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Naval name game

2025 saw ships named, renamed,
canceled and conceived **Page 2**



The replenishment oiler USNS Harvey Milk conducts a replenishment at sea with the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in 2024. In 2025, the ship's name was changed from that of the gay-rights leader to that of Medal of Honor recipient Oscar V. Peterson.

MAXWELL ORLOSKY/U.S. Navy

COVER STORY



ALEX BRANDON/AP

President Donald Trump speaks, with from left, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Secretary of the Navy John Phelan, at his Mar-a-Lago club on Dec. 22, in Palm Beach, Fla.

By any other name ...

'Trump-class' battleship is latest twist in naming, renaming, adding, canceling ships

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump scrambled Navy ship-naming traditions last month with his announcement of a new "Trump-class" battleship, to be called the USS Defiant, featuring nuclear-tipped missiles and laser defenses.

Battleships are usually named after states — the last commissioned was the USS Missouri in 1944. Ship classes are named after the first ship of the type built — the Missouri was an Iowa-class ship, named for the first of four battleships ordered in 1939.

Trump's announcement put an exclamation point on the end of a busy year for Navy ship naming.

The period between a presidential election and inauguration is often filled with last-minute ship naming.

In January 2021, Navy Secretary Kenneth J. Braithwaite traveled to Massachusetts to film a video in front of the Navy's oldest ship, the USS Constitution, nicknamed "Old Ironsides," commissioned in October 1797.

"We must always look to our wake to chart our future course," he said before announcing names for a new frigate, an expeditionary ship, an attack submarine and an amphibious transport dock.

Four years later, it was the turn of outgoing President Joe Biden's administration to go on a ship-naming spree.

Biden's Navy secretary, Carlos Del Toro, rolled out 19 new ship names — including new Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be named for for-



SHANNON RENFROE/U.S. Navy

A graphic rendering depicts the now-canceled Constellation-class frigate USS Lafayette.

mer President William J. Clinton (a Democrat) and President George W. Bush (a Republican).

"When I personally delivered the news to Bill and George, they were deeply humbled," Biden said at the time. "Each knows firsthand the weight of the responsibilities that come with being Commander-in-Chief."

In 2025, the naming — and renaming — of ships didn't hit much of a speed bump with a change in the occupant of the White House.

In June, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the name of the USNS Harvey Milk stripped from the official Naval Vessel Register. Milk was a gay-rights leader and San Francisco supervisor assassinated in 1978. The Navy said Hegseth had ordered Navy Secretary John Phelan to make the change, "taking the politics out of ship naming."

The ship was renamed for Navy Chief Petty Officer Oscar V. Peterson,

a Medal of Honor recipient from the World War II Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

The ship is the second of new class of replenishment oilers. According to the Congressional Research Service, Congress directed that they be named for prominent civil rights advocates. The class carries the name of the late Black civil rights advocate and longtime U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.

Phelan, Hegseth and Trump have not ordered any further name changes to the Lewis-class ships.

Before the new battleship announcement, Trump scrambled Navy ship naming plans with an announcement canceling the Constellation frigate program after the two ships were already under construction — the USS Constellation and the USS Congress.

The Navy canceled the remaining ships, including those to be named for the French Marquis de Lafayette, who aided American patriot forces in the Revolutionary War; Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton; Spain's Louisiana Governor Conde Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid, a backer of the American Revolution; former Navy pilot Everett Alvarez Jr., who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War; and Capt. Bright Joy Hancock, one of the first female Navy officers, who served during World War I and II.

Also canceled was the new USS Chesapeake, named after the early American frigate captured by Britain in 1813, renamed HMS Chesapeake and later deconstructed for use as a

watermill in Wickham, Hampshire, England. In recent years, the building has housed an antiques store.

In canceling the Constellation program, Trump announced a new generation of frigates called FF(X) based on the U.S. Coast Guard's large National Security Cutter design. The names of the future ships are to be determined.

A sidelight to the "Trump-class" battleship-naming controversy is that it could affect naming a future aircraft carrier after the president.

Twelve of the past 17 aircraft carriers have been named for presidents, according to the U.S. Naval Institute. From Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush, nearly every president has had an aircraft carrier named for them.

