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## Trump & troops

Second term might bring moves out  
of Somalia, Bavaria **Pages 2, 3**

Members of the East Africa Response Force,  
assigned to Combined Joint Task Force – Horn  
of Africa, pose at Baledogle Airfield, Somalia.

JOSHUA DURANT/U.S. Army



## COVER STORY

# US military presence in Somalia could end

Trump pulled troops from African nation as last term ended

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTT GART, Germany — One of President-elect Donald Trump's last actions during his first term was pulling all U.S. forces out of Somalia, a move that could be back on the table in a second term that carries the potential for a broader scaling-back of military activities in Africa.

Of all of U.S. Africa Command's missions, its campaign in Somalia is likely to come under a microscope soonest, said J. Peter Pham, who served as special envoy to Africa's volatile Sahel region during Trump's first term.

"I would expect that President Trump will want to reverse course and restore things to where he intended at the end of 2020," Pham said Sunday.

Pham said current conditions in Somalia, where a decades-long conflict between Islamic militants and a weak central government continues to play out, justify pulling out U.S. forces once again.

"Quite frankly, as the corruption of even allegedly elite units like Danab has underscored, we do not have an effective partner in Mogadishu, and there are no U.S. national security interests that justify risking American treasure — much less American blood — in Somalia that cannot be handled offshore or from nearby bases," Pham said.

Headquartered in Stuttgart, AFRI-COM has several hundred troops positioned in Somalia, where they serve as advisers to local forces. There's a special focus on the Danab unit, which the U.S. military has touted as one of Somalia's most capable forces.

President Joe Biden in 2022 directed U.S. personnel back to Somalia on a continuous basis, reversing Trump's order in late 2020 that resulted in some 700 troops being moved out of the country.

Biden's decision came in the wake of criticism from then-AFRICOM commander Gen. Stephen Townsend, who said the rotational approach that re-



KATHLEEN LACORTE/U.S. Air National Guard

**U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Brian Cashman watches MV-22 Osprey aircraft land during a multi-day training exercise at Cooperative Security Location, Kismayo, Somalia, on July 21.**

**"Quite frankly, as the corruption of even allegedly elite units like Danab has underscored, we do not have an effective partner in Mogadishu."**

**J. Peter Pham**

special envoy to Africa's Sahel region during Donald Trump's first term

placed the full-time presence in Somalia amounted to "commuting to work" and allowed insurgents to gain ground.

Trump's move out of Somalia was something he had sought to do earlier in his term. Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, in his memoir about his time in the Trump administration, said Trump was skeptical about the AFRI-COM mission as a whole.

Trump "didn't see much value in having any Americans, whether they be military personnel or diplomats,

based anywhere on the continent," Esper wrote in his book, "A Sacred Oath." "The bottom line was that Trump wanted out of Africa completely, and Somalia now seemed to be the start point."

The Pentagon under Trump is expected to make China more of a focal point, which means that resources could be pulled from lower-priority missions and sent toward Asia.

Elbridge Colby, whom Trump has nominated to serve as the Pentagon's undersecretary of defense for policy, has argued that the military is spread too thin and must pivot more sharply to the Pacific.

In the case of Africa, the militant group al-Shabab has proved resilient despite an international effort to help Somalia's government counter it. Meanwhile, AFRICOM has raised concern about other militants expanding their reach in parts of western Africa. So far, however, such groups have not demonstrated an ability to strike outside the continent, raising questions about how significant of a threat they pose to the U.S. homeland.

Esper, writing about security in Africa, said some combatant commands during his tenure were prone to inflate threats to get more military assets.

"Some couldn't accept their priority in the bigger scheme of things, and a few would stretch the risk assessment to justify their demands," Esper wrote.

How such threat assessments could factor into Trump's approach to AFRI-COM, formed nearly 20 years ago when countering Islamic militant groups around the world was a Pentagon focal point, isn't yet clear.

Concerns about China's growing influence and large trade advantage in Africa also could influence Trump's actions.

As for Somalia, Pham said the current U.S. approach needs an overhaul.

"At the very least, a complete blank slate review of U.S. policy toward the Somali failed state should be undertaken before investing any more American resources," Pham said.

