

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Volume 17 Edition 13

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**U.S. EDITION**

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FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2025



## Frigid fight

Division based in Alaska trains for Arctic warfare in Finland **Page 2**

U.S. soldiers with the 11th Airborne Division participate in the Arctic Forge exercise in Sodankylä, Finland.

PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes



## COVER STORY

# Soldiers face extreme cold, Finland's best

## Troops learn about obstacles they may face in Arctic fight

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

SODANKYLÄ, Finland — Army 2nd Lt. Emily Rief, concealed by a whitened camouflage tent and the cover of a nondescript patch of pine forest blanketed by powdery snow, tracked enemy movements with cutting-edge technology.

She also had an analog board that would have looked familiar in the mid-20th century, because technology sometimes fails when the thermometer reading plummets below -20 F.

In a part of northern Finland that even hardy Finns find austere, U.S. soldiers are learning quickly about the obstacles they may face if conflict erupts in a region where military and economic competition is rapidly increasing. Sometimes, the simplest solutions are the best.

“U.S. forces, we got some really awesome equipment that enables us to maybe go further in some ways than the Finns,” Rief said. “But they have history in the Arctic to make them better.”

Soldiers with the Alaska-based 11th Airborne Division had been training here in Lapland — about 100 miles from the Russian border — for a little over a week in a first-of-its-kind exercise for the unit that American and Finnish military officials are calling a success.

It's the latest in a surge of activity by U.S. personnel in the Arctic in recent years, following Russia's military expansion and China's aspirations to grow its influence in higher latitudes.

The Arctic Forge exercise reflects the Army's role in ensuring that the U.S. and its allies maintain a favorable balance of power in the region, which is undergoing rapid change due to melting sea ice, even though other branches of the military are often more associated with Arctic operations aimed at protecting the U.S. homeland.

“The land component is where the people are. That's the area we need to influence,” Lt. Col. Dan Ludwig, a



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

**Soldiers with the 11th Airborne Division shoot a mock machine gun during the Arctic Forge military exercise in Sodankylä, Finland, on Feb. 27. The exercise tested the unit's ability to deploy to Finland rapidly to help stave off an enemy invasion.**



**A group of 11th Airborne Division soldiers convenes outside their main command post during the Arctic Forge military exercise in Sodankylä.**

squadron commander with the 11th Airborne Division's 1st Brigade, told a small group of journalists during a mock land battle involving U.S., Finnish and Canadian soldiers. “And it is gaining prominence.”

Ludwig cut questions short after enemy troops, played by Finland's Jaeger Brigade, attacked his mobile command post, forcing him to rush back to the fight.

The three-day battle was the highlight of Finland's portion of Arctic Forge. The exercise was designed as if enemy forces had invaded Finland, a new NATO member, which in turn

called on the U.S. for urgent support.

Upon receiving the call, a company of New York-based soldiers with the 10th Mountain Division and a platoon of Canadian infantry flew to Fort Wainwright, Alaska, to form a task force with an 11th Airborne Division company.

After training together for several days — including sleeping outside in bone-chilling weather, ski practice and shooting in the snow — the task force flew in C-17 cargo planes with their equipment over the North Pole to Finland.

Soon after, they hit the ground — or

rather, sank their boots into it. Finns here say the snow is unusually wet for this time of year.

The soldiers had just a few extra days of training before going into battle.

“This exercise has shown that if we needed to deploy tomorrow to this type of environment, we're more than capable of winning here,” said Canadian Brig. Gen. Robert McBride, who serves as deputy commanding general of operations for the 11th Airborne Division.

While Arctic defense was a priority during the Cold War, attention waned as counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East took precedence. Now, as the U.S. prepares for near-peer conflict, it is again looking north.

The Arctic is warming significantly faster than the global average, according to scientific studies, resulting in ice melt that is expected to open access to natural resources and new shipping lanes.

Russia and China are poised to take advantage of those opportunities, analysts say.