The exceptions are Lyndon B. Johnson, whose name is on a Zumwalt-class destroyer to be commissioned in 2027, and President Jimmy Carter, a former Navy submarine officer, who has a Seawolf-class attack submarine named for him.

Only President Richard M. Nixon, who resigned office in 1974 because of the Watergate scandal, doesn't have a ship at sea or in the construction pipeline bearing his name.

Four of six Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers are named for presidents. If the naming tradition is followed in chronological order, future carriers could be named for Presidents Barack Obama, Trump and Biden.

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MILITARY

Marines create 6 pack of drone courses

Corps prepares to field tens of thousands of commercial drones in coming year

By **LYDIA GORDON**
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is adding six new piloting courses as the service prepares to field tens of thousands of commercial drones in the coming year.

The plan, announced Dec. 29 in a memo from the service, outlines a two-and-a-half-year framework to standardize drone training across the Corps.

Under the new framework, Marines of any job specialty can apply through their commands for one of the courses, which include basic drone operator, attack drone operator, attack drone leader, payload specialist, attack drone instructor and payload specialist instructor.

Units at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Camp Lejeune, N.C., and on the Japanese island of Okinawa were selected as regional training hubs for the courses, with Quantico, Va., serving as the current central training site, according to the release.

In addition to the six courses, eight new drone-related certifications will be introduced, broadening qualification pathways for Marines with varying experience levels, the Corps said.

Marines who have completed previous service drone training may be granted corresponding certifications under the new system, the memo said.

First-person view drones will be fielded to all infantry, reconnaissance and littoral combat teams across the Corps as early as May, according to a separate statement.

The initiatives align with the Defense Department's broader effort to develop and field approximately \$1 billion in autonomous and remotely operated systems across the services, the Marine Corps said.

Full operational capability for the Corps' drone program is expected by 2028, with initial fielding slated to begin in March.

The new program builds on efforts already underway by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, which has begun delivering Neros Archer attack drones to select units.

The Corps plans to maintain and expand its use of existing platforms as part of a diverse and adaptable drone portfolio, according to the Dec. 29 message.

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MAURION MOORE/U.S. Marine Corps

Marines load a simulated warhead onto a drone during training at Camp Santiago, Puerto Rico, in November. The service launched a training program last month that aims to rapidly boost the number of Marine operators of commercial off-the-shelf attack drones.

New Fort Drum unit to focus on 'drone dominance'

By **JOHN VANDIVER**
Stars and Stripes

A new unit in the 10th Mountain Division dedicated to "drone dominance" marks the latest push by the Army to reorganize itself for future battlefields swarming with unmanned systems.

The establishment of Fox Company, assigned to the 1st Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment, will pave the way for future drone formations across the force, the Fort Drum, N.Y.-based division said in a statement in December.

The activation of the unit, described by the division as a "first-of-its-kind" unmanned tactical formation, adds a wider range of combat capabilities to the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade.

Fox Company soldiers are collaborating with a 10th Mountain Division innovation unit to produce their own drone components, the Dec. 22 statement said.

That partnership puts the unit "at the forefront of the Army's efforts to integrate unmanned systems, ensuring the division is equipped with the advanced tools needed to ... outmaneuver any adversary on the battlefields of today and tomorrow," the division statement said.

Creation of the unit aligns with a broader Army strategy that calls for equipping every division by 2026 with more capabilities to penetrate and destroy enemy air defenses, according to the statement.

"Current conflicts have proven that the modern battlefield is more lethal than ever before, primarily due to the potent combination of (drones) and long-range fires," regiment commander Lt. Col. Chris Stoinoff said in the statement.

Drawing on lessons from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the Army has been racing to catch up with the advances in drone warfare tactics borne out on Ukrainian battlefields.

In May, the Army announced an overhaul in the structure of combat aviation units, with a focus on fewer helicopters and more unmanned systems.

Across the service, units have been experimenting with different types of

drones, sometimes building them in-house under the tutelage of Ukrainian troops.

The establishment of Fox Company also shows how small unit formations are springing up to meet new battlefield demands.

Drones will be key to protecting forces and allowing soldiers to "take the fight to our enemies," Stoinoff said.