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## COVER STORY

# Cavalry might say goodbye to Bavaria

## Concerns about brigade's future in Germany revived

By MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — President-elect Donald Trump's imminent return to the Oval Office is reviving concerns about a Vilseck-based Army brigade's future in Germany.

The 2nd Cavalry Regiment was among the 12,000 troops designated for withdrawal under an eleventh-hour plan from Trump's first administration that President Joe Biden scrapped before it could be enacted.

Army leaders have called the regiment the "go-to brigade for quick response" within U.S. European Command, and its role on the Continent has been magnified by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The regiment also leads NATO's multinational battle group in Poland.

Trump hasn't said anything publicly about moving troops out of Germany since winning the November election. However, he has called on allies to spend a lot more on defense.

In a Dec. 8 interview with NBC News, Trump said the U.S. would "absolutely" remain in NATO if its members "pay their bills." During his first term, Trump hounded allies that fell well short of a defense spending benchmark of 2% of gross domestic product, which was to be reached by 2024.

Twenty-three of the alliance's 32 members now meet that goal, including Germany. But recently appointed NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has acknowledged that the 2% level is no longer enough.

And Vice President-elect JD Vance in November singled out Germany for needing to contribute more to military matters.

The question with no immediate answer is whether Trump would revive his first-term plan to move U.S. troops if Germany, which is constitutionally prevented from most deficit spending, doesn't pay more for defense.

The uncertainty has been a source of anxiety for residents who live around



MARKUS RAUCHENBERGER/U.S. Army

**Capt. Raza Muhammad, assigned to Field Artillery Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, pulls the lanyard to fire a M777 howitzer during an exercise at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, in October.**

the U.S. Army's sprawling training ranges in northern Bavaria, said Nils Gruender, a federal lawmaker representing Amberg and a member of the pro-business Free Democratic Party.

A pullout of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment would be a "catastrophe for the entire region," Gruender said in a statement.

The bases in Bavaria are surrounded primarily by small towns and forests. The American troops here represent a major economic force, Vilseck Mayor Hans-Martin Schertl said, noting that the soldiers based at the Grafenwoehr Training Area pump \$739 million into the economy annually.

While there are groups with pro-Russian views and small leftist political parties that shun most defense spending, more domestic investment in the military is popular among many in the area, whether out of self-interest or conviction in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Harald Rippl, a businessman in neighboring Weiden who rents homes and apartments to American military personnel, said Germany should contribute its fair share.

The possibility that Trump might reintroduce a withdrawal plan during his second term is worrisome in Vilseck and surrounding towns, he said.



WILLIAM KUANG/U.S. Army

**Army Pvt. Kendrick Harper, assigned to the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, searches for enemies during a training exercise in Vilseck, Germany, in February.**

"If you go to restaurants, if you see (Americans) at the Christmas markets, if you have American tenants ... (the impact of losing them) will be huge," Rippl said.

Vilseck hosts Rose Barracks, the regiment's home, which is connected by a series of secure roads to Tower Barracks and the grounds at Grafenwoehr, the Army's largest and most advanced permanent training area in Europe.

In recent years, the U.S. has ramped up operations in Poland, which Trump praised during his first term for its

willingness to spend on the military. Poland is expected to lead NATO at 4.7% of GDP spending on defense in 2025, according to budget projections released in October.

However, the U.S. would be hard-pressed to quickly replicate the facilities and infrastructure it already has in Bavaria, whether in Poland or in other central and Eastern European countries.

Another possibility is having fewer U.S. troops in Europe altogether. Some analysts nominated for key roles in the Trump administration have argued that America's concerns on the Continent are detracting from the higher priority of deterring China.

Jakub Janda, director of the European Values Center for Security Policy in Prague, said that although reducing the American military presence in Europe wouldn't kill NATO's deterrence capabilities, they would be significantly diminished.

"It would be a very bad signal if we want to negotiate with Russia from a position of strength," Janda said. "Withdrawing U.S. troops from Europe in any way would be obviously not very smart during this situation."

Russian President Vladimir Putin would likely see a withdrawal as a lack of commitment to European security and try to exploit the move, like when he annexed Crimea in 2014, Janda said.

Such a move also could harm American bargaining power during negotiations to end the Ukraine war, he added.

American personnel number about 33,000 in Germany and 90,000 in Europe, EUCOM spokesman Charles Prichard said in November.

