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Special species

Bats find homes on
many US bases and
the military wants to
keep it that way

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An eastern small-footed bat at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y. The academy and the Army Corps of Engineers are teaming up to create a plan to protect bats on the historic grounds.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

COVER STORY

DOD initiative to protect bats on bases

Pentagon bound by federal law to keep those species safe that are threatened

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Bats have long been associated with Halloween, but at many U.S. domestic and overseas military installations they're more than just a symbol of the season. They're permanent residents that need protection.

The Defense Department has broadened efforts to keep bats out of harm's way while ensuring that the primary tasks of training personnel and defending the country aren't jeopardized, according to the Army Corps of Engineers, which is leading the initiative.

A drastic drop in bat numbers in parts of the United States is spurring the DOD push to safeguard the populations on its premises.

More than 300 installations stateside could have threatened or endangered bat species living on them within the next five years, according to Defense Department data. In the U.S., the DOD is bound by federal law to keep those species safe.

"Our work is important because it directly impacts on-the-ground land and natural resource management on DOD installations," Pat Wolff, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers biologist, said in a statement recently.

Bat conservation efforts are a "top priority" for the military, Wolff added.

The Army Corps of Engineers is working with the U.S. Military Academy to develop a plan to protect federally listed bat species on the historic property in New York.

Research is also being done at Camp Grayling, Mich.; Fort Cavazos, Texas; Adelphi Laboratory Center in Maryland and Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, reflecting the diverse ecosystems and unique challenges faced by each installation.

The Corps' Engineer Research and Development Center has studied bats on military land for decades. Historically, it focused on assessing the potential impacts of military training on



TONIE ROCKE/U. S. Geological Survey

A bat is administered a vaccine against white-nose syndrome. Some areas in North America have seen bat populations decline by over 90% in recent years, largely because of the fungal disease.

threatened or endangered species.

But researchers have since begun evaluating the statuses of bat populations on installations, which the Army Corps of Engineers has described as an "urgent need."

Some areas in North America have seen bat populations decline by over 90% in recent years, largely due to white-nose syndrome, a fungal disease that was discovered in 2006, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

AI-driven software designed to identify bats by their echolocation calls is playing a key role, the Corps of Engineers said. Another project involves improving the safety and efficiency of artificial roosts, or bat boxes.

Many military installations have installed the boxes to help monitor and manage bat populations. But in some cases, poor design and bad placement have made them ineffective or even harmful, according to researchers.

"We looked at how well different bat box designs work for housing bats and tested acoustic lures to attract bats faster," Wolff said. "We also offered guidance to help military managers use bat box technology effectively."

The Pentagon's bid to protect bat



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center biologist Pat Wolff holds a big brown bat, *Eptesicus fuscus*, during a mist-net survey.

populations extends to some of its foreign bases as well.

In Germany, U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz spokeswoman Tammy Muckenfuss said that ongoing efforts to protect bats at its Miesau Army Depot were paying off.

Since 2009, the number of bats being monitored there has jumped about 400%, according to data from the garri-

son.

The Miesau depot, part of the vast Kaiserslautern Military Community, is one of the Army's largest ammunition depots outside the U.S.

In the German state of Bavaria, a 2021 project at the Army's base in Hohenfels that transformed the apse of a former church into a bat shelter also is keeping up its effectiveness, officials there say.

"The project is still running successfully, and the number of bats remains stable," the 7th Army Training Command said in a statement.

"The apse was well-accepted by the bats since it was built, as it provides another space with different temperature conditions, which allows the bats to find different resting places inside the church."

The Hohenfels Training Area is home to 19 species of bats, five of which are federally protected in Germany, Stars and Stripes reported at the time. That number includes the greater horseshoe bat, the rarest bat species in the country.

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SO MUCH CHRISTMAS



MILITARY

IG: USAF overpaid for C-17 soap dispensers

Federal watchdog finds \$1 million in wasteful spending

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force paid over 80 times more than it should have for lavatory soap dispensers on one of its most versatile cargo planes, a significant part of nearly \$1 million in wasteful spending, a watchdog agency concluded in a new audit.

The findings by the Defense Department Inspector General reveal a series of procurement missteps that allowed defense giant Boeing to overcharge for various components of the C-17 Globemaster III.

While the price of each dispenser and the number bought were redacted in the report, the service paid nearly \$150,000 more than the market value of the collective purchase, according to the findings released recently in a report.

Of the 46 parts auditors examined, over a quarter were purchased at prices deemed not fair or reasonable, the report said.

The IG couldn't determine whether the Air Force paid fair and reasonable



An image from the Defense Department Inspector General's audit shows a C-17 Globemaster III soap dispenser, left, and a similar commercial dispenser. The Air Force overpaid by more than 80 times for soap dispensers in the bathroom of the airplane, the IG said.

prices for 25 of the parts examined, with a combined valuation of over \$22 million, the report added.

