and Russia would diverge from the ongoing war in Ukraine in several ways, the Rand Corp. said in the report requested by U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa.

"First, and perhaps most importantly, NATO air dominance would probably upset the stagnation that defines current ground operations" in the Russia-Ukraine war, the report states.

Over the past three years, U.S. forces have drawn numerous lessons from the Ukraine fighting. Some of the biggest have to do with whether allies have fallen behind in incorporating small drones and electronic warfare techniques, which have defined the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Other vulnerabilities center on the inability of the West's defense industrial base to keep up with Russia to churn out large amounts of ammunition. However, NATO has big advantages over Russia in combat power, Rand said.

Attacking Russian ground forces would likely achieve initial gains before NATO could mobilize a counterattack, but the alliance would "dominate the skies over Eastern Europe," the report said.

Neutralizing Russia's air defenses also would enable NATO surveillance aircraft to spot enemy weak points and troop movements "while attack jets relentlessly bombard command posts, logistical nodes, and maneuver formations," it said.

The Rand war game scenario involved a Russian attack on a NATO

country and a claim to some of its territory. The fighting then quickly escalates, with American and allied forces launching an attack to reclaim the territory.

"A true conflict of this intensity could plausibly escalate into a nuclear war, especially if Russian forces suffer unsustainable losses or NATO actions threaten the integrity of the Russian state," the report said.

The study put aside the nuclear wild card to examine how a conventional fight would unfold.

The findings come at a time of heightened focus about NATO's preparedness for a potential conflict with Russia. Allied officials have warned that the Kremlin could be able to attack a NATO state within the next five years.

The situation has prompted members to ramp up defense spending and try to energize their industrial base to keep pace with Russia, which can churn out about three to four times as much ammunition as all of NATO combined on an annual basis, according to alliance officials.

Such concerns among allies are well-founded, according to Rand, which recommended the Pentagon identify priority munitions systems for rapid production in the event of conflict with Russia.

Accelerating investments in drones and counter-drone technology also is critical, the report said. Still, air control and aerial-delivered firepower "are the keys to unlocking ground maneuver on today's transparent battlefield," the report said.

"NATO's potential for successful offensive operations in a war with Russia appears much greater than (that) of Russia or Ukraine in the present conflict," it concluded.

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MILITARY

DOD to slash budget for troop moves

Action may reduce frequency of relocation

By MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has announced defense officials are developing proposals that cut permanent change of station budgets in half by fiscal 2030, while also reducing the frequency of personnel moves.

The Defense Department spends about \$5 billion to move military personnel and their families between assignments, with moves typically occurring every two to four years.

“While these permanent change of station moves support mission requirements, the frequency can reduce quality of life for service members and their families, harm spousal employment, and disrupt functional communities, unit cohesion and long-term talent management,” Jules Hurst, who is performing the duties of the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, wrote in a memo.

The memo calls for the development of a plan to reduce PCS “discretionary move” budgets. This includes operational travel in the United States, rotational travel overseas and training travel by 10% in fiscal 2027, 30% by 2028, 40% by 2029 and 50% by 2030.

The memo also addresses proposed modifications to the career development models for officers and noncom-

missioned officers to prioritize geographic stability and permit some officers and NCOs to specialize in place of gaining generalized experience across a range of functions.

The service branches are to provide information and implementation plans no later than 120 days from the date of the memo, Hurst wrote.

“It’s clear that it’s time for the department to look at reducing the frequency of those moves, especially if we want to maintain the momentum that we have today, both in recruiting and the retention of our service members,” Tim Dill, the acting deputy undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, told reporters recently.

Some moves occur because a service member needs certain accreditation or additional training requirements for career advancement, and some moves considered discretionary, Dill added. The Pentagon estimates about 80% of the department’s PCS moves are in the discretionary category, and 20% are mandatory.

“What we are directing the [services] to do is purely to examine potential reductions in things that would be defined as discretionary,” he said. “So, if they see that as mandatory for mission need, we’re not even asking them to come back with a plan to reduce it. We



ETHAN STEINQUEST/Fort Campbell Public Affairs Office

Workers conduct a delivery for a military personnel move in May 2022 at Fort Campbell, Ky.

want them to continue that course of action and do the mandatory moves.”

The announcement comes after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the formation of a Pentagon task force to improve the workflow behind permanent change of station moves under the Global Household Goods Contract, or GHC.

Moves under the contract began with a slow rollout more than a year ago but

ramped up in earnest this year.

GHC was created because of service member complaints over the performance of the legacy system. But GHC has been plagued by late pickups and deliveries, and several U.S. senators commenced inquiries in the spring into its shortcomings.

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IG: Tricare might be overpaying for medical procedures

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

Inconsistencies between states could have cost U.S. taxpayers and Tricare beneficiaries millions of dollars in excessive payments for some medical procedures and devices, a watchdog report has found.

The cost of certain medical procedures and devices varied from state to state, according to a Pentagon inspector general audit published May 1.