Those figures have fluctuated in recent years as U.S.-based units rotate through the country. But moving permanently based service members in Germany elsewhere — whether within Europe, to the U.S. or another continent — would send a far stronger signal to allies and adversaries alike.

"It's pretty much a game of numbers," Janda said. "How many and what kind of troops would various allies and the U.S. have ready in close proximity of a potential conflict?"

Stars and Stripes reporter Marcus Kloeckner contributed to this report.  
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## MILITARY

# Russian setbacks may benefit Navy in Med

## Limits on operations at bases in Syria may reduce influence

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — Russia's sudden loss of operations at its bases in Syria could deliver a gut punch to the Kremlin's ambitions in the Middle East and Africa while offering the U.S. and its allies opportunities to extend their influence.

It's uncertain how much success Russia is having while negotiating with Syria's dominant forces to retain its naval

and air bases in the country. Russian officials have said they are communicating with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the main group that led the toppling of former Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Recent satellite images showed that naval piers home to Russia's Mediterranean task force in Tartus remained empty. The location of at least three warships and a Kilo-class submarine that had languished off the coast of Syria since the fall of Damascus wasn't clear.

They may have a new homeport in Libya, where Russia has begun moving its naval assets, CNN recently reported, citing unidentified U.S. officials. Moscow is pressuring Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar for space at a Benghazi port, CNN said.

The Russian withdrawal from Tartus and its air base 52 miles north of the naval docks appeared to be large-scale and significant. But it remains unclear whether the move is permanent.

The Kremlin's maritime presence in the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea is dependent on Tartus, and the airfield is a critical refueling point for operations in Africa, said Michael Petersen, a principal research scientist in the Russian studies program for the Arlington, Va.-based think tank CNA.

The bases "are crucial for Russia's larger global and regional aspirations," Petersen said. "If Russia does not have access to these bases, then it will be a major strategic blow."



Russian defense ministry

**The Russian frigate Admiral Gorshkov was reportedly in the Mediterranean Sea early last year. Russian navy vessels are apparently leaving their naval base in Syria following the fall of Kremlin ally Bashar Assad's regime.**



JACQUELIN FROST/U.S. Navy

**The P-8A Poseidon, a patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, is one asset the U.S. Navy has operating in the Mediterranean Sea.**

That loss, even if temporary, could offer opportunity for the U.S. and NATO, Petersen and other analysts said.

"Removing the Russian navy from NATO's southern flank would remove one irritant, as would removing it from Israel's western flank and from proximity to the Suez Canal," said James Holmes, chair of the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. "The fall of Syria is a setback for Russian and 'axis' geopolitics in more ways than one."

The Mediterranean is home to the

tensen said.

He added that last month, it appeared the Russian fleet, distracted by its problems in Syria, wasn't inclined to follow U.S. ships.

"That tells me that the U.S. has a maritime security advantage at this point," Petersen said.

American warships can operate more freely, potentially allowing the U.S. to focus more on security problems beyond the Mediterranean, such as the Red Sea, he said.

That advantage also could be exploited in Africa, where the U.S. has struggled to make and retain relationships with countries, particularly in the Sahel region, which was once considered the centerpiece of Washington's security strategy.

Without a navy base in the Mediterranean, Russia would have difficulty supplying its troops in the Middle East and Africa, making it a challenge to maintain its influence in those regions.

"But whether or not the U.S. and NATO are going to be able to exploit those windows of opportunity is another question," Petersen said. He noted Russia's deep, institutional relationships with many African countries and waning U.S. influence on the continent.

Russia could look to locations other than Libya, such as Sudan or Algeria, to reestablish its Mediterranean operations.

That would take "time and money to develop the infrastructure to make the deals happen," said Katarzyna Zysk, a professor with the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo and a non-resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council.

Another possibility is a ceasefire in Ukraine that, in turn, would end restrictions that keep warships from entering or leaving the Black Sea, where Russia has a navy base.

That freedom of movement could help Russia somewhat restore its capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean, analysts said.

However, negotiating an end to Russia's war in Ukraine poses a sizable challenge, Zysk said.

The Russians "cannot lose face in Ukraine. ... They've put everything on that card," she said.