"These robots can be equipped for a multitude of missions: to conduct reconnaissance, to act as decoys, to jam enemy communications or to deliver lethal strikes," he said.

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MILITARY

Lab aims to extend endurance at sea

With food science, engineering, feedback Navy team working to modernize galleys

By KAYLYN BARNHART BATISTA
Stars and Stripes

At a lab in Natick, Mass., a team of Navy civilians and contractors is testing new galley equipment and food recipes with one goal in mind: keeping sailors well-fed, healthy and mission-ready during long deployments at sea.

By combining food science, engineering and frequent feedback from the fleet, the team is working to modernize Navy galleys to extend endurance at sea aboard ships and submarines.

“The long-term goal is to keep the warfighters at sea doing what they have to do,” said Rick Watts, a Navy project officer on the Joint Food Service and Engineering Team.

After more than 20 years serving as a Navy culinary specialist, including time aboard submarines, Watts retired as a master chief and now works to solve everyday challenges in Navy galleys.

His team evaluates commercial kitchen equipment to determine suitability for shipboard use, including space constraints, constant motion, power supply and water requirements.

Smart technologies are being tested to address personnel shortages and training gaps in ship galleys. Automated tilt skillet, for example, are designed to simplify complex cooking tasks. With recipes pre-programmed into the system, the skillet guides culinary specialists step by step, producing consistent meals and reducing food waste.

A new deep-fat fryer, developed over the past year, is also being prepared for testing with the submarine force.

“Our No. 1 challenge is obsolescence,” Watts said. “We have older equipment, so we have to find new solutions for those.”

Looking further ahead, the Breadbot — an automated bread production system — is being explored for potential shipboard use. While promising for



ZACHARY WHEELER / U.S. Navy

Rick Watts, a Navy Project Officer with the Combat Feeding Division at the U.S. Army DEVCOM Soldier Center in Natick, Mass., inspects the Breadbot, an automated bakery by Wilkinson Baking Co., for potential shipboard use.



U.S. Army

Brittany Koukoulous, left, and Rick Watts, Navy project officers at Natick, demonstrate rehydration of freeze-dried products as part of a large-scale production test while aboard the USS Makin Island in San Diego.

the future, Watts said it still has some “growing pains” and is not yet ready for implementation on Navy vessels.

Alongside equipment testing, food technologist Brittany Koukoulous works with Navy recipe development on the

Functional Food Nutrition Intervention Team. Her team constantly experiments with ingredients to develop new food recipes that meet the “Go For Green” nutritional standards for sailors.



U.S. Army

Brittany Koukoulous, a food technologist and Navy project officer, prepares samples of beef enchilada casse-roles in the Navy kitchen in Natick.

Her team is currently experimenting with freeze-dried ingredients to see if they can help extend ship endurance, allowing vessels to stay at sea longer without running out of food. Recently, she worked on a strawberry shortbread cookie recipe.

“There is a push on finding out some information about freeze-dried ingredients based on some conversations with the fleet,” said Koukoulous, who is currently conducting research and development in the lab.

Watts added that freeze-dried ingredients have been highly successful for the submarine force and now surface vessels are beginning to show more of an interest.

Developing and finalizing one food recipe can take two to five weeks before it is submitted to Naval Supply Systems Command for review and distribution to the fleet, according to Koukoulous. An average of 15-20 new recipes are implemented in the fleet each year.

Kitchen equipment takes much longer than recipes to reach vessels. Tests take about a week, followed by reports and reviews from NAVSUP and Naval Sea Systems Command, Watts said. Depending on priority, installation of equipment can take months or even years.

MILITARY

Nimitz reactors could fuel AI data center

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

A pair of nuclear reactors that have propelled a U.S. Navy supercarrier to hot spots around the world for half a century could end up repurposed to power a data center in Tennessee.

HGP Intelligent Energy, based in Dallas, has proposed to the Department of Energy that the two Westinghouse A4W naval fission pressurized water reactors on the USS Nimitz be sent to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory after they are removed from the carrier during its upcoming decommissioning, deactivation and defueling. Oak Ridge is a key U.S. government center for nuclear energy research.