That probe found Tricare — the military’s Defense Health Agency-run medical insurance provider that covers some 9.5 million troops, veterans and their family members — paid out thousands of dollars more for similar proce-

dures and medical devices in some states versus others.

The report found inconsistent DHA policies governing the amount of money that Tricare pays for medical care across the U.S.

In one instance, the IG found Tricare was paying some \$11,500 for custom sleep apnea mouthguards in Illinois that were costing it about \$3,000 in neighboring Iowa.

The payment discrepancy came about because Tricare, which is split into two regions in the U.S. with Illinois in its east section and Iowa in its west, uses contractors to establish a basic pay rate, known as a prevailing rate, for standard procedures and devices based on the

amounts that providers in those states had charged Tricare for those offerings in the past.

The state’s prevailing rate is then set at the 80th percentile of all those charges.

The IG found there were no efforts to ensure payment rates were more consistent from one state to another.

The auditors recommended that the Defense Health Agency officials reevaluate its payment methodology and ensure payment rates are not based on fraudulent or unreasonable rates charged in the past.

“Because the DHA did not determine that the state prevailing rates were reasonable, the [Defense Department] is at

risk of wasteful spending and increasing DOD beneficiaries’ risk of unreasonable cost-shares for health care services and items that are paid with state prevailing rates,” the report states.

The probe also found Tricare might have been overpaying for some more rare procedures that do not have a set reimbursement rate.

In fiscal 2023, Tricare paid some \$183.3 million for 184 of those “miscellaneous procedure costs.”

The IG report said Defense Health Agency officials agreed with their findings and committed to implementing their recommendations.

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MILITARY

Air Force to build training center in Alaska

Facility will focus on preparation to react to threats from Russia, China

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Work will start this summer on a Pentagon “mega-project” in Alaska intended to boost the Air Force’s training capability to defend North America.

The 150,000-square-foot Joint Integrated Test and Training Center will contain 426 computer servers kept running by a 15 million megavolt-ampere electric substation. The project is slated to be completed in 2029 at a cost of up to \$500 million.

John Budnik, spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the center will allow trainers to sync personnel on the ground with pilots in the air.

“It’s the only place in the Indo-Pacific Command that can host multi-domain simulators for joint and coalition fighters, including F-35s, F-22s, F-15s, F-18s, next-generation fighters, bombers, command and control platforms, intelligence surveillance, reconnaissance aircraft and long-range weapons fire,” he said.

Thareth Casey, the program manager for the Army Corps of Engineers, said the training center is being designed so simulations can be adapted to



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

A designer’s concept of the Joint Integrated Test and Training Center to be built at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska.

include weapons and aircraft from other U.S. military branches, as well as NATO allies Canada, Finland, Sweden and others.

Air Force Col. Lisa Mabbutt, commander of the 673d Air Base Wing at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, the future home of the facility, said the location underlines the importance of Alaska and the Arctic to the U.S.

“It demonstrates a commitment to Alaska as both a key power-projection platform and one of our nation’s leading edges of homeland defense,” Mabbutt said.

While the long, warmer days of summer have allowed military and commercial ships to take advantage of new sea lanes, the training center has to be

built to withstand the seasonal flipside: winter, with its minus-20 temperatures and days where sunset comes a little over five hours after sunrise.

Casey, the project manager, said construction less than 2,000 miles from the North Pole has its challenges.

To keep the elements outside from impacting the work inside, the center will be built with a reinforced concrete foundation, steel-frame-insulated wall panels covered in masonry and a steel-reinforced metal roof.

Construction will accelerate during the long, warmer summer days when the sun can be out for 20 hours. It will slow down during the cold, dark winters.

“It’s a one-of-a-kind project,” Casey said. “We’re constrained by the seasons but with planning, we expect to complete work by the fall of 2029.”

Despite a steady stream of reports about Russian and Chinese joint sea and air operations in the region, the U.S. commands that will be the primary users of the training center declined to specify which nations the training will focus on as possible aggressors.

A query to the 11th Air Force in Alaska was passed to Air Force headquarters at the Pentagon, which passed it to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii — which then passed it back to the 11th Air Force.

But political and military officials have made it clear in earlier state-

ments that the focus will be on training to react to potential threats from Russia and China.

Former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and top officers such as Air Force Gen. Anthony J. Cotton, head of Strategic Command, helped popularize the term “near-peer adversary,” a nation with a large military force approaching — it not reaching — equivalence with the United States.

The term was most frequently used as a shorthand to describe Russia.

The other term often used is “pacing challenge” — a country that is building up its military at a rapid rate. A 2023 Pentagon statement said the planned training center at Elmendorf-Richardson would allow “our warfighters to train against our pacing challenge in realistic threat scenarios.”

“China is the only country that can pose a systemic challenge to the United States in the sense of challenging us, economically, technologically, politically and militarily,” Colin Kahl, the assistant secretary of defense for policy, said in 2023.

