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Double duty

Unaccompanied troops
to spend 2 years in
South Korea instead of 1
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Army soldiers cross a floating bridge on the Imjin River during a joint river-crossing as a part of the Freedom Shield military exercise in Yeoncheon, South Korea, in March.

ANN YOUNG-JOON/AP

COVER STORY



AHN YOUNG-JOON/AP

Soldiers from the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team stand by their M1A2 Abrams tanks as they prepare to attend a live-fire drill at Rodriguez Live Fire Complex in Pocheon, South Korea, last year.

DOD doubles length of tours in S. Korea

After Oct. 1, troops unaccompanied by family members will serve 24 months in country

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — U.S. service members ordered to South Korea without their families after Oct. 1 will serve 24 months in the country, double the current tour length, according to U.S. Forces Korea.

The new policy comes five months after the Defense Department extended tour lengths in South Korea to 36 months for service members accompanied by their family members.

Troops now serving in South Korea or receiving their orders prior to the Oct. 1 start date will not be forced to extend their tours, the command said in a news release.

The extended tours are meant to reduce the number of permanent changes of station by U.S. service members. USFK said the change will

improve military families' quality of life and enhance "both readiness and stability" of the U.S. military posture in South Korea.

"Extending unaccompanied tours to 24 months enables service members to build deeper operational expertise, fosters continuity in leadership, and reduces turnover in mission-critical roles," USFK director of personnel Air Force Col. William Parker said in the release. "This change reflects our commitment to both the mission and our people. USFK also recognizes that stability enhances resilience and connection with host communities."

Based on their needs, individual service branches will have some flexibility in implementing the change after Oct. 1, Parker said.

In February, DOD announced similar changes for troops who bring their

families to South Korea.

Under that policy, which also goes into effect Oct. 1, accompanied service members are required to stay in the country for three years, up from two.

Some service members whose requests for accompanied tours are denied due to logistical or medical resources at their new base will serve only one year in South Korea, according to the release.

The changes account for threat conditions on the Korean Peninsula and will not affect the overall number of U.S. troops there, Parker said.

"The policy change has nothing to do with bringing more people here," he said. "Service members want to serve by and with their families."

USFK plans to beef up its infrastructure to accommodate more dependents on its bases, Parker said July 3. Al-

though these billets are "at or near capacity," the command will be "increasing capacity to support accompanied tours rather significantly" going forward, he added.

At Camp Humphreys — headquarters of USFK, Eighth Army and the 2nd Infantry Division about 40 miles south of Seoul — construction plans include several barracks and the new East Elementary School scheduled to open sometime next year.

Additionally, efforts are underway to allow for a "very limited" number of service members to bring their dependents with them to smaller U.S. bases that exclusively host unaccompanied troops, such as Kunsan Air Base, 115 miles southwest of Seoul, Parker said.

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MILITARY

Aboard Ford: Focusing on deterrence

Carrier strike group drills with allies in Mediterranean

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE USS GERALD R. FORD — The Navy's newest carrier strike group is putting hard-earned lessons from the Red Sea into practice, drawing on the fleet's recent combat experience to shape its current Mediterranean deployment.

Before deploying, Carrier Strike Group 12 leaders had one-on-one meetings with commanders from the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman, whose strike group battled Houthi militants and launched the largest carrier-based airstrike in history against Islamic State targets in Somalia.

The idea was to learn "what they experienced ... and how we can apply those lessons to our own deployment if we're faced with the same kind of threat," Rear Adm. Paul Lanzilotta, commander of Carrier Strike Group 12, told reporters July 29 aboard USS Gerald R. Ford in the Ionian Sea.

While the Ford strike group is currently operating in the Mediterranean, it's not clear whether the carrier and its escorts will remain in the region or shift to the Middle East, where tensions continue to simmer.

Iran-backed Houthi militants have threatened to renew attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, and the war in Ukraine shows no signs of ending. Ford's presence serves as both a show of force and a hedge against escalation.

"I'm actually here to help manage that escalation so that it doesn't start to go that way," Lanzilotta said.