In response, Boeing said it was reviewing the findings.

The report "appears to be based on an inapt comparison of the prices paid for parts that meet military specifications and designs versus basic commercial items that would not be qualified or approved for use on the C-17," company spokeswoman Deborah Van-Nierop said in a statement published by Bloomberg.

The audit, which looked at spending between 2018 and 2022, was conducted after a whistleblower contacted the DOD with concerns related to the expensive soap dispensers.

Overall, the Air Force wasted at least \$992,000 on parts purchased under its contract with Boeing, including overpaying more than \$142,000 for pressure transmitters, which measure the pressure of a gas or liquid and convert it into an electrical signal, the IG said.

It spent nearly \$300,000 more than it should have on retaining bands for the



ROLAND BALIK/U.S. Air Force

A C-17 Globemaster III prepares to land at Dover Air Force Base, Del.

C-17, the report added.

"Significant overpayments for spare parts may reduce the number of spare parts that Boeing can purchase on the contract, potentially reducing C-17 readiness worldwide," Inspector General Robert Storch said in a statement.

He noted that the contract continues through 2031. It lets Boeing purchase needed spare parts for the C-17, and the Air Force reimburses the company for those expenditures, according to the audit.

The IG blamed the overpayment on a lack of oversight and made several recommendations. They include Air Force use of enhanced billing analysis, forecasting tools and invoice reviews.

About 220 C-17s are used by the U.S. Air Force, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Command for transport operations worldwide.

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Owner of clinics convicted of bilking federal programs

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The owner and operator of several medical clinics specializing in pain management was convicted of bilking federal programs of \$35 million for medically unnecessary injections given to opioid-dependent patients, including veterans and troops, according to the Justice Department.

Michael Kestner, 72, of Nashville, Tenn., who ran "Pain MD" clinics in North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and other states, was recently found guilty in U.S. District Court Middle District of Tennessee of one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and 12 counts of health care fraud.

Kestner conspired between 2010 and 2018 to submit false and fraudulent

claims to Medicare, Medicaid and Tri-care, according to court documents.

Kestner, who is not a physician, imposed quotas and pressured nurses and other clinical staff to give frequent shots for tendonitis to patients seeking opioid medication, according to federal officials.

Kestner directed staff to perform "a high number of medically unnecessary injections into patients' back muscles" for the purpose of receiving higher reimbursements, according to court documents.

Patients also were pressured to receive the injections.

"Witnesses testified that patients who refused to accept regular injections risked being turned away from Pain MD and suffering withdrawals from their

opioid medication," according to the Justice Department.

Kestner became Medicare's single highest biller for so-called "tendon-origin insertion" procedures in the nation in an eight-year period, though most of the patients did not have a diagnosis for tendonitis, federal officials said.

"Kestner relentlessly pressured the providers at his clinics to administer and bill for injections. The evidence also demonstrated that to keep billings up, Kestner sent regular emails ranking the practitioners' production [and] making providers feel they would lose their jobs or let down their clinic staff if they did not perform an increasing number of injections," the Justice Department said.

Prosecutors argued the clinics lacked

the proper medical equipment to perform back injections along the spine as detailed in patient medical records. The type of medication administered was not identified.

A 2019 indictment stated, "Pain MD held itself out to be an interventional pain management practice, meaning that it claimed to provide pain management services that were intended to reduce patient reliance on opioids and other narcotic pain medications, when, in fact, these services were intended to increase Pain MD's revenues and enrich the defendants."

Kestner could face up to 10 years in prison for each count. His sentencing is scheduled for Feb. 27.

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MILITARY

Asthma, ADHD no longer prevent enlistment

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department has expanded the list of medical conditions that no longer disqualify people from enlisting in the military.

More than 6,000 people with conditions such as childhood asthma have enlisted through a pilot program's relaxed requirements, which allow recruits to enter basic training with previously disqualifying medical conditions, said Lin St. Clair, deputy director of the Defense Department's accession policy directorate.

When the program began in 2022, it included 38 conditions but was expanded earlier this year to 51. The program changes also further eased restrictions on previously included conditions such as attention deficient hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

Each of the conditions listed would have disqualified a candidate unless the military granted a waiver to allow en-



Ivy THOMAS/Ohio National Guard

A list of medical conditions that no longer disqualify people from enlisting in the military and no longer require a waiver has been expanded by the Defense Department.

listment. By removing this step, it can speed up the enlistment process and free up medical evaluators to review candidates with more complex medical histories.

The program outlines when a recruit

could have last received treatment or showed symptoms for their medical condition. Some of the medical ailments included are related to the eyes, orthopedics, hearing impairments and the digestive tract.