A 2023 study by the Rand Corp. warned that the U.S. faces significant capacity gaps in the Arctic, including limited icebreakers, inadequate communications and insufficient troops

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## COVER STORY

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trained for extreme cold-weather operations.

One reason the 11th Airborne Division was established in 2022 was to develop more Arctic-ready troops. Soldiers assigned to the unit typically spend three years training in Alaska, gaining area-specific expertise that could be shared within the force.

Exercises like Arctic Forge build skills and act as a deterrent, said Dan Hamilton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

“And if deterrence fails and conflict is to happen, better for it to happen ‘there’ rather than ‘here,’” Hamilton said.

The Arctic was a focal point for potential missile and air attacks during the Cold War, as it is the shortest route between Russia and North America. The Air Force and, more recently, the Space Force monitor Arctic airspace for threats, while the Navy and Coast Guard patrol the waters.

“No one expects that we’re going to be fighting (enemy ground forces) in Alaska anytime soon,” McBride said when asked how the Army’s Arctic

efforts protect the United States.

“But there is a real possibility we could come over here to northern Europe to fight,” he added, emphasizing the importance of collective defense training with allies.

Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the third anniversary of which coincided with Arctic Forge, prompted historically neutral Finland and Sweden to join NATO.

While this strengthens Arctic cooperation among allies, it also means there is far more Arctic territory to defend.

Finland shares an over 800-mile border with Russia.

“At the moment in Finland, we feel that we are somehow like a front-line country,” Col. Ari Mure, deputy commander of Finland’s Jaeger Brigade, said recently at the Sodankylä training area, which is about 600 miles north of Helsinki.

“It’s no secret that we’re thinking if we someday have an enemy, it will be Russia,” Mure added. “And it’s very close to here.”

Mure said he was impressed by how the U.S. troops performed during the



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

**The Alaska-based 11th Airborne Division is the Army’s only division specifically focused on Arctic and cold-weather operations.**

exercise, in which the invading team, played by the Finns, used tanks and various simulated weapons systems.

The North American forces called in simulated long-range fire support from a U.S. unit stationed in Norway, some 200 miles away.

That unit, the 41st Field Artillery Brigade, is becoming a regular presence in the High North, having trained in Finland in May and November 2023.

Soldiers with the Virginia National

Guard, which paired with Finland last year under the U.S. State Partnership Program, were also in southern Finland conducting engineer training as part of Arctic Forge.

Mure said the demand for foreign troops to train in Finland’s Arctic region has surged in recent years.

“We can’t take all who want to come here now,” he said.

But of all the recent exercises, Mure said Arctic Forge was particularly important, as it tested for the first time the ability of U.S. Arctic forces to rapidly deploy to Finland in case of an attack.

“I feel this has been the best show of capability of U.S. troops that I’ve seen here in these conditions,” Mure said.

Finnish soldier Santeri Koivula agreed. His rank, also called jaeger, is the Finnish equivalent of a U.S. Army private.

“I thought it would be easier to beat them because this is our environment,” Koivula said. “But it’s actually been quite balanced.”

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## MILITARY

# Leaders: Foes becoming more tech savvy

## Special ops commanders say advantage once held by US troops is slipping away

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The commanders of special operations forces told lawmakers recently that they were worried about the speed of technological advancement among adversaries and feared the U.S. was not keeping up.

The advantage that the U.S. had for decades in being able to “sense the enemy before they sense us” has eroded with the proliferation of modern technologies among great powers and terrorist and criminal groups, said Maj. Gen. Peter Huntley, who leads the Marine Forces Special Operations Command.

“They’re moving fast in terms of upgrading. We need to be able to move just as fast,” he said in testimony to a House Armed Services Committee subpanel. “That’s our main challenge going forward.”

Huntley said he was “greatly” concerned about the ability of Special Forces to keep pace with modernization and rapidly evolving technology such as artificial intelligence. Non-state actors, such as the Islamist militant

group al-Shabab and drug cartels in South America, are evolving quickly, he said.