Naples-based U.S. 6th Fleet. The Navy's only air operations in Europe, including P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft and an MQ-4C Triton drone detachment, are at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. The fleet also has operations at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay in Crete.

U.S. forces could work the situation to their advantage if the Russian fleet feels compelled to shadow them, as it often does. It would stress Russian ships that now have limited resources for replenishment, repair or rest, Pe-





## VETERANS

# 'Put me in a pine box'

## Green burials offered at 3 national cemeteries

By LINDA F. HERSEY

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Christopher, a Marine Corps veteran who survived a truck explosion while serving in Afghanistan, said the near-death experience caused him to consider his own mortality and how he wants his burial to be handled.

The 35-year-old Colorado resident, who declined to provide his last name, said he has done advance planning and conveyed his desire to have a natural burial, also known as a green burial, that does not burden loved ones with thousands of dollars in funeral bills.

In contrast to the pomp and circumstance of traditional military funerals, a growing number of veterans say they prefer a simple, low-cost burial that forgoes the luxury of lined caskets and marble urns for a natural interment with minimal impact to the environment, according to a recent survey of veterans by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Based on surveys, the VA recently opened green burial sections at three national cemeteries that limit markers and landscaping, forgo chemicals and embalming fluids, and use caskets, shrouds and urns from natural materials that degrade over time.

The green burials are offered at Pikes Peak National Cemetery in Colorado Springs, Colo.; the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona in Phoenix; and Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, which is north of Tampa.

The VA survey showed respondents ages 40 and under had the greatest interest in natural burials and overwhelmingly supported green alternatives.

"Just put me in a pine box where my body can decompose and return to nature," said Christopher, a former sergeant who served between 2007 and 2016 in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Interest by veterans and their families in green burials parallels a national trend among Americans seeking alternatives to formal funerals with costly grave sites, underground vaults and a standardized burial process that does not allow for individual expression, according to Ann Hoffner, who publishes "Green Burial Naturally," a



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Jane Pennington holds a photo of her deceased husband World War II veteran Ken Pennington. Ken Pennington was buried using green burial methods.**

state-by-state guide to natural burials.

The number of cemeteries offering green burials has grown from 42 in 2016 to more than 300 in 2024, Hoffner said.

Hoffner first learned about green burials through her own experience seeking an alternative to a conventional funeral for her 94-year-old father, a World War II veteran who died in 2016.

Edward A. Hoffner was an Army lieutenant who participated in the liberation of France, his daughter said.

Hoffner published an essay about her father's natural burial at a wooded sanctuary, comparing it to a cousin's traditional funeral "in a painted casket in a concrete vault under an Astroturf temporary covering" at a memorial park.

An American flag was draped over her father's body, which was wrapped in a shroud of natural material. Mourners placed his body in a wooden wagon that was wheeled to his grave at Steelmantown Cemetery, a woodland burial preserve in New Jersey.

An honor guard played taps and fired a three-volley salute as a final farewell after the body was lowered into the ground.

"The wild blueberries had been pulled back to admit his body and would be replanted," Ann Hoffner wrote. "It was an extraordinary realization that he had joined an ecosystem. It would recycle the nutrients in his flesh and bones and weave them



ANN HOFFNER

**Mourners stand before the gravesite of Edward Hoffner, a World War II veteran who died in 2016. His daughter, Ann Hoffner, chose a green burial for her father that used only biodegradable materials. Hoffner was buried at Steelmantown Cemetery, a natural burial preserve in New Jersey.**

into life."

While the Hoffner family holds a deed to his burial plot, there are no grave markers or head stones.

The simplicity of green burials also makes them less costly for the survivors. They typically cost about \$6,000, but prices vary by location and the services selected, according to the Green Burial Council.

Conventional funerals can run up to \$15,000 — with fees for viewing, burial, refrigeration, transport, casket purchase and embalming. Standard caskets and urns alone can cost thousands of dollars.

When a veteran dies, the Department of Veterans Affairs provides a burial allowance to offset the costs of a funeral, with the family responsible for the difference.

For service-connected deaths, VA pays up to \$2,000 for burial expenses of former service members who died after Sept. 11, 2001. It provides up to \$1,500 for deaths prior to that date.

If the veteran is buried in a VA national cemetery, some or all of the cost of transporting the deceased may be reimbursed.

