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A Polish family waves American flags at the Polish-American Freedom Fest in Powidz, Poland, on July 4.

PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

Building bonds in Poland

Poles, Americans celebrate together in village that's home to US troops **Page 3**

COVER STORY

US ties growing in Polish town of Powidz

800-year-old village has changed markedly since Army arrived

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

POWIDZ, Poland — Residents of this sleepy lakeside village that hosts U.S. troops could hardly believe it when they heard that the American indie rock band American Authors would be performing here.

“In Poland, we know very well the song ‘Best Day of My Life,’” Mayor Jakub Gwit said in his office, referring to the group’s 2013 hit single. “It’s amazing that in small Powidz, a world-famous band would come to sing to us.”

The July 4 concert was part of the Polish-American Freedom Fest, a U.S. Independence Day celebration co-hosted by this village of about 2,300 people in west-central Poland and the U.S. Army.

As soldiers in civilian attire and Polish attendees danced together — at times with their hands in the air and joined by frontman Zac Barnett, who leapt offstage wearing an Uncle Sam hat — the celebration, at the very least, sparked smiles and casual conversation outside the usual rhythms of daily life.

It also underscored how much this nearly 800-year-old village has changed in less than a decade since the Army arrived.

Powidz has long had a military presence. The Polish government built an airfield here in the 1950s, when the country was part of the communist Eastern Bloc.

In the late 2000s, several years after Poland joined NATO, the U.S. Air Force began using the airfield for rotational operations.

But arguably the most significant transformation to the area since the airfield was built began in 2017, when U.S. Army units started deploying to Powidz for monthslong rotations as part of a task force under Operation Atlantic Resolve, a mission designed to deter Russian aggression and bolster NATO’s eastern flank.

The task force provides fuel, maintenance and other logistical support to



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

A Polish boy colors on American-themed paper at Polish-American Freedom Fest in Powidz, Poland, on July 4.



Sgt. Damiracle Alexander was crowned the cake-eating champion at the Polish-American Freedom Fest in Powidz.

Army units. In addition to the rotational soldiers who support it, other U.S. soldiers work at the airfield, training Polish personnel on operating and maintaining Apache helicopters that Warsaw is purchasing from Washington.

A small group of soldiers also works alongside U.S. contractors at the Army’s newest pre-positioned stock site in Powidz, where equipment and supplies are stored for rapid use in a crisis.

Together, these elements bring the number of U.S. personnel in Powidz to roughly 1,500, according to the U.S.

Army Garrison Poland. At any given time, that’s about 40% of the village’s population, which includes the surrounding areas.

Promoting cohesion has been a priority, which military leaders say goes hand-in-hand with outreach and cultural understanding.

“We have a responsibility to the community,” garrison commander Col. Jesse Chace said on the sidelines of the July 4 event. “This isn’t Iraq or Afghanistan. Soldiers can walk out the gate, they can hop in a cab, they are going to be part of the community,



A Statue of Liberty replica overlooks Lake Powidzkie at Pod Strzecha hotel and restaurant in Giewartow, Poland.



For the time being, U.S. soldiers deployed to Powidz have to live in communal tents, like these. However, permanent dormitories are being built.

regardless.”

It’s a similar situation at the garrison’s 12 installations spread across western Poland. Although the Army has operated in the country for years, the garrison was only activated in early 2023, reflecting the service’s increasingly permanent presence.

The Polish-American Freedom Fest, held last year for the first time, is the only official Army Independence Day celebration in Europe held off base.

The speed with which the event came together underscored the garrison’s commitment to strengthening ties, something Chace described as an insurance policy of sorts as the relationship moves forward.

“When the community has positive relationships with the Army as an

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COVER STORY

Polish town sees economic growth since arrival of American troops

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institution, that really helps, because there will be one-off incidents here and there,” Chace said. “These goodwill events help mitigate those sorts of things.”

Cpl. Paul Young, who played cornhole in the afternoon, said that in addition to breaking down barriers with the community, the event provided a rest day for soldiers, whose deployment to Powidz can be difficult at times.

Soldiers here still live in communal tents on base, although the construction of permanent housing has begun. Some face travel restrictions based on their rank, and while Powidz has the largest Exchange store in Poland, it pales in comparison to stores at larger bases elsewhere in Europe.

“It’s not a hostile environment, but when you think about the time away from family, the amount of hours that get put in every day at work, the limited time you have to actually enjoy your life, that makes it more stressful, and in extreme cases depression can set

in,” said Young, who spent the holiday away from his two young children and wife. “So, having days like this are definitely beneficial because they allow us to take a step back and really get to enjoy life.”