“What they bring to the tactical fight is, frankly, pretty impressive,” Huntley said.

Lt. Gen. Jonathan Braga, commander of Army Special Operations Command, said his forces struggle with rapid innovation due to lengthy bureaucratic processes that can make the simple modification of commercial off-the-shelf drones take months or years.

Lt. Gen. Michael Conley, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, said modifications to his aircraft fleet also take too long. By the time an aircraft fleet is updated to modern needs, the technology is already irrelevant, he said.

“It’s this constant loop of trying to catch up with the enemy threat,” Conley said.

To make up for the gap, Air Force Special Forces have been “training our way out of it” by developing new tactics and procedures, he said.

“But that’s only a small piece of what we really need as far as advanced mod-



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Army Lt. Gen. Jonathan Braga, left, talks with Air Force Lt. Gen. Michael Conley before a recent House Armed Services Committee hearing in Washington.**

ifications,” Conley said.

Rear Adm. Milton Sands III, commander of Naval Special Warfare Command, said the challenge and priority for his command is rapidly getting equipment required for the modern battlefield into the hands of service members.

Braga suggested that could be achieved through better streamlining of innovation, funding and oversight processes. Huntley said Special Forces must move quickly to remove barriers

to modernization as technology continues to transform warfare.

“That’s just kind of where the tactical world is right now and that’s where it’s going,” he said. “We can identify that, we know what we have to do, but to be able to get those capabilities into the hands of our operators, or our small tactical units, I would describe as critical.”

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## SEALs launch raids in drill with NATO special operators

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Navy SEALs and combat crewmen launched small raiding crafts from a high-speed patrol boat off the Lithuanian coastline in a show of force aimed at “reestablishing deterrence” in the Baltic region, the Navy said.

The SEALs, along with German and Lithuanian special operators, carried out a range of maritime maneuvers and combat tactics at sea over a two-week span.

“Exercises like this are crucial to ensuring we can operate seamlessly together to fight and win wars,” Capt. V. Scott King, commander of Naval Special Warfare Group 2, said in a statement.

The exercises were conducted around Klaipeda, a seaside Lithuanian city about 50 miles from the Russian



WILLIAM CARLISLE/U.S. Navy

**U.S. Naval Special Warfare combat crewmen conduct maritime training with Lithuanian and German special operations forces off Lithuania.**

military enclave of Kaliningrad.

The Baltic Sea region has emerged as a potential flashpoint with Russia. In recent months, a series of suspected sabotage incidents targeted critical undersea infrastructure, including communications cables.

In January, NATO responded with a new surveillance mission in the

region focused on tracking down potential saboteurs. Some 40 U.S. Marines have deployed to Finland to assist in that campaign.

Meanwhile, U.S. special operators have forged closer partnerships with their counterparts in the Baltics.

Advanced marksmanship and close-quarters combat techniques were

among the tactics rehearsed. The special operators also fine-tuned their ability to launch small raiding craft from the well decks of the Combatant Craft Medium, a versatile patrol vessel that plays a key role in SEAL missions.

The event culminated with a scenario that showcased the troops’ preparedness to carry out combat operations in the maritime realm, the SEALs said. The Navy did not elaborate on the details of the scenario.

“This training showcases U.S. forces’ lethality as well as re-establishes the U.S. military as a formidable deterrent to those who may try to test America’s military capabilities,” the statement said.

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## MILITARY

# Marines seeking Baltic Sea saboteurs

## Corps joins effort after cable incidents

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — A contingent of U.S. Marines has deployed to coastal Finland to assist a NATO operation aimed at tracking down potential saboteurs in the Baltic Sea.

About 40 Marines carrying small drones and other surveillance equipment are boosting observation efforts, the Stuttgart-based Marine Forces Europe and Africa said in a statement.

“The Marine Corps’ ability to be an expeditionary and agile force, with expertise in littoral environments, makes us a logical partner for this type of enhanced vigilance activity,” the Marines said recently.