For non-service-connected deaths, VA will pay up to \$978 toward burial and funeral expenses with a \$978 plot-interment allowance, if the veteran is not buried in a national cemetery.

The National Cemetery Administration will accept cremated and intact

remains for green burials at the three cemeteries participating in the pilot program.

According to the National Funeral Directors Association, nearly 70% of Americans surveyed expressed interest in learning about green burials as a funeral option because of the lower costs and benefits for the environment.

Congress in 2022 authorized the VA to establish green burial sections in national cemeteries.

Under the National Cemeteries Preservation and Protection Act, a veteran's remains interred in a green burial section must be prepared without chemicals and using caskets and urns that will naturally degrade in the environment.

The idea behind green burials is to allow the body to recycle in the natural environment with little disturbance to the surroundings, according to the Green Burial Council.

"When it comes to green burials, I like to say there are many shades of green. For some families, green burial means no chemical preservation of the body, a casket made of natural material, and no vault or grave liner if the cemetery allows," said Lily Buerkle, director of funerals for the historic Congressional Cemetery in Washington, where 1,700 veterans are interred.













## MILITARY

# Vietnam soldiers receive Medal of Honor

## 2 rescued fellow troops in combat

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden was direct when speaking to Kenneth David on Jan. 3.

“You’re a hero, a genuine hero,” said Biden, who presented such an honor for the final time in his administration. “Flat-out, straight-up American hero, and we owe you.”

David was one of seven soldiers on that day who served in the wars in Vietnam and Korea to receive the nation’s highest military award for valor in combat from Biden. But David, who served in Vietnam, was the only man present for the ceremony. The other awards were presented posthumously. Four men had died in combat and two died after their military service.

David, now 74, joined the Army in August 1969 after being drafted. He graduated from Girard High School in Ohio and had been working for a year.

“Being I was brought up proper, I went in the Army and fulfilled my commitment to our country. That’s what I believed in,” he told reporters ahead of the ceremony.

Then-Pfc. David distinguished himself on May 7, 1970, in Thua Thien Province. He served as a radio-telephone operator with Company D, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, near Fire Support Base Maureen.

“We got overrun,” he said. “[It] was pitch black at night. Explosions started going off, and we got overrun by sappers. And behind the sappers were [North Vietnamese troops].”

The enemy’s initial assault mortally wounded the company’s platoon leader. David’s lieutenant was killed instantly, Biden said. Then David was also hit in the back with shrapnel.

“But he couldn’t and wouldn’t give up,” the president added.

Without hesitation, David handed his radio to his platoon sergeant and moved forward to the defensive perimeter, unleashing automatic weapons fire on the enemy troops.

David, from his position, beat back



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Army Spec. 4 Kenneth J. David is awarded the Medal of Honor by President Joe Biden at the White House on Jan. 3.**

enemy efforts to overrun him. Realizing the impact of the enemy assault on the wounded, who were being moved to the center of the defensive perimeter that the U.S. troops had established, David moved to a position outside of the perimeter while continuing to engage the enemy.



Nelson

Each time the enemy attempted to concentrate its fire on wounded Americans inside the perimeter, David jumped from his position and yelled to draw enemy fire away from injured troops. Refusing to withdraw in the face of the concentrated enemy fire now directed toward him, he continued to engage the enemy.

Though wounded by an exploding satchel charge and running low on ammunition, he tossed hand grenades toward the attackers to counter their fire. The unit’s medic, realizing David had been injured, moved to his position to provide medical aid. David told the medic that he was OK and continued to fight on.

“The adrenaline was so high in me that I had no idea ... but I was able to save seven [other troops],” he said. “So, between the effort of Greg and

myself, we did our duty.”

David credited his buddy, Spc. Gregory Phillips, for his efforts during the fight. Phillips received the Silver Star for his actions. David initially received the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroics that day.

Another soldier who fought in Vietnam also received the Medal of Honor on Jan. 3 — Capt. Hugh Nelson Jr.

His daughter, Debbie McKnight, recounted recently how she didn’t want her father to go to Vietnam.

“As a 5-year-old, I remember him lifting me up in my grandparents’ house. And I told him not to go because I was never going to see him again,” she said.

Six months later, Army officials drove up to the Nelsons’ house to inform them that Hugh was killed in action. He was 28. It happened the day before her little brother, Hugh Nelson III, turned a year old.