The reactors could generate up to 520 megawatts of power, which HGP said in a letter to the Department of Energy could be used to boost energy for power-hungry data centers at the heart of the booming artificial intelligence industry.

HGP Intelligent Energy filed a letter with the White House's Genesis Mission Office, which President Donald Trump created by executive order in November to "leverage artificial intelligence" on a scale and pace equal to the "Manhattan Project," which produced the first atomic bomb in World War II.

The proposal was first reported by Bloomberg News.

HGP said that reusing and adapting



GARY WARNER/Stars and Stripes

USS Nimitz arrives at its homeport of Bremerton on Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., on Dec. 16, following a nine-month deployment to Asia and the Middle East.

the Nimitz nuclear reactors would cost between \$1 million and \$4 million per megawatt of generating power. A 2024 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said a new large reactor built from the ground up would cost between \$8 and \$10 million per megawatt.

As part of the plan, HGP said it would cost up to \$2.1 billion in private funds to create the system to use the naval reactors. The company stated it plans to apply for a loan guarantee from the Energy Department.

If the Nimitz project succeeds, reactors from future decommissioned aircraft carriers, submarines and other sources could be used for data centers.

The Nimitz arrived at its homeport of Bremerton, Wash., in December at the end of the final deployment of its career. The Navy's oldest carrier was commissioned in May 1975. The first of the 10 Nimitz-class carriers already has orders to sail soon to Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia to begin its retirement.

Huntington Ingalls Industries has

received a \$33.5 million contract to continue planning for the carrier's decommissioning, deactivation and defueling. This process has not been previously done on a ship the size of the Nimitz.

HII's Newport News Shipbuilding facility in Virginia would be responsible for eventually removing the two reactors.

Marine Insight, a maritime industry publication, said recently that the process is expected to take five phases, with each step requiring up to 10 years, at an eventual price tag of \$1 billion.

The Navy currently has a protocol for smaller reactors from Los Angeles-class submarines retired since the late 1990s. The reactors are wrapped in radioactive-shielded containers, sent on a barge from the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, then out to the Pacific Ocean and finally up the Columbia River to a port that transports the containers to a radioactive materials burial trench at the Hanford Nuclear Site in eastern Washington.

The Navy is still working on plans to dispose of or reuse the power plants on Nimitz-class carriers. Each ship has two reactors that generate 140,000 shaft horsepower, with each reactor driving two propeller shafts. The reactors also generate about 100 megawatts of electricity for use on the ship.

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Army launches AI, machine learning path for officers

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

A new career path for Army officers that focuses on artificial intelligence and machine learning further cements the service's doctrinal shift toward cutting-edge technology and autonomous warfare.

The occupational specialty "49B Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning" officer will be phased in as an official area of concentration starting in January through the Army's Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, an Army statement on Dec. 30 said.

Officers with advanced academic and technical backgrounds in fields related to AI or machine learning are particularly sought, the Army said.

The service is also considering offering the career path to warrant offi-

cers in the future, according to the statement.

"We're building a dedicated cadre of in-house experts who will be at the forefront of integrating AI and machine learning across our warfighting functions," Army spokesman Lt. Col. Orlandon Howard said in the statement. "Ultimately, it's about building a force that can outthink, outpace and outmaneuver any adversary."

The Army uses the term area of concentration to describe the job and specialty of commissioned officers, similar to the military occupational specialty for enlisted troops.

Each job is given a corresponding three-character identification code of two numbers and a letter. There are dozens of AOC ratings for officers, ranging from 11A Infantry to 67J Aero-

medical Evacuation.

The new job specialty will be offered initially to any officer eligible for the Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, the statement said.

The program is designed to facilitate the transfer of officers to new occupational specialties within Army manning requirements.

Those chosen for transfer to 49B will be reclassified by Sept. 30, the end of the current fiscal year, the statement said.

The new cadre will undergo rigorous graduate-level training and receive hands-on experience in constructing, maintaining and deploying the Army's AI-enabled systems, the statement said.

These "uniformed experts" will speed integration of advanced systems

to expedite battlefield decision-making and streamline logistics, and they additionally will field and manage the next generation of battlefield robotics, the statement said.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has spurred the Army to embrace artificial intelligence and autonomous systems in recent years, as small, off-the-shelf drones deployed by both sides in the conflict proved transformational for future combat.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently launched the military-focused AI platform GenAI.mil, which is powered by Google Gemini, to further signal the "AI-driven culture change," according to a Pentagon statement.