The 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion team, which deployed from Camp Lejeune, N.C., is operating alongside a Finnish brigade, the Corps said.

In January, NATO launched the Baltic Sentry mission, which was prompted by a series of suspected sabotage incidents that resulted in damage to undersea energy and communication cables.

The alliance-led effort incorporates naval surveillance drones, warships, submarines and aircraft to identify and track ships.

A so-called shadow fleet of Russian ships, made up of old oil tankers with opaque ownership to circumvent in-



BRIAN BOLIN JR./U.S. Marine Corps

**Petty Officer 1st Class Kepono Gowan, a special operations independent duty Navy corpsman with 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, launches an RQ-20 Puma aerial drone during Operation Baltic Sentry in southern Finland.**

ternational sanctions, is suspected of causing at least some of the damage.

Cables that have been sabotaged in recent months include lines connecting Estonia and Finland, Lithuania and Sweden, and Germany and Finland.

Undersea vulnerabilities have been a long-standing concern for the U.S. military and NATO. Submerged cables secure 95% of global internet traffic and enable an estimated \$10 trillion worth of financial transactions daily,

according to NATO.

Investigations into the Baltic Sea incidents are underway.

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# Marine Corps revises reenlistments for senior NCOs

By LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Senior enlisted Marines will soon be able to apply for reenlistments that extend their service to the end of their rank’s time limitations, eliminating the need for periodic extensions.

The Enlisted Career Designation Program for career Marines will begin accepting applications on June 1.

Though it’s currently designated as a pilot program, it appears to be structured as a permanent change.

Under the new policy, master sergeants and first sergeants may serve

up to 27 years on active duty, while master gunnery sergeants and sergeants major may remain on active duty for 30 years, without having to ask for periodic extensions.

To be eligible, Marines in those ranks must have at least 15 years of service or have spent at least two years in their current grade, with a contract set to expire before Sept. 30, 2026, according to an administrative message issued recently.

“The program offers career Marines a more streamlined retention process, reducing uncertainty and adminis-

trative burdens by allowing them to voluntarily commit to long-term service,” Sgt. Maj. of the Marine Corps Carlos Ruiz said in a recent service statement.

All ranks will still be able to request resignation or retirement six to 18 months in advance provided they fulfill their obligated service requirements, the statement said.

Ruiz added that the initiative supports the Marine Corps’ talent management strategy, which prioritizes retaining experienced, highly skilled Marines.

A deadline for the first round of applications has not yet been announced.

Marine Corps Manpower and Reserve Affairs officials did not respond to questions about the duration of the pilot period, the deadlines for applications and any associated incentives to apply.

Other services have implemented similar programs in recent years to eliminate periodic reenlistments.

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## MILITARY

# Spouse firings spur worries about retention

## Unknown number in military families lose their jobs amid cuts in federal workforce

BY LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

Emily Cormier says she'll never forget the moment she got the termination notice.

It was Feb. 13, and she was relaxing with her family in their Virginia home when she received a frantic call from her supervisor, telling her to check her email.

After scrambling to her laptop, she saw a message sent at 7:11 p.m. stating that she had lost her job at the Department of Veterans Affairs as a program assistant.

The email, reviewed by Stars and Stripes, cited her performance as a factor in the firing, though she had only been there for four months and hadn't yet had a review.

Cormier said she went numb. Her husband, an active-duty service member, was awaiting permanent change of station orders. They were months away from moving their family, including two young children, to a new town.

Cormier counted on her entry into the federal employment system to ease that transition.

Instead, the job that helped them afford car payments and day care — the job that she had hoped would provide stability amid the constant change of military life — was gone.

"I'd always viewed the federal government as 'this is where I needed to be,'" she said in an online interview. "That's changed now."

Cormier is among an unknown number of military spouses who have lost their jobs as part of reductions in the federal workforce. The cuts have dealt financial blows to the affected military spouses and their families, who often struggle to find the work they say is necessary to supplement service members' income.