The U.S. has frequently kept an aircraft carrier or amphibious ready group in the Mediterranean Sea following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In January 2024, Ford ended a more than eight-month deployment to the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations that included duty in the Eastern Mediterranean following Hamas' attack on Israel in October 2023.



PHOTOS BY ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

A sailor works on an F/A-18 Super Hornet in the hangar bay of the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in the Ionian Sea on July 29.



Sailors man the bridge of the Ford during flight operations in the Ionian Sea.

Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin extended Ford's deployment as the U.S. used a dual-carrier strategy as part of efforts to keep Hezbollah and other Iran-backed proxies from broadening the conflict.

The aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, which was presumed to relieve Ford, was sent to the Middle East as part of that strategy. More recently, the Navy stationed five de-

stroyers in the Eastern Mediterranean in June to defend Israel against Iranian attacks and promote regional stability.

Earlier in July, the Ford strike group entered the Mediterranean.

One of the most notable changes on this deployment is the role of the destroyer USS Winston Churchill, which is functioning as the air and missile defense commander for the strike group.

That role has long been filled by a cruiser. But with the Navy's aging cruiser fleet nearing retirement, destroyers are bridging the gap. Churchill is the first East Coast destroyer equipped with the modifications to deploy to take on the role, officials said.

The shift in structure and training comes as the Navy reassesses how carriers may be targeted in combat.

In March, Adm. Daryl Caudle, commander of U.S. Fleet Forces, said Ford was training to use its close-in weapons system to defend against incoming missiles or drones, Naval News reported at the time.

Carriers in recent decades typically have been defended by embarked aircraft and escort ships.

But in March 2024, officials aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower on duty in the Red Sea acknowledged that the Houthis had employed swarm drone attacks and upgraded ballistic missile capabilities.

Since its arrival, the Ford group has trained with the Spanish and Italian navies and participated in Neptune Strike 25-2, a NATO exercise spanning multiple theaters, including the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, Eastern Europe and the Black Sea.

The exercise emphasizes long-range air operations, according to NATO.

On Tuesday, there were about 90 to 100 flights scheduled aboard Ford, officials said, noting that four catapults and three arresting wires that help launch and stop aircraft, respectively, had been in use on the carrier during the entire deployment.

"We are fully mission-capable to meet all missions at any time at any place," said Capt. David Skarosi, commander of USS Gerald R. Ford.

Leaders say sailors have aggressively trained for this deployment, which marks the third to the U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations for the carrier.

The group's day-to-day operations focus on training and readiness for any contingency, such as challenging weather conditions or the need to provide humanitarian assistance.

"Or, if there's some crisis in the region, we're able to respond to that, too," Lanzilotta said.

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MILITARY

US spends \$2B to rebuild THAAD arsenal

Interceptor stockpiles depleted by Iran fight

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is ramping up missile defense production after the U.S. military expended nearly a quarter of its high-altitude interceptor arsenal during Iran's attacks on Israel in June.

Last month, the Missile Defense Agency authorized spending an extra \$2 billion on an existing contract with Lockheed Martin to deliver more high-altitude interceptors over the next four years, in a bid to strengthen one of the military's marquee missile defense systems.

The extra \$2 billion is a considerable investment in the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system but comes after years of flagging production that could leave the U.S. unprepared to handle future conflicts, analysts say.

"It's a recognition of reality," Bradley Bowman, senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said about the order for additional interceptors. "I'm not happy that we're waking up at this late hour, but I'm very happy that we're waking up."

The contract modification follows the U.S. launch of more than 150 THAAD interceptors from two systems during a 12-day conflict with Iran — nearly 25% of all interceptors ever purchased by the Pentagon, according to a report by The Wall Street Journal, citing U.S. officials.

The rapid depletion has reignited long-standing concerns about readiness for a potential conflict with a major power and highlighted the need to accelerate missile procurement at the Pentagon.

"If we're struggling to deal with threats from Iran, how do we think we're going to do... against China?" Bowman said. "That's going to make Iran look like the junior varsity."

Neither the contractor nor the agency disclosed the quantity of interceptors included in the contract update. Lockheed Martin said it has delivered 900 THAAD interceptors to date, including foreign orders.