Kahl said being a pacing challenge didn’t mean the U.S. had to go to war with China.

“It does mean that we will have a more competitive and, at times, ... adversarial relationship with Beijing,” he said.

Russia’s northern border is adjacent to the Arctic Ocean. From czars to Stalin to Putin, it has operated in the region for centuries.

China is a relative newcomer. Though 900 miles from the Arctic Circle, China in 2018 officially declared itself an “near-Arctic state” intent on becoming a “great polar power” by 2030.

In October 2024, a U.S. Coast Guard HC-130J long-range surveillance plane spotted Russian and Chinese ships operating together near the Bering Strait, the sea passage between Alaska and Russia that is just 55 miles wide at its closest point.

Last year, American and Canadian fighters were scrambled to intercept Russian and Chinese long-range reconnaissance aircraft flying near the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone, a U.S.-designated 150-mile buffer zone from U.S. territory.

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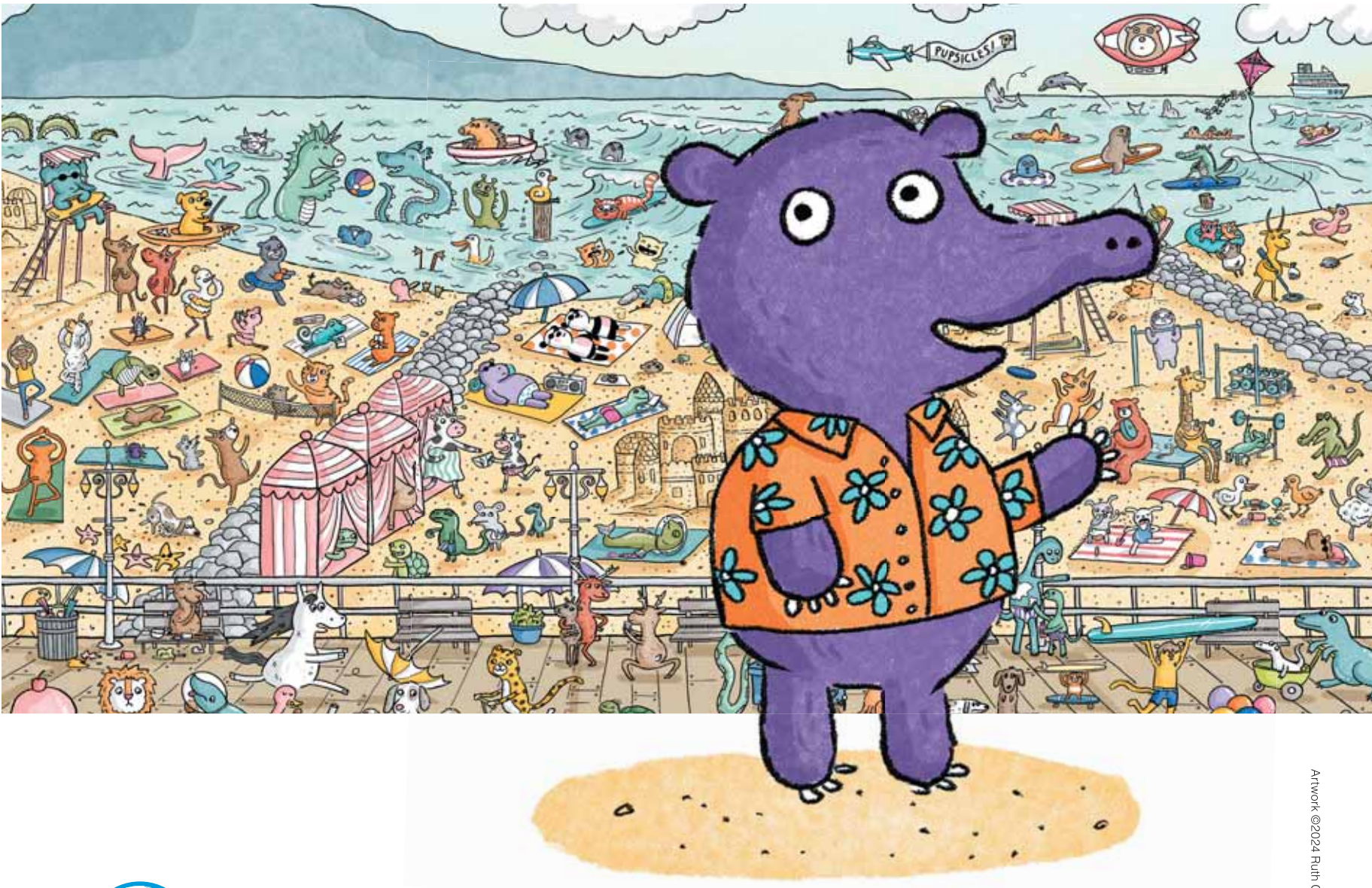


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