The loss is likely to cause stress and hardship on members of the military, experts and advocates say, impacting readiness and, potentially, hurting

retention numbers.

"When you don't have stable home situations and you're worrying about your spouse, you're worrying about spouse employment, you're worrying about income ... it impacts readiness, it impacts stability," said retired Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly, chief executive officer of the Military Officers Association of America. "The calculus for military service is: when the hardships and the difficulties outweigh the benefits, then retention suffers."

Job hunting is a chronic issue for military spouses, who face unemployment rates far higher than the general public — about 20% compared to the current national average of 4%. Last year, more than three-quarters of active-duty spouses reported that two incomes were vital for their families' well-being, according to a yearly survey of Blue Star Families, with 54% listing employment as their top concern.

Regular relocation makes it difficult to maintain steady work, particularly in the private sector, spouses say. One in four active-duty families experienced food insecurity in 2023, according to a survey from the Military Family Advisory Network. In some cases, spouses and their families choose to live apart from their service members in order to keep up a second income, a practice known as geo-batching.

Overseas stations present even more challenges, with U.S. and NATO country restrictions blocking spouses from the job market and resulting in thousands of families living abroad on food stamps and low-income assistance.

Federal jobs, when they're available, can provide more stability — allowing husbands and wives to stay at the same agency or department over the course of several moves.

The federal government for years offered a hiring preference for military spouses. In 2018, President Donald Trump signed an executive order seeking to provide greater opportunity for military spouses to be considered for federal competitive service positions.

Kelly, at MOAA, said he understands the goal of making the government more efficient, but said it's inevitable



Facebook

**Military spouses who have been let go from their federal jobs have used a template, located at <https://shorturl.at/G2TQK>, to underscore the impact.**

that the cuts will impact the military.

"You will have readiness immediately suffer because some people who are highly skilled and capable either aren't able to focus on their mission or don't retain," he said.

Emmalee Gruesen, a Virginia-based military spouse, helps run a Facebook group for fellow wives and husbands working in the federal government. She said the group has seen a significant uptick in membership since the second Trump administration started cutting the workforce, and that many military families have been left struggling and seeking support.

"Certainly we are realizing how fragile many people's financial situation is," said Gruesen, who works for the Navy. "It doesn't matter if you're dual income, suddenly you are still paycheck to paycheck. We're hearing from people who are dipping into savings because, not knowing what will happen, they don't want to give up child care spots."

It's unclear exactly how many military spouses have lost their jobs following several executive orders and actions by the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency. In 2021, the Defense Department alone

employed about 46,000 military spouses, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Defense officials said they're planning to cut about 5,400 employees who are still in a probationary period, which is generally those who have been hired within the last one to two years.

That included Erin White, an Air Force veteran who was let go from her job at the Food and Drug Administration.

White, whose husband is also a retired veteran, joined the FDA's communications team after a stint working with the Navy. She had to serve a probationary period upon changing jobs.

On Feb. 15, she received her termination notice. As with other federal employees, the message cited poor work performance as the cause of separation, without offering specifics.



White

"Obviously we're taking a really big hit here," she said. "We're fortunate enough that we can make ends meet, but it's just not going to be comfortable. Hopefully I can find another job before we run out of savings."

There is some hope that the administration will take steps to lessen the blow to military families. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management issued a memo exempting military spouses who had been on remote work contracts from a return-to-office mandate.

Spouses and advocates, meanwhile, have been speaking out about their experiences, taking to social media and contacting members of Congress.

Maria Donnelly, another moderator in the federally employed spouses' Facebook page, said that, for some military families, relying on one income will be too much of a financial burden, and that some may leave the military to seek more flexibility and opportunities in the private sector.

"They are willing to serve," she said. "But if it becomes too expensive or becomes untenable, something's got to give."

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## MILITARY

# Senator troubled by 'failures' after moving overhaul

BY WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Sen. Mark Warner is urging U.S. Transportation Command to take immediate action over "failures" in pick-up and delivery of household goods for hundreds of relocating military families under a sweeping overhaul of how items are shipped and stored.