McKnight and her family know the sacrifice her father made. The country now knows it too as Nelson posthumously received the highest military honor for heroism in battle.

Nelson was raised in Rocky Mount and Durham, N.C. McKnight said her father was in JROTC in high school before graduating from The Citadel in South Carolina in 1959.

On June 5, 1966, near Moc Hoa, Nelson was the acting aircraft commander of a Huey helicopter with the 114th Aviation Company on a search-and-destroy reconnaissance mission when the aircraft was struck by a barrage of enemy fire that rendered it uncontrollable.

McKnight’s brother, “Tripp” as the family refers to him, said his father was flying the helicopter with three other crew members. Tripp Nelson said reports on the fight concluded the aircraft hit the ground at 100 mph.

The crash left the four-man crew unconscious in the helicopter. Nelson was the first to wake up and moved to the other side of the aircraft where he found his dazed and wounded crew chief still trapped inside the Huey. After getting him out of the aircraft, Nelson climbed into the severely damaged helicopter to assist the door gunner, who was still strapped inside and unable to move.

While Nelson tried to free his comrade, North Vietnamese troops attacked the downed helicopter, firing automatic rifles and small arms from about 30 feet away. The heavy enemy fire wounded Nelson but he continued his efforts to free the trapped door gunner. After freeing the soldier from the Huey, Nelson used his body as a shield to cover the door gunner from the intense enemy fire.

“I’ve read everywhere that he took between six and, I believe, 20 rounds,” Tripp Nelson said. “He passed away during that time. The other three crew members lived and luckily were evacuated fairly quickly.”

McKnight said the family was returning home from getting haircuts when they pulled up to the house and saw two men waiting for them. After the men left, McKnight went in the house and saw her mother crying.

“She looked at me and she said that my daddy was gone and he was never coming back,” McKnight said. “He was just brought up as a good Christian and a good soldier, and all he would have thought about was doing the right thing. He told us, and our mother, that the one thing that he had to do was he had to fight for freedom so that everyone had the right to live their lives the way they wanted.”

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## MILITARY

# 'Always selfless, loving and honorable'

## 5 Korean War soldiers posthumously receive the Medal of Honor

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Five Korean War soldiers whose extraordinary heroism was not fully recognized at the time were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on Jan. 3 as part of a campaign to shine a light on the role of minority service members in defense of the nation.

All five — one Hispanic, one Filipino American, one Japanese American and two African Americans — were awarded medals for valor at the time.

However, in August 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed secretaries of the military branches to review decorations given to Black and Native American veterans to determine whether their actions "warrant the award of the Medal of Honor," the military's highest award for valor.

Of the more than 3,500 service members who have been awarded the Medal of Honor, only 94 African Americans, 59 Hispanics and 35 Asian or Pacific Islanders have received the decoration, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

President Joe Biden presented the medals at a White House ceremony, during which two Vietnam War soldiers also received Medals of Honor.



Cavazos

**Then-1st Lt. Richard Cavazos**, who was from Kingsville, Texas, entered the Army after graduating from what is now

Texas Tech University. During the Korean conflict, he served as commander of E Company, 2nd Battalion, 65th Infantry Regiment, comprised mostly of Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans.

On the night of June 14, 1953, Cavazos led his company on a raid on an enemy outpost on Hill 142 near Sagemak, Korea. During the initial attack, the company came under intense mortar and artillery fire.

After fierce close combat in the ene-



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**President Joe Biden smiles with Juanita Mendez during a ceremony in which her brother Pfc. Charles R. Johnson was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.**

my trenches, the company was forced to pull back under heavy artillery and mortar fire. Twice more Cavazos led his soldiers in assaults on the position despite intense hostile fire.

Ordered to withdraw, Cavazos remained alone on the enemy position to search for missing men. While exposed to enemy fire, he located five casualties and evacuated them to safety on the reverse slope of a nearby hill where they were shielded from enemy fire.

Returning to the battlefield, he found others who had become separated from the main assault force and personally led them to safety.

Cavazos repeatedly returned to the enemy position until he was satisfied all had been accounted for, according to records from the time. Only then would he allow medics to treat his own wounds.

Cavazos was initially awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest military decoration for valor, for his actions on Hill 142.

After fighting in Korea ended, Cavazos remained in the Army and was again awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in Vietnam. In 1976, he became the first Hispanic to be promoted to brigadier general and six years later was appointed the first four-star general of Hispanic origin.

He retired in 1984 after a 33-year career and died in 2017 at age 88. In

2023, Fort Hood, Texas, was renamed Fort Cavazos after Congress directed the removal of names of Confederates from American military installations.

Cavazos' son Tommy said he isn't certain that his father would accept the Medal of Honor if he were still living because "it was something my dad never sought or pursued or felt that he was entitled to."

Instead, his father felt bad "because he knew he couldn't get everybody off that field. And I think he always was haunted by that."

**Pvt. Bruno Orig** was born in Hawaii to parents from the Philippines. He



Orig

was 11 years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, plunging the U.S. into World War II. Following the example of his father and stepfather, he enlisted in the Army in 1950 less than two months after the North Koreans attacked the South, igniting the Korean War.

On Feb. 15, 1951, while assigned to G Company, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, Orig was returning from a wire-laying mission near Chipyeong-ni, Korea, when he saw several of his comrades had been wounded during an attack.

Disregarding his own safety, Orig

rushed to them and began administering first aid under fire. With the help of several comrades from the company command post, Orig began removing the wounded to safety.

After returning to help more of the wounded, Orig volunteered to man a machine gun because most of the crew had been wounded. He provided covering fire so a platoon of allies could escape and continued firing even as his company's positions were overrun.

After the battle was over and the area secured, Orig was found dead beside his weapon. In front of his position lay the bodies of several enemy soldiers.

He was 20 years old. For his sacrifice, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

"He came upon a firefight, rescued fellow soldiers, took a machine-gun position, engaged with the enemy and ultimately died in action," his nephew Charles "Chuck" Allen III said. "But [he] saved a platoon and doing that is now being recognized."

**Pfc. Wataru Nakamura** was a 20-year-old Japanese American when the U.S. entered World War II and then-President Franklin Roosevelt ordered citizens of Japanese descent into internment camps. Nakamura and his family were sent to a camp in Rowher, Ark.



Nakamura

After Japanese American men were allowed to enlist, he signed up for the Army, according to his nephew Gary Takashima. He was assigned to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a Japanese American unit that fought in Italy and became one of the most decorated American units of the war.

After World War II, Nakamura joined the Army Reserve and was called up when the Korean War began. On May 18, 1951, Nakamura, serving as a lieutenant in the 2nd Infantry Division, volunteered to repair a communications line between his platoon and the command post. As he made his way along the line, he came under fire from an enemy unit threatening to breach the company defense lines.

Nakamura rushed the enemy troops

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## MILITARY

# Vietnam

### FROM PAGE 11

Nelson had initially received the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army's second highest military decoration, for his actions and sacrifice.

The Medal of Honor process can take years before a service member receives the award.

Herm Breuer, an Army veteran and a veterans service officer in Trumbull County, examined David's records and felt the Medal of Honor was justified. David said Breuer devoted 17 years to work on a recommendation packet for him.

"Mr. Herm Breuer never gave up on me and that's why I'm here today, and I thank him for that," David said.

Tripp Nelson and McKnight said Ted Curtis was working in the archives of The Citadel and discovered their father's story. Curtis, also a graduate of The Citadel, got other graduates involved after reading the story. They investigated the history and submitted their review five or six years ago. Then-Rep. Mark Walker, R-N.C., and Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., kept McKnight updated on the process. It took three years for the Army Review Board to look at the information.

"When Ted was putting the package together, he was able to contact former members of my father's unit who have actually since passed away," McKnight said. "I witnessed reports from them about what had happened. Tripp and I had gotten portions of the story, but we never knew the whole story until after Ted did all of this research. We're just so grateful that he never gave up and would just call or periodically email and just say, 'Hey,

it's going to happen.'"

McKnight said she remembers the day that Biden called. The phone call lasted two minutes and 16 seconds. She was sitting down because her knees were shaking.

After the president recapped Nelson's actions and he would present the family with the Medal of Honor posthumously, Biden commented her father was a very handsome man.

"I was like, 'Yes, my mother thought so too,'" McKnight said. "And that was when the conversation ended. I'm not sure if I should have said that to him, but it always kind of makes me smile and giggle when I think about having said that to the president."

Tripp said despite not knowing his father, he has several of his possessions. He has his uniforms and parachute. He also has his father's wallet.

In Nelson's wallet, there was a picture of his wife and a vaccination card. There were three or four documents related to code of conduct and what to do if you were captured by the Vietnamese. His father also had a prayer in his wallet.

"It was filled with documents he was keeping with him, I guess, to remind him what good conduct was. I don't think he needed to remind himself," Tripp said. "You can tell a lot about a person. He felt he was in the right place where he belonged, and that was in the war, fighting for our country."

McKnight accepted the award on her father's behalf. She and the president held hands as the Medal of Honor citation was read. It appeared McKnight held back tears.

As Biden handed the framed medal to her, McKnight said, "Thank you and God bless."

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# Korea

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with a fixed bayonet and singlehandedly destroyed a hostile machine-gun position, driving the enemy from several bunkers that they had captured.

When his ammunition ran low, he withdrew under intense enemy fire until he met an ammunition party climbing the hill.

With more ammunition, Nakamura returned to the fight, killing three enemy soldiers in one bunker before charging another. Continuing to press the attack, he was mortally wounded by an enemy grenade.

Nakamura was 29. He received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions and sacrifice.

"He lost his life, volunteering for an assignment, helping out his unit," Takashima said. "My uncle had a commitment to his service and his fellow soldiers. It impressed one of his buddies, Richard Edlebeck. When Richard learned years later his friend didn't receive the Medal of Honor, he spent the rest of his life working on a packet."

Takashima said his uncle would have been honored to receive the award but "felt all of this was too much for doing what he was supposed to do."

**Cpl. Fred McGee** was an African American from Steubenville, Ohio, who



**McGee**

enlisted in the Army in May 1951, only about three years after then-President Harry S. Truman ordered the desegregation of the U.S. military.

Sent to Korea, McGee was serving with the 7th Infantry Division on Hill 528 when his unit came under fire. After his squad leader was wounded, McGee assumed command and ordered the remaining members to advance to a more exposed position and engage an enemy machine-gun crew.

When his own machine-gunner was mortally wounded, McGee again took over the weapon and ordered the rest of his squad to withdraw while he provided cover fire.

Though wounded in the face, he stood straight up under intense enemy machine-gun and mortar fire and tried to evacuate the body of the company runner. Forced to abandon the body, he aided a wounded man and moved him

to safety through a barrage of enemy mortar and artillery fire.

McGee's daughter Victoria Secrest said while her father was still in Korea, a comic book publisher wanted to do a story on his actions at Hill 528. However, there was a glaring inaccuracy in the depiction.

"They made him a white soldier," Secrest said. "I think it could have been inadvertent because they hadn't seen a picture of him. I don't know if they ever saw his DD-214 (service record) but, anyway, that's what happened."

McGee was awarded a Silver Star, the third-highest combat decoration. He died in 2020.

"When I hear about his acts of valor on the battlefield, it comes as no surprise because he was always selfless, loving and honorable in everything he did," said his granddaughter, Kristen Lee Bailey.

Before **Pfc. Charles R. Johnson** was drafted into the Army, he played football, basketball, baseball and ran track at Arlington High School in New York. He was also a singer.

"He had some options when he was drafted," said his nephew Trey Mendez. "He could have applied for different roles in the military. But he said, 'No, if other people are going to the front, I need to go to the front too.'"

Johnson, an African American, was serving during the Korean War as a Browning Automatic Rifle operator with Company B, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, when Chinese forces attacked his unit on June 11-12, 1953.

Overwhelming numbers of Chinese troops assaulted the trenches and bunkers defended by Johnson and his squad.

Johnson, who was wounded by artillery and grenade fire, administered first aid to the more seriously injured. He dragged a wounded soldier to a secure bunker, stopping intermittently to aid injured soldiers and kill several enemy troops in hand-to-hand combat.

As the second bunker came under attack, he left the position and began firing at the enemy to defend the American wounded. He was killed in the fighting at age 20.

Mendez said his uncle saved the lives of at least 8 soldiers, including his high school classmate Don Dingee.

He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star in 2010.



**Johnson**



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