ADHD makes up 60% of enlistments through the pilot program, St. Clair said. The latest changes moved the time without treatment for ADHD from the past three years to one year, opening the door to quicker enlistment for many who recently graduated high school.

"High school students who have some type of learning accommodation, an individual education program or are on medication, once you graduate high school, you don't need that anymore. By lowering it to a year, that's allowed [the military] to pick up a whole bunch of folks," he said.

Childhood asthma is the second-most common condition in the program. Though it was added in June, asthma already makes up 11% of the pilot pro-

gram, St. Clair said. People who haven't needed an inhaler in the last four years no longer need a waiver.

Asthma is one of the most common chronic diseases among children, with about 9% of teenagers diagnosed with the lung disease, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is all with the help and the review of the medical professionals," he said. "They are the ones who review the medical qualifications front to back every couple of years."

Recruiters watch these policy changes closely and communicate often so they can act on the changes quickly, Auckerman said. Databases allow recruiters to track what illness disqualified interested candidates so they can call them back if something changes.

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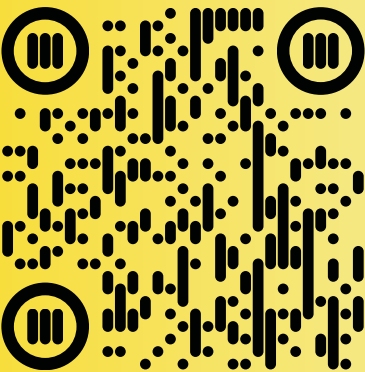
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MILITARY

Army mariners help off-duty Navy sailors at sea

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Three off-duty Navy sailors stranded in a ramshackle sailboat off Hawaii's coast got help from an improbable source: three soldiers in an Army speed boat.

The flukey role-reversal came after the Army crew responded to a Coast Guard call for assistance to a distress call Sept. 26 from a vessel a few miles off Honolulu.

As it happened, Sgt. Daniel Koster, the vessel master, and his crew of two were training aboard a 30-foot high-speed boat that can be operated remotely while pulling targets during live-fire drills.

The Army crew had stopped to tinker with an engine problem when they heard the Coast Guard's radio message about a disabled vessel, Koster said by phone recently.

"I decided to ask for the coordinates, and I put them into our GPS, and it turned out it was like three miles away," said Koster, who is assigned to the 8th Special Troops Battalion, 8th Theater Sustainment Command, and works out of Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam.



U.S. Army

Army Spc. Jace Spivey, left, and Sgt. Daniel Koster tow a disabled sailboat to its pier off the coast of Honolulu, on Sept. 26.

The Army is not generally associated with seafaring, but the service has maintained fleets of various sizes since World War II. It now has about 70 watercraft for transporting equipment and troops for

exercises and disaster relief.

Koster said he and his crew felt some initial hesitation to take on the distress call. He had only a week earlier completed the Army course qualifying him to command a small boat.

"So, it was my first time actually taking a crew out on the water on these boats," he said.

"We kind of looked at each other, like, yeah, I guess we're trained for this. You know, there's an impulse to think, oh, I can't help in a real emergency. I just do training stuff. But then we thought to ourselves, yeah, we can do things; we're capable. So, we answered the Coast Guard and said we would go and try to help," Koster said.

Arriving at the scene, the soldiers found a "rickety old sailboat with a torn sail," he said. Its engine had either failed or lacked the power to handle the considerable sea chop that day.

Four men were aboard, one of whom was likely the owner, and "three Navy guys" in tight blue T-shirts, Koster said. "That's the de facto uniform for off-

duty Navy," he said with a laugh.

Exactly what the sailors were doing on the shaky sailboat wasn't clear, but Koster suspects the trio was considering a purchase.

The soldiers tethered a line to the disabled sailboat and headed for the harbor "nice and slow and easy," Koster said.

"The sea was quite rough — big waves — so we just took it real easy and dragged them into Ala Wai Harbor," he said. The harbor abuts Waikiki Beach and Magic Island.

Koster credits his crew for their finesse during the "tense situation" of guiding the sailboat hulk "right between two rows of million-dollar yachts" in the harbor.

Spc. Nathaniel Breaux, an Army watercraft operator with 8th Battalion, maneuvered the crippled boat into its berth.

"Coming through the marina with that much wind was nerve wracking," Breaux said in an Army article about the rescue.

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May. 19, 2010

"Taliban attack key US base in Afghanistan, killing 1 US contractor, wounding 9 troops"

– Fox News

Nov. 12, 2016

"4 Killed in Bagram Airfield Explosion"

– DOD News

Dec. 11, 2019

"US airstrikes end daylong battle after Taliban attempt to storm Bagram Airfield"

– Stars and Stripes

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MILITARY

Navy extending service of aging ships

12 destroyers due to retire beginning in 2028 will now stay until new ships join

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy is extending the service life of 12 aging destroyers as the service balances the need to keep ships at sea with the time it takes for new ships to join the fleet.