"As the military community enters the permanent change of station peak season, it is essential that our service members and their families have the logistical support they need to meet the mission," the Virginia Democrat said in the letter to Gen. Randall Reed, who heads the command.

The Defense Department is transferring oversight of the roughly 300,000 annual moves for the military and Coast Guard to HomeSafe Alliance, a joint venture between Tier One Relocation and KBR, formerly Kellogg Brown & Root.

The Transportation Command awarded HomeSafe a \$20 billion contract in late 2021 to implement the Global Household Goods Contract, or GHC.

Under GHC, HomeSafe is replacing about 900 companies that until now managed military moves by contracting with movers and trucking, shipping and warehousing companies.

During a media roundtable in late January, Transportation Command officials said that roughly 1,000 service members had faced late pickups or deliveries of household goods under the ramp-up phase of GHC.

Warner compared the current spate of failures to problems a decade ago when he intervened on behalf of service members experiencing issues with shipping of personally owned vehicles.

"This delay cost military members hundreds of dollars in vehicle rental fees and untold aggravation with an unresponsive contractor, and I was

pleased that USTRANSCOM implemented a plan to address contract performance," Warner wrote.

"I am disappointed to once again find that intervention is necessary to ensure the military community has what they need to focus on their jobs and families," he said.

The Transportation Command is aware of the letter and "greatly appreciates the Senator's concerns regarding the implementation of the Global Household Goods Contract," Scott Ross, a spokesman for the command, said in an email.

"General Reed and U.S. TRANSCOM remain committed to delivering an improved moving experience to our service members and their families and will respond to the questions posed in the letter," Ross said.

In an emailed statement, HomeSafe said that logistical challenges have caused delays for some moves in the "early and developmental stages" of GHC.

"We apologize to every affected family," the email states. "HomeSafe is taking all the lessons learned and continually improving our systems and processes, including enhancing our customer care operations, updating our technology platform, reshaping our training program for service providers, and hiring additional employees."

Warner requested that command officials brief the senator's staffers about the percentage of missed drop off and pick-ups due to capacity issues; options available to service members experiencing delays; assurances made by HomeSafe to build moving-contractor capacity; performance metrics being used to evaluate HomeSafe; and impacts to the command's staffing or budget due to intervention by the Department of Government Efficiency.

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CHRISTY TRABUN/Naval Support Activity Mechanics

**Lt. Cmdr. Lauren Elkins and Command Master Chief Daniel Hemingway high-five preschoolers at a child development center last year.**

## Navy to build, renovate facilities for child care

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Navy plans to update or build child care facilities, such as classrooms and playrooms, to accommodate another 3,000 children in the next five years after years of struggling to meet the needs of military families.

Construction projects are already underway to build new centers or upgrade existing facilities to accommodate 978 additional children at four military bases, including: Naval Base Kitsap, Wash.; Naval Base Point Loma, Calif.; Naval Support Activity Hampton Roads, Va.; and Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, Va.

Another 12 projects are scheduled in the next five years that will make child care available for another 2,000 children. These include four projects in the San Diego area, four projects in Hampton Roads, Va., two at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, one project at Naval Weapons Station China Lake, Calif., and one project supporting the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.

The projects are part of a \$51.7 million investment from the Navy to offer child care services to thousands of military families.

There are about 2,500 children on the service-wide waitlist to enroll in a Navy child development center — down from 5,000 children in 2023. Child development centers are for kids

younger than 5 years old, and school-age care centers are for kids 6 to 12 years old, the service said.

More facilities could become available. The Navy is working to use vacant warehouses, chapels and community centers to meet the demand for child care facilities. Last year, buildings at Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Japan, and Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md., were converted into school-age care facilities.

Improving access to child care for military families requires a multi-pronged approach, according to Maryann Coutino, director of the Navy's Child and Youth Program.