"We remain committed to innovation



Missile Defense Agency

A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptor is launched from the Reagan Test Site on Kwajalein atoll in 2019. The Pentagon is ramping up procurement after expending nearly a quarter of its THAAD stockpile last month against Iran.

and investment in interceptor production as global events continue to highlight the importance of providing unparalleled protection for populations and infrastructure," Dawn Golightly, vice president of upper tier integrated air and missile defense at Lockheed Martin, said in a statement.

At an estimated cost of \$12.7 million apiece, according to recent budget estimates from the MDA, the extra funding will almost certainly be enough to fully replace the June THAAD launches.

"(An amount of) \$2 billion gets you to at least a replacement level of interceptors that were expended over the course of the 12 days," said Wes Rumbaugh, a fellow in the Missile Defense Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

In response to questions about missile defense stockpiles, Defense Department spokeswoman Kingsley Wilson said "the U.S. military is the strongest it has ever been and has everything it needs to conduct any mission anywhere, anytime, all around the world."

"If you need further proof, look no further than Operation Midnight Ham-

mer and the total obliteration of Iran's nuclear ambitions," Wilson added.

Each THAAD battery consists of about 90 soldiers, six truck-mounted launchers and 48 interceptors, backed by radar that tracks incoming short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, according to the Missile Defense Agency.

At least half of the Army's eight THAAD batteries are deployed, including two in the Middle East, the Congressional Research Service said in a report last month.

THAAD interceptor purchases peaked in 2018 and 2019, when the U.S. secured 109 and 110 missiles, respectively, according to Rumbaugh's analysis. Since then, production has dropped significantly, with Lockheed Martin delivering just 11 interceptors in 2024.

The dropoff suggests that the Pentagon felt comfortable with its stockpile and was focused on funding other priorities, Rumbaugh said.

But the recent pace of operations, including those against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, has driven a reassessment.

That increased urgency is a positive sign, Bowman said, but he added that

manufacturers can produce far more than the 37 interceptors Congress asked for in 2026.

Bowman estimates that the industrial base could produce three to four times more THAAD missiles than lawmakers are requesting.

It's not just THAADs that are facing a shortfall. The Army wants to bolster its Patriot systems, the same ones that fended off Iranian missiles aimed at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar in June.

Industry can produce 500 Patriot PAC-3 missiles per year, with that number set to rise to 650 by 2027, according to FDD. The Trump administration has requested 341 PAC-3s in next year's budget, with additional missiles going to foreign militaries.

The Army has also requested \$300 million to modernize the PAC-3 line in its annual unfunded priorities list.

Concerns also extend to the Navy. The Wall Street Journal reported that naval destroyers fired about 80 SM-3 interceptors during the Iranian conflict.

The Missile Defense Agency earlier this year inked a \$1 billion contract with manufacturer Raytheon for 55 more SM-3s to be delivered by spring 2031.

"This is a problem endemic to, essentially, the entire U.S. military air missile defense enterprise," Bowman said. "In almost every case, we do not have the capacity that we need."

The broader issue reflects systemic problems with how the military develops and acquires weapons. Critics say the system is bogged down by bureaucracy, making it difficult and expensive to deliver arms quickly in a crisis.

A decline in missile procurement has discouraged contractors from expanding their production capacity, Bowman said.

Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, the incoming head of U.S. Central Command, told lawmakers at a hearing in June that munitions stockpiles and magazine depth were among his top concerns.

He said he supports recent efforts to cut red tape and wants to see the military leverage the tech sector's capabilities.

"I think we need to move with a sense of urgency," he said.

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MILITARY

Hypersonic missile makes overseas debut

US Army Dark Eagle sent to Australia for Talisman Sabre drills

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army deployed its Dark Eagle hypersonic missile system to Australia's Northern Territory during the Talisman Sabre exercise, marking the weapon's first overseas appearance, the service announced over the weekend.

The deployment marks "a significant milestone for the Army, demonstrating our ability to rapidly deploy and operate advanced capabilities in support of our allies and partners," U.S. Army Pacific posted Sunday on X.