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MILITARY



MIRIAM ESPINOZA/U.S. Army

The 1st Cavalry Division's Horse Cavalry Detachment marches in the Tournament of Roses Parade in 2022 in Pasadena, Calif. Fort Hood's troopers and horses also participated in this year's parade.

Horses to stay at Hood, Riley

Equestrian units were to be eliminated after decision in July

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Army will preserve two of the five ceremonial horse units that were to be cut for cost savings after determining the horses bring community engagement opportunities and capabilities that are difficult to replicate.

The units at Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Riley, Kan., will remain active, but the horses, mules and donkeys owned by the Army at Fort Irwin, Calif.; Fort Huachuca, Ariz.; and Fort Sill, Okla., will be put up for adoption and transferred out of the Army by July.

"After careful consideration, the Army has determined that retaining these [Military Working Equid] programs is in the best interests of the force," said Col. James Fuhrman, assistant deputy for Army health affairs.

The plan announced in July called for cutting all five horse units to save the Army about \$2 million annually. Keeping the two units and transforming them into official programs will cost the Army roughly \$1.2 million a

year, Army spokesman Tony McCormick said.

The Old Guard caisson units at the Military District of Washington and Joint Base San Antonio, Texas, were not affected by the horse reduction plans. Those units participate in funeral services for Medal of Honor recipients, prisoners of war, those killed in action and veterans ranked sergeant major or higher at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, in Texas, and at Arlington National Cemetery, in Virginia.

The ceremonial horse units typically bring alive the history of the cavalry during weekly public demonstrations and unit ceremonies as well as during parades, rodeos and events throughout local communities.

The 1st Infantry Division Commanding General's Mounted Color Guard at Fort Riley — with 30 soldiers, 18 horses and four mules — is reminiscent of Civil War-era soldiers. Fort Hood's 1st Cavalry Division Horse Cavalry Detachment represents the Army of the late 1880s, using Colt revolvers and

sabers of the era with about 40 troopers working alongside 29 horses and four mules.

Each has participated in presidential inaugurations as well as many events within their local communities. Fort Hood's troopers and horses participated in last week's Tournament of Roses Parade in California, as it has more than 20 times before.

The Army will formally establish the two units as programs linking the Army and the American people through public demonstrations, educational outreach and participation in local events, the service said Dec. 30.

The Army said Dec. 30 it recently established a new military occupational specialty, Army Equestrian (08H) as an example of its investment in the units. The new specialty replaces the "military horseman" identifier and creates a specialized career path dedicated to the professional care of military working equines.

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Military ends 'painful' experiments on cats, dogs

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The defense bill that President Donald Trump signed into law puts an end to many military experiments on cats and dogs and declares a ceasefire to shooting animals in "trauma" exercises.

The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, enacted Dec. 18, includes a provision that bans the Defense Department from conducting and sponsoring "painful research" on domestic cats and dogs as live test subjects.

The bill also orders the Defense Department to ensure that it will not engage in "live-fire trauma training" that targets dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals.

Supporters said the bill ends exercises that involved shooting, critically wounding and killing goats and pigs to help educate medics in treating combat injuries. The legislation directs the military to use technologically advanced human simulators instead.

The shift is part of a government-wide effort to phase out the use of live animals in federally sponsored tests, studies and training, with pressure growing from the Trump administration, Congress and animal welfare groups to end the practice.

The Navy in May implemented a total ban on experiments using cats and dogs. The Department of Veterans Affairs is phasing out research on cats, dogs and non-human primates.

The defense secretary can make exceptions in the interests of national security. Exemptions also may be made for training and studies related to military or service animals.

New restrictions on using domestic cats and dogs in military studies target research that is "painful" but does not end all experiments. Defunded are animal experiments that cause significant and unrelieved pain and distress, under criteria set by the Agriculture Department.

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MILITARY

Air Force rejects ruling by COVID board

Panel had cleared officer of allegations related to actions during pandemic

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Brig. Gen. Christopher Sage has spent the last four years of his Air Force career quietly fighting to clear his name of wrongdoing, get back on the promotion list and stay in the service.