In conjunction with efforts to expand facilities, the Navy is working to address staffing challenges. In recent years, a shortage of child care staff forced the child development centers to operate below capacity. The Navy is offering salary increases, recruitment and retention incentives and professional development opportunities to attract new staff and retain seasoned workers.

Incentives for child care staff include discounts of 100% for their first child and 20% for additional children, while management and support staff enjoy a 50% discount for their first child and 20% for others.

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## MILITARY

# US soldiers test Dronebuster prototype

## Mock gunbattle part of Cobra Gold exercise

BY ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

PHU LAM YAI, Thailand — As U.S. and Thai soldiers engaged in a mock gunbattle recently, a singular warning cut through the chaos: “Drones! It’s a drone swarm!”

About a dozen unmanned aircraft flying in two formations appeared on the horizon, their rotor hum prompting soldiers to shift their focus upward. A fire team of four quickly took positions with one of their newest weapons — the Dronebuster.

The handheld electronic device emits electromagnetic signals designed to disrupt or disable unmanned aerial systems.

During the training, the targeted drones simply reversed course. In a real combat scenario, they would likely fall from the sky, said Capt. Tyler Schultz, an observer coach and trainer with the 196th Infantry Brigade, based at Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

The Dronebuster used in the drill was a prototype developed from an existing system, he told Stars and Stripes.

The swarm attacked twice during the drill, but not all drones were repelled in time; those that made it through resulted in simulated explosions near the troops, all from the 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo.

Drones present multiple challenges



PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

**A fire team from the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division carrying a Dronebuster, center right, holds its position during a recent Cobra Gold drill in Phu Lam Yai, Thailand.**

in warfare, including their high maneuverability and the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe.

“Identification of these drones is a huge challenge, as well as getting that ... Dronebuster operator in the right spot to actually be effective and take a

shot at that drone,” Schultz said.

Addressing those challenges requires repeated training and rehearsals, said Maj. Paul Hanneman, operational planner for the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center, based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

“This is exactly the arena that we train in, so we can fight in a similar arena,” Hanneman said at the exercise. “That’s why we’re over here in Thailand, where it’s hot, it’s remote, it’s rugged.”

Between firefights and drone swarms, soldiers also contended with high humidity and 100-degree temperatures. At least two U.S. troops suffered heat exhaustion or heat stroke.

Drones have played an increasingly pivotal role in conflicts over the past five years, including in Ukraine, the Red Sea and Israel. They represent “an evolving threat” with many variables, Hanneman said.

“It’s one thing to train to counter [drones] in an air-conditioned room



**Thai soldiers listen to a briefing ahead of a mock Cobra Gold battle in Phu Lam Yai.**

with field support techs nearby,” he said. “It’s another thing to do so under sleep deprivation, when there’s language barriers at play and it’s remote.”

Cobra Gold, now in its 44th year, involves approximately 8,000 troops from 30 countries.

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Like your favorite ride share or streaming service, CORT lets you access the furniture you need without owning anything you don't. Allow CORT Furniture Rental to design your space, deliver, set up, and then pick up your furniture at the end of your lease- all starting at \$99/month. We're experts at making military moves easier and helping you travel lighter. Get all the details at [cort.com/stripes](https://cort.com/stripes)





# SERVICE CONNECTED Veteran's Health ID Cards are your passport to Commissary Savings!



SAVE an average of 25% every time you shop!

## Easy steps to shop with us!

- 1 **CHECK YOUR VHIC:** Look at your Veteran Health Identification Card. It should indicate one of the following:
  - Service Connected
  - Medal of Honor
  - Purple Heart
  - Former Prisoner of War (POW)
- 2 **UPDATE YOUR CARD:** If any condition is not met, contact VA Healthcare at 877-222-8387 to request an updated card.
- 3 **GATE ENTRY:** Check the entry requirements with your local installation to ensure a seamless gate entry experience.

**Important:** Make sure the expiration date is current

Learn more at [corp.commissaries.com/extended-eligibility](https://corp.commissaries.com/extended-eligibility)