The Army gave no indication that the weapon, with an estimated range of 1,700 miles, was fired in Australia. The 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force, based in Hawaii, transported the system to Australia, according to an Army news release Saturday.

Defense Department photos show soldiers from B Battery (Dark Eagle), 5th Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment briefing allied troops about the weapon on July 9.

"The exercise demonstrates the Combatant Command's capacity to project power and support the defense of Australia, a key ally in the region," Adm. Samuel Paparo, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said in the news release.

Dark Eagle's debut Down Under shows the Army's ability to rapidly deploy and operate advanced capabilities, Col. Wade Germann, commander of the multidomain task force, said in Saturday's release.

The U.S. Army is collaborating with Australia's 10th Brigade in Adelaide, South Australia, to plan the deployment of hypersonic weapons, Lt. Gen. Joel Vowell, deputy commander of U.S. Army Pacific, told Stars and Stripes on July 14 at Shoalwater Bay on Australia's east coast.

"We are looking at how we can do that together," he said.

Hypersonic weapons travel at speeds exceeding Mach 5, five times the speed of sound.

The 1st Multi-Domain Task Force at



PERLA ALFARO/U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers brief allied troops about the Dark Eagle hypersonic missile system in Australia's Northern Territory last month.

Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., was the first unit to field and integrate Dark Eagle.

In March 2024, the Air Force test-fired its AGM-183A Air-launched Rapid Response Weapon from a B-52H Stratofortress bomber over the Ronald Reagan test site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

China has pursued an anti-access, area-denial strategy involving missiles designed to target ships and aircraft near Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

"This system changes the game," Vowell said of hypersonic missiles.

Talisman Sabre, a three-week biennial exercise, concluded Monday. It

involved more than 40,000 troops from the United States, Australia and 17 other nations across Australia and Papua New Guinea.

The exercise also featured the first live fire from Australia of the U.S. Army's Typhon mid-range missile system and the debut of Australia's High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, which fired a precision strike missile with a range of more than 310 miles.

Australia is prioritizing long-range precision strike capability in response to China's military modernization, said Carlyle Thayer, emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and lecturer at the Australian Defence

Force Academy.

"Australia's acquisition of [Dark Eagle] would demonstrate Australia's willingness to lift defense spending," he said.

Dark Eagle can deliver a large warhead, said Mick Ryan, a former Australian army general who is now senior fellow at the Lowy Institute's International Security Program.

"It's a great capability given that it's ground-launched, and it's got a pretty low signature," he said on Monday. "You can fire it and head back under cover."

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MILITARY

DOD confirms withdrawals from Mideast

US troops leave 3 bases that focused on fighting ISIS

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq have departed three military bases that for years supported efforts to defeat Islamic State militants, a new Pentagon report confirmed.

American personnel and their anti-ISIS coalition partners in May left Mission Support Site Green Village, H2 and Mission Support Site Euphrates, sometimes referred to as the Conoco gas field, the latest quarterly report from the Defense Department's Inspector General said.

All three sites are in the vast region known as the middle Euphrates River valley. Both the Conoco and Green Village bases were targets of numerous rocket attacks from Iran-backed militias over the past five years.



FRED BROWN/U.S. Army

Syrian partner forces practice squad-level tactics with U.S. soldiers in Syria in April. American personnel left three bases in May and were either relocated within Syria and Iraq or returned home.

Conoco was attacked as recently as December and was also the site of a brief but intense 2018 skirmish between U.S. forces and fighters for the former regime, including Russian mercenaries, that left hundreds of the attackers dead and the Americans unharmed.

U.S. forces "either dismantled and removed or handed over infrastructure" to the Syrian Democratic Forces,

part of the anti-ISIS coalition led by the U.S., according to the report, which was recently made public.

Fox News reported in May that 500 troops had left bases in northeastern Syria, including Mission Support Site Green Village and Mission Support Site Euphrates.

The base closures are part of a larger consolidation of U.S. forces in Syria that the Pentagon announced earlier

this year, with plans to eventually reduce the American military presence to one base and fewer than 1,000 troops.