Disciplined for decisions he made as a commander deployed to the Middle East during the coronavirus pandemic — such as reopening gyms and removing barbed wire surrounding quarantine areas — an Air Force board reviewing COVID-related adverse actions determined he faced retaliation for his views. A majority of the board agreed in November he should have the black mark removed from his record and have his fast-approaching forced retirement date extended to be returned to consideration for promotion to major general.

However, an Air Force senior official disagreed and overturned the board's decision six days later, and Sage was to retire at the end of 2025. The official, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Richard Anderson, said there was insufficient evidence for the board's decision.

The Air Force is the final arbiter of the decision, though the defense secretary or president could choose to intervene.

"The board took one and a half to two months to review every shred of evidence," Sage said in an interview. "It was overturned within a few days."

Eleven members of Congress and 66 current and former colleagues, commanders and subordinates sent letters of support to Air Force and Defense Department officials with no response, Sage and his attorneys said.

"This is not about me," Sage said. "Yes, I want to see myself get cleared for my posterity and for my reputation. This is for the hundreds, if not thousands, of airmen that are waiting and



CHRISTOPHER SAGE

Brig. Gen. Christopher Sage, then commander of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, is shown during a deployment to the Middle East that started in June 2021.

watching my case to see whether they are going to submit their case to the Air Force [Board for Correction of Military Records]."

An Air Force spokesperson declined to answer questions about the decision but said in a statement the "Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records request for appeal has been reviewed by all senior leaders within the Department of the Air Force."

The service also declined to answer the rate at which Air Force officials override a board decision.

Board statistics show the Air Force granted relief to service members making claims unrelated to sexual

assault or mental health on average about 29% of the time in 2024. In the first quarter of 2025, relief was granted in 39% of 289 cases evaluated — the most recent data available.

The online charts do not indicate if the review board's decision was changed during the service's final sign-off for the decision.

"There seems to be a real lack of transparency," said Davis Younts, a retired Air Force attorney representing Sage.

In one response from the service, Younts said he was told that if Sage were to be promoted now, there would be no place for him to serve.

"The board took one and a half to two months to review every shred of evidence. It was overturned within a few days."

Brig. Gen. Christopher Sage

"You can still clear his name," he said. "It's been over three years. Promote him to two-star to make this right, and he could still retire immediately."

Younts, who has worked for 10 years on cases before military records boards, said he has never seen a service overturn a board decision to the detriment of the service member. In roughly 200 cases, it's happened twice and in favor of his client each time.

"It is just extremely troubling," Younts said. "I have a lot of clients who are considering coming back in and serving, but every time they see something like this, they don't trust it, and they're walking away."

When President Donald Trump came into office in January, his administration began reviewing many of the decisions made under President Joe Biden related to the coronavirus pandemic, citing retaliation for certain beliefs some people hold about the virus and vaccine for it.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth opened the door for the roughly 8,000 service members separated for refusing the COVID vaccine to return to service, and he allowed for COVID-related adverse actions and discharge characterizations to be reevaluated by expedited military records boards.

Most of those troops separated for vaccine refusal received an honorable discharge, but more than 4,000 had their service characterized as general (under honorable conditions), the Pentagon said last month. Nearly 900 veterans have had their discharge characterizations upgraded, and more than 3,000 await review.

The Defense Department did not have an estimate on how many troops

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MILITARY

Navy to require a 2nd fitness test each year

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Active-duty sailors will have to complete two physical fitness assessments per year starting in 2026 in a return to its pre-coronavirus pandemic fitness testing schedule.

All sailors in the active component will now be tested during cycles between Jan. 1 and June 30 and July 1 and Dec. 31, according to a Naval Ad-

ministrative Message governing fitness standards published Dec. 29. Reserve component sailors must complete at least one fitness test during the year, according to the message released in late December.

The increase in fitness testing aligns with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's push for increased physical standards across the U.S. military. The service has also made its fitness tests and body

composition standards — which include a measure of waist-to-height ratio and body fat percentage — gender neutral, per Hegseth's orders.

The Navy will now require commanders to integrate some physical training into every workday for their sailors, the message said. The Navy did not provide specific guidance for commanders to accomplish that goal.

Most sailors will take the Navy Phys-

ical Readiness Test twice per year. That test includes a two-minute push-up test, a timed forearm plank and a timed 1½-mile walk or run. Commanding officers or officers in charge may authorize a 2,000-meter row, a 14-minute stationary bike ride, or a 500- or 450-meter swim instead of the walk or run, according to the Navy.

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COVID: Sage decided to ease restrictions on base during pandemic

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received COVID-related adverse action but still serve — like Sage.

The Air Force said it has approved 155 requests to upgrade discharges. It will proactively review another 378 cases.

Sage's adverse-action case was unique to the service because it did not involve vaccine refusal. It's unclear if any others will present themselves as the board continues to review more cases, according to a service official.

Sage said he submitted his case in response to a May 7 memo that initiated the boards. A service official called him a few months after the memo was released and suggested he submit his paperwork, he said.

The inspector general case against Sage began while he was commander of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing from July 2021 to 2022. Sage was deployed to a base in the Middle East, and he said that though the pandemic was slowing in the U.S. at that time, it was still raging in the region. However,

about 95% of his personnel had been vaccinated.

He began asking a lot of questions about existing policies and made decisions to ease restrictions on the base, such as removing barbed wire that surrounded areas for quarantine and allowing sick personnel to stay in empty quarters for distinguished visitors, according to documents related to the investigation. This gave them access to private, indoor bathrooms.

Sage reopened the gyms and allowed airmen working outdoors to take off medical masks because the temperatures soared above 100 degrees some days. He also removed a testing requirement for troops as they arrived at the base because they were already being tested for COVID when they left the U.S., and it was slowing down the mission. He maintained random, weekly testing.

"I told my commander I was doing this. It was all within my legal authority," Sage said. "At the time we had the lowest numbers in the Middle East."

A senior officer reported Sage to the inspector general for a hostile work environment, misuse of government funds and travel and other types of fraud, waste and abuse. The investigating officer did not find credible evidence to those allegations, according to documents reviewed in the case.

However, the investigator relied on the testimony of the same officer and others to evaluate whether Sage's COVID-related decisions went against a healthy command climate, according to documents about the case.

The investigator in November 2022 reported evidence that these decisions did go against a healthy command climate and that Sage did not trust his subordinates.

By this time, Sage had moved to a new job, and his new commander chose to take no action on the findings, according to case documents.

However, Biden removed Sage's name from the list for promotion to major general in March 2024.

After five years as a brigadier general, Sage will be forced to retire. This triggered an officer grade review which found he acted honorably in that rank, even during the period in which the inspector general investigated, according to case documents.

The order removing Sage from the promotion list was signed with Biden's signature by an autopen, Younts said. The device has been used for decades by presidents to sign the hundreds of documents required of them, but Trump has fixated on Biden's use of it.

Trump began last year to claim Biden's staff used it to push "radical" policies and has touted the line at political rallies and news conferences. He posted on social media that all docu-

ments signed with it under Biden are canceled.

The Air Force declined to comment on what impact this could have on Sage or other service-related documents signed this way.

Just a day before his retirement, Sage said he still hoped for a final reprieve from the defense secretary or president. Both would have the ability to overturn the Air Force's decision, Younts said. Particularly given the orders that have been released in the last year and discussed by Hegseth during a September meeting with all general and flag officers held at Quantico, Va.

Hegseth referred to a new memo he called the "No More Walking on Eggshells policy," which called for an end to "weaponized" complaints and discipline for filing a false report against someone, and he restored commander discretion to take risks.

For Sage's punishment to remain goes directly against this policy, Younts said.

"Without question, his case should be an example of why that memo was necessary," he said.

For Sage, a fighter pilot who is now assigned as a special assistant to the commander of NATO's Air Command in Belgium, it's about the opportunity to continue to serve, should he be given that option. He is a 1994 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado, where he met his wife, Jessica Sage, a fellow academy graduate.

"My wife and my family, we still feel called to serve, if so selected," he said. "I would welcome that."

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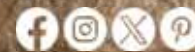


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