“Today’s budget-constrained environment requires the Navy to make prioritized investments to keep more ready players on the field,” said Adm. Lisa Franchetti, chief of naval operations. “The Navy is actively pulling the right levers to maintain and grow its battle force inventory to support the United States’ global interests in peace and to win decisively in conflict.”

The 12 destroyers that will remain in service, the Navy said, are Flight I destroyers, the oldest variant of the Arleigh Burke-class, guided-missile destroyers. The ships would have started to retire in 2028, but the Navy now plans to keep them in service until sometime between 2030 and 2036.

The Arleigh Burke-class destroyers typically have a service life of 35 years, but the service has started extending the service of individual ships incrementally in recent years due to a rise in demand.

Multiple conflicts around the world are driving the need for more warships. The Navy has been forced to shuffle assets, pulling aircraft carriers supported by guided-missile destroyers from the Indo-Pacific region to deter conflict in the Middle East. At the same time, the

Navy has had to rely more on destroyers, using the warships to fill in gaps left by retiring Ticonderoga-class, guided-missile cruisers. The service retired four cruisers in 2024, with nine remaining cruisers slated for decommissioning by 2027.

Additionally, the Navy has worked to reach a fleet of 355 ships to keep pace with a growing Chinese navy, which congressional lawmakers have said is expected to have a fleet of 400 in 2025. The U.S. Navy now boasts a fleet of about 300.

In 2014, the Navy began developing new destroyers to replace the older Arleigh Burke ships with the intention of the new class entering service in the 2030s. A Congressional Research Service report in August said the Navy is looking to purchase the first new class of destroyers in 2032 — four years after the Arleigh Burke-class would have previously had a ship retire.

The service-life extensions range from one to five years. The ships that will now remain active include:

- The USS Barry, which was set to retire in 2028 but will now remain in service until 2031.
- The USS John Paul Jones from 2028 to 2033.
- The USS Curtis Wilbur from 2029 to 2034.
- The USS Stout from 2029 to 2034.
- The USS John S. McCain from 2029 to 2034.
- The USS Laboon from 2030 to 2035.



KEVIN TANG/U.S. Navy

Sailors conduct a flight deck fire fighting drill recently aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain. USS McCain was set to retire but has had its service life extended.

- The USS Paul Hamilton from 2030 to 2035.
- The USS Stethem from 2030 to 2031.
- The USS Carney from 2031 to 2032.
- The USS Gonzalez from 2031 to 2036.
- The USS Cole from 2031 to 2036.
- The USS The Sullivans from 2032 to 2035.

The Navy said it evaluated each destroyer in the past 10 months and determined all 12 warships should remain operational beyond their expected service life. The Navy said it conducted hull-by-hull evaluations of the ship’s material condition, combat capability, technical feasibility and life cycle maintenance requirements.

The decision follows a similar one announced last year to extend five Arleigh Burke destroyers. The USS Arleigh Burke — the oldest Flight I destroyer and the namesake of the class — is 33 years old, having joined the fleet in 1991. Its service life was extended in 2023 by five years through 2031. Also extended by five years in 2023 was the USS Ramage to 2035 and USS Benfold to 2036. The USS Mitscher and USS Milius were extended by four years to 2034 and 2035, respectively.

These destroyers are armed with vertical launch anti-submarine rockets, Tomahawk missiles and MK-46 torpedoes. They are designed for anti-air, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, and the most recent versions can

simultaneously defend against aircraft and missiles, according to the Navy.

The service will propose funding in its fiscal 2026 budget request to maintain the destroyers beyond 35 years, the Navy said. The service did not indicate how much it might cost to keep the ships in the fleet.

“Extending these highly capable, well-maintained destroyers will further bolster our numbers as new construction warships join the fleet,” Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro said. “It also speaks to their enduring role in projecting power globally, and most recently in the Red Sea, their proven ability to defend themselves, as well as our allies, partners and friends from missile and drone attacks.”

The ships have played a key role in mitigating conflict in the Middle East for more than a year. Destroyers have shot down drones launched by Iran-backed Houthi militants from Yemen that targeted merchant maritime shipping the Red Sea. The destroyers that have played a role in controlling conflict in the Middle East include the USS Arleigh Burke, USS Mitscher, USS Laboon, USS Russell, USS Ramage and USS Carney.

Two destroyers also helped defend Israel from a barrage of nearly 200 ballistic missiles launched by Iran. One of the ships, the USS Cole, is a Flight I Arleigh Burke-class destroyer.

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