The U.S. has maintained a presence in the country since the 2014 start of Operation Inherent Resolve, which aimed to suppress ISIS's growing influence in Iraq and Syria.

U.S. forces at the three bases either relocated to other sites in Syria or Iraq or returned home after completing their tour of duty, the report said, without specifying the number of troops.

The departure of the American troops comes amid a tense transition for the new Syrian government, which in December ousted longtime dictator Bashar Assad and has since struggled to contain sectarian violence across the nation.

The Inspector General's report notes that the U.S. withdrew from an area where relations remain strained between the SDF and the Arab tribal leaders.

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USO center established aboard USS Iwo Jima

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima is the latest Navy vessel to host an afloat USO center designed to improve shipboard life for deployed sailors and Marines, the service said.

Iwo Jima is the first amphibious assault ship to have one of the centers, which also are on 10 aircraft carriers and five destroyers, the Navy said in a recent statement.

Like their ashore counterparts, shipboard USO centers include comfortable seating, TVs, video and board games, and snacks.

They offer sailors and Marines a home-away-from-home environment and a way to relax while serving in high-stress operational environments, according to the statement.

The center aboard Iwo Jima gives the ship's 2,200 sailors and Marines a

place to reset, recharge and de-stress, Capt. Kathryn Wijnaldum, executive officer of Iwo Jima, said in the statement.

That allows them to "resume their duties that enable us to accomplish our mission and get the job done when our nation calls upon us," Wijnaldum said.

USO shipboard centers are among the latest efforts by the Navy to address service member health and well-being, particularly during deployments that can include weeks or months at sea without a port call and limited contact with family and friends.

In May 2023, the service deployed a yellow Labrador retriever on the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford as an operational stress military working dog.

The pilot program came as the service worked to address quality of life



ERICKSON MAGNO/U.S. Navy

Capt. Kathryn Wijnaldum, executive officer of the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima, left, and Jeff Hill, USO expeditionary region vice president, open a USO center aboard Iwo Jima recently at Norfolk, Va.

issues and expand services amid concerns about mental health and suicide. The program has since expanded to other ships.

The first USO shipboard center

opened in June 2023 on the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush.

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MILITARY

1st Brigade claims a drone first

Strike underscores changing nature of Army training

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — U.S. soldiers at this vast training ground in Bavaria used a one-way attack drone in a live-fire exercise that leaders say marks a first at the company level.

The 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team crashed a homemade first-person view drone carrying C-4 plastic explosives into a simulated vehicle July 29 to kick off a combined arms drill at the Grafenwoehr Training Area.

“There has been no other conventional U.S. Army unit to my knowledge that has done this,” said 1st Lt. Benjamin Storie, an aerial systems platoon leader with the 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion. “We’re continuing to innovate. Being on the cutting edge of lethality and warfighting is what we’re about.”

The exercise began with drone operators lying prone atop a hill, Storie said. They then guided the drone to the target using a device resembling a video game controller and goggles integrated with a camera mounted on the drone.

After the target blew up, the battle began. Soldiers from Assassin Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment navigated a simulated minefield and obstacles, and cleared buildings on their way to seizing two designated objectives, a northern and a southern area. They were backed by M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles.

The exercise highlights the Army’s efforts to develop and integrate new technologies to keep pace with evolving battlefield conditions, such as those seen in Ukraine.

V Corps, which leads the brigade, is



DYLAN BAILEY/U.S. Army

Sgt. Elena Killough of the 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion flies a first-person view drone at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, on July 23.



DYLAN BAILEY/U.S. Army

A U.S. soldier from the 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion pilots a first-person view drone at Grafenwoehr.



JOSEFINA GARCIA/U.S. Army

Killough, left, and Sgt. Demond Blach, both of the 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion, ready an armed drone for launch during a July 21 exercise at Grafenwoehr.

last month at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels with support from installations in Europe.

Sgt. Elena Killough, a drone operator from the 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion, said before the exercise July 29 that the mercurial German weather and hilly terrain had improved the soldiers’ understanding of drone warfare immensely.