Local entrepreneurs have seized on the opportunity to offer goods and services that enhance the quality of life for U.S. soldiers stationed in Powidz.

Outside the base, a roadside collection of businesses includes restaurants, a vape shop, a tattoo parlor and a car rental store.

Sebastian Zurek runs the Red Box Truck restaurant with his brother and said it was the first to open in the area.

“I want the soldiers to feel at home here,” Zurek, who grew up in the U.S., said at the restaurant, whose wall decorations included a Trump 2020 flag, various Army unit flags and a Ted Nugent flag with a rifle silhouette and “I will not comply” written on it, a phrase commonly associated with opposition to gun regulations.

The venue has a pool table and hosts

karaoke nights. A miniature golf course is planned to be built out back.

Zurek said he thinks of U.S. troops as friends but conceded that not all residents see them this way.

“It’s a mixed feeling among the locals, because sometimes the soldiers’ shenanigans are noisy, and sometimes they drink a little bit too much and get kind of obnoxious,” Zurek said, adding that, generally, even the critics consider the Americans good for Powidz’s economy.

Gwit, the mayor, agreed, and said since the Army’s arrival, about 50 new businesses have opened in the area.

Across the lake in Giewartow, a resort has erected a large replica of the Statue of Liberty, facing the water, partly to attract American customers and partly because the owner “is a fan of the American lifestyle,” according to management.

Gwit said the growth is benefiting residents, too. Restaurants that used to shutter when the lake tourism season ended are now open all year.

Also, as part of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States and Poland, which expanded the U.S. military presence in the country, the Polish government agreed to fund infrastructure improvements for U.S. forces, including upgrades to roads in places like Powidz.

In addition to the Freedom Fest, which organizers say will be an annual tradition, the garrison says soldiers will continue to participate in regular outreach activities. These include events like cooking and dance classes and school visits by soldiers.

Pfc. Destiny Winfield is one of the volunteers who visit local schools.

“So many of the students follow me on social media now,” Winfield said with a smile, adding that young Poles are keen to take selfies with soldiers and talk about U.S. pop culture. “A lot of girls here listen to Olivia Rodrigo, they literally like the same things.”

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MILITARY

USS Pierre closes chapter of LCS saga

Last of once-touted Independence-class completes sea trials

BY SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

The Navy's last Independence-class littoral combat ship successfully completed sea trials this month, a bitter-sweet milestone for a group of vessels that were once planned to be a bigger part of the service's future.

USS Pierre, the 19th vessel of its class, returned to Mobile, Ala., in early June after completing comprehensive testing of its major systems and equipment, Naval Sea Systems Command said in a June 23 statement.

The ship will be commissioned this fall and homeported in San Diego, supporting security, sea control and deterrence operations, the Navy said.

The achievement marked the close of an important chapter in U.S. shipbuilding history, with the story of the littoral combat ship still being written by sailors, Jonas Brown, deputy program manager of the LCS Program Office, said in the statement.

Littoral combat ships are fast, nimble vessels prized for their abilities in coastal areas and the open ocean.

In the early 2000s, shipbuilders



AMANDA HELFERS/U.S. Navy

USS Pierre departs Austal USA shipyard to conduct acceptance trials in Mobile, Ala., in June.

developed two variants, Independence and Freedom, each capable of surface warfare and mine hunting. The ships have different hulls and are designed and built by separate shipbuilders.

At one point, the Navy planned to have the ships make up about one-sixth of the service's oceangoing fleet.

But the Independence variant suffered costly setbacks and delays, including cracked hulls and propulsion issues.

The USS Independence, the first ship in the class, joined the active fleet in 2010 and was decommissioned in 2021. The USS Coronado was decommissioned in 2022 after about eight years of service. Upgrading the two ships, along with the first two Free-

dom-class variants, was considered too costly, Navy officials said at the time.

About 17 Independence-class vessels are active.

The Freedom variant also was plagued by propulsion problems and other costly issues. As a result, the Navy in 2022 proposed mothballing nine Freedom-class ships well ahead of their end-of-service dates. Ultimately, five of the ships were saved.

About 10 Freedom-class ships remain in service, according to the Navy's website. The variant's final vessel, USS Cleveland, is planned to be commissioned this fall, according to ussclaveland.org.

The service now is prioritizing production of the Constellation-class fri-

gate, which it says delivers a more powerful punch.

But with the aging Avenger-class minesweepers nearing retirement, the Navy recently designated at least three Independence-class ships — USS Canberra, USS Tulsa and USS Santa Barbara — to be homeported in Bahrain.

The ships are the first Independence-class vessels to be outfitted with mine-hunting capabilities, including surface drones, Naval News reported in April.

Canberra arrived in the Middle East in May. Santa Barbara and Tulsa are expected to deploy to the region later this year, USNI News reported on June 23.

No Freedom-class variants are expected to be outfitted with mine-hunting capabilities, according to Naval News.

Pierre is named in honor of the South Dakota capital and is the second U.S. Navy warship to bear the name, the Navy said.

The ship "is not just the final LCS in its class; it's a symbol of our Navy's strength, lethality, and commitment to global security," Melissa Kirkendall, acting program executive officer for unmanned and small combatants, said in the statement.

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Congress wants American-made boots for all troops

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
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WASHINGTON — All service members would wear combat boots manufactured entirely in America and made with U.S.-sourced materials under a new bill introduced by a bipartisan group of lawmakers.

The legislation aims to ensure troops are equipped with "high-quality, safe and reliable" footwear and seeks to reduce reliance on foreign supply chains that have flooded the market with cheap, imported boots.

Defense Department regulations now allow troops to purchase foreign-made boots that have the appearance of regulation boots but fall "far short in quality and durability," according to lawmakers.

"Ensuring our military's readiness means every part of our service members' uniforms must be functional, reliable and safe — and that we can surge supplies in crisis or conflict," said Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., an Army combat veteran.

Rep. Nikki Budzinski, D-Ill., said a military boot manufacturer in her district — Belleville Boots — has faced unfair competition from countries such as China, undercutting jobs and posing a threat to national security.

The Better Outfitting Our Troops, or BOOTS, Act mandates all boots worn by troops, including optional boots that serve as alternatives to the military's standard-issue boot, are 100% made and sourced in the United States or are compliant with the Berry Amendment.



GIANNA GRONOWSKI/Stars and Stripes

Army soldiers march along the streets of Washington, D.C., for the U.S. Ar-

The amendment requires the Pentagon to give purchasing preference to clothing produced in the U.S.

Bill McCann, the executive director of the U.S. Footwear Manufacturers Association, said the introduced legis-

lation closes a gap in the Berry Amendment by requiring all military footwear sold through Defense Department exchanges to be domestically sourced.

"Alarming, up to 50% of our service members currently wear foreign-made 'optional' boots, primarily from China and Vietnam, while on duty," McCann wrote in a letter to President Donald Trump in May.

Lawmakers said the influx of foreign-made boots has led to a decrease in quality and undermined the domestic defense supply chain to the point that it would be too fragile to meet demand in the event of a major conflict.

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MILITARY

Army to cut 10 ROTC programs, revamp others

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Nearly 300 college students in the Army's Reserve Officers' Training Corps will see their units affected by a downsizing triggered by cuts to the civilian workforce behind the program, service officials said.

Ten universities will drop an existing Army ROTC unit, and another 46 programs will reduce on-campus resources and staff. The changes are set to occur in the summer of 2026 and will not affect those entering their senior year in a program.

"This rebalance and optimization effort ensures we meet the Army's requirements for officer commissioning while being good stewards of resources," said Brig. Gen. Maurice Barnett, commander of Army Cadet Command.

"Our approach allows us to sustain and strengthen ROTC programs while providing quality training to cadets across the country."

Roughly 900 campuses nationwide

will continue to train future Army officers after the rebalancing, the service said.

The changes will allow the Army to scale officer training as needed and avoid "hollow units," the service said. It also allows soldiers working for the program to move to other jobs prioritized by the Army.



Barnett

About 70% of Army officers commission through ROTC, and about 15,000 students receive merit-based scholarships each year through the program, the Army said.

The changes were sparked by the federal government's deferred resignation program, which has allowed some federal employees to leave their jobs in government and continue to receive pay through September.

In the Cadet Command, which oversees Army ROTC, 168 civilian workers resigned, which cut about 12% of its

workforce, the service said.

As part of the ROTC reduction, the Army will inactivate the 1st Brigade headquarters at Fort Knox, Ky.

The unit provided support to six senior and four junior military colleges across the country, which include The Citadel in South Carolina and Texas A&M University. The brigade's workload will transfer to the other seven brigades in the command.

For those 291 students affected by the changes, 144 are incoming juniors and seniors and should see only a minor impact while completing their contract and commissioning into the service because it will take about two years to make all the changes, according to Cadet Command.

For other students, 108 are not in a contract with the Army, which means they are taking ROTC courses but do not plan to commission. Another 16 are incoming freshmen or sophomores who will have to make a decision, the command said.

They can either transfer to a school

continuing with an ROTC program, or the Army will allow them to walk away from their contract without consequences.

"Throughout this process, our commitment remains unchanged — producing high-caliber officers of character to lead our Army," Barnett said.

"We are working closely with our workforce, cadets and academic partners to ensure a smooth transition while preserving the quality of our ROTC programs."

The 10 universities leaving Army ROTC are: California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo; University of Northern Iowa; Western Illinois University; Truman State University, Mo.; Elizabeth City State University, N.C.; Saint Augustine's University, N.C.; Clarkson University, N.Y.; John Carroll University, Ohio; University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh; and West Virginia State University.

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Alaska Air Force base picked for nuclear microreactor

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

A remote Air Force base in Alaska has been selected to be the first U.S. military installation with a nuclear microreactor under a Defense Department pilot project.

Eielson Air Force Base, located near Fairbanks, was named in June by the Defense Department as the preferred site for the reactor. Pentagon officials hope to have it built and running by late 2028.

Air Force Secretary Troy Meink said in an announcement that Eielson was selected because the microreactors would be most beneficial at isolated bases with fewer power options if other electrical systems failed. Eielson experienced temporary power outages in 2020 and 2024.

If the pilot project planned at Eielson proves the microreactors have value, additional models could be added to more bases in the future, Meink said.

"This initiative has the potential to shape future strategies for powering national security infrastructure — especially in the Arctic, where energy

reliability is critical amid evolving threats," he said.

Eielson is home to the 354th Fighter Wing. The base operates in extreme Arctic conditions, with temperatures well below zero degrees during winter.

The reactor could keep the base's lights on and heat running and perform other missions, including possibly de-icing runways in case other systems are offline.

The Defense Logistics Agency said Oklo Inc. would design, build, own and operate the microreactor that the Air Force wants to install at Eielson. The nuclear technology company based in Santa Clara, Calif., is developing a test model of the reactor at the Idaho National Laboratory in Idaho Falls.

The Pentagon would not say how much the microreactor will cost.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission rejected Oklo's initial license application for its microreactor design in 2022, citing incomplete data for approval. Oklo has announced plans to reapply. President Donald Trump in May issued a directive that the NRC process applications in less than 18



Oklo Inc.

Oklo Inc. created this rendering of the nuclear microreactor building that the Pentagon wants to construct at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska.

months.

A 30-year, fixed-price power purchase agreement between the Air Force and Oklo would be finalized once the NRC grants a license.

The project is part of the Pentagon's Advanced Nuclear Power for Installations program, which aims to build microreactors at two military installations by 2030. The reactors are designed to generate between 3 and 10 megawatts of power and operate for several years without refueling.

The Pentagon described microreactor-

tors as advanced nuclear systems capable of generating electricity for several years without replenishing the nuclear fuel that do not need connection to commercial power supplies to operate.

In a parallel project, the Defense Department Strategic Capabilities Office is working on a portable reactor that could work up to three years without requiring refueling. The program being developed by BWXT Advanced Technologies would be for a 1-to-5-megawatt reactor that could be transported to sites in the field.

The project is part of a broader federal effort to accelerate the development of nuclear energy. Congress in 2024 passed legislation to streamline nuclear power regulations.

Trump has made fast-tracking nuclear energy projects a priority during his second term in office. In May, he announced a goal of creating 400 gigawatts of nuclear power by 2050, with 10 large reactors under construction by 2030.

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MILITARY



DAVID GRIM/U.S. Space Force

Air Force airmen and Space Force guardians stand in formation at an activation ceremony at Schriever Space Force Base, Colo., on June 18.

Air Force, Space Force hit recruiting targets

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force and Space Force each hit their 2025 recruiting goals with months to spare, the Air Force announced.

“The fact that we have even exceeded this goal and currently have a [delayed entry program] at its largest level in 10 years speaks to the vast number of volunteers interested in serving their country today,” Air Force Secretary Troy Meink said in a recent statement.

The Space Force was seeking to enlist 800 guardians this year, and the Air Force wanted to enlist more than 33,000 active-duty airmen.

The Air Force had its strongest delayed entry program in the last decade with 14,000 recruits, the service said. The service also has what it says is a record 750 special warfare recruits.

“When you have a winning team, people want to join,” Gen. David