Electronic components often react to snow, rain, cold and heat, and hills or

trees can cause signal loss. Lessons from the exercise will help the Army update its techniques, tactics and procedures.

“I think (drones) are going to play a huge part in making us more lethal,” Killough said. “They’re very cost-effective and very quick, easy ways to get precise engagements on targets.”

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VETERANS

Authorities: Vet's body concealed in closet to collect benefits

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A 72-year-old Marine Corps veteran was buried July 28 with full military honors after a cousin had hidden his body for months inside the veteran's New Jersey mobile home to collect benefits under his name, authorities said.

New Jersey State Police in April discovered the body of Michael S. Blankenship, a Vietnam War-era veteran, wrapped in several layers of plastic and stuffed inside a bedroom closet at his mobile home at Evergreen Estates in Fairfield Township.

Blankenship died in 2024 from natural causes, according to a grand jury indictment filed last month in Cumberland County Superior Court in New Jersey.

But Steven Blankenship, a 58-year-old cousin of the veteran, is accused of hiding the body for several months to collect benefits and use a credit card under Michael Blankenship's name, according to the indictment. His arraignment is scheduled for Aug. 18.

Michael Blankenship had served in the Marine Corps and was honorably discharged in 1970, according to his obituary.

He had worked as a forklift operator

before retiring in 2001 because of a disability.

Blankenship's body was discovered by police summoned to his home to conduct a welfare check, according to police. His decomposing body was found inside a rear bedroom closet after police detected a foul smell. A doorknob had been removed from the closet door and the door frame was sealed with electrical tape, police said.

The Marine veteran had resided at his mobile home for 40 years, according to his obituary.

Steven Blankenship faces charges of desecrating human remains, tampering with evidence, theft by deception and fraudulent use of a credit card, according to the indictment.

He is accused of receiving nearly \$14,000 in benefits and using Michael's personal credit card to cover his own expenses, according to a police report.

Police said they found a handwritten note by Steven Blankenship inside the mobile home admitting he devised a plan to conceal his cousin's death for his own financial benefit. Police said he also continued to pay bills under the Marine veteran's name to avoid detection.

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The Veterans Scam and Fraud Evasion Act would create a job focused on prevention, reporting, and incident response plans in the wake of a Federal Trade Commission review that found veterans reported \$350 million in losses to fraud.

Lawmakers seek dedicated VA fraud prevention officer

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Department of Veterans Affairs would have to establish an officer to assist with fraud and scam response and prevention among veterans under a bill recently filed in the Senate.

The Veterans Scam and Fraud Evasion Act would create a job focused on prevention, reporting and incident response plans in the wake of a 2023 Federal Trade Commission review that found veterans and military retirees reported \$350 million in losses to fraud.

That is up from a 2021 report that showed veterans lost roughly \$177 million to scams.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, introduced the bill alongside Sens. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., John Boozman, R-Ark., and Angus King, I-Maine. Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Calif., introduced the bill in February in the House and the legislation has gained 10 cosponsors.

"Texas is proudly home to more veterans than any other state, and it is imperative that we do everything in our power to protect our nation's heroes from predatory scams," Cornyn said in a statement.

While the VA already offers veterans resources, such as a hotline and website to report veteran-specific scams, this bill would establish a veterans scam and fraud evasion officer and offer more communication within the

VA and with veterans.

The job is also expected to improve coordination between government agencies.

Roughly 152,000 veterans reported fraud to the FTC in 2023, with about 31% reporting that they lost money in the scam. It is the largest type of military fraud. The next largest category, active-duty service members, made more than 16,000 reports for a loss of about \$52 million.

"With scammers increasingly targeting our veterans, we should ensure they have advocates in their corner helping them avoid or mitigate any potential harm and providing helpful resources to fight back," Boozman said in a statement.

Some of the most common scams among veterans include benefit payment redirection, which occurs when someone gets hold of a veteran's personal information and gains control of email or bank accounts, according to the VA. Another involves convincing veterans to move their pension benefits into false trusts or annuity products.

To avoid scams, the VA recommends disconnecting any phone calls where the caller demands money or personal information and to verify an organization's authenticity before making any requested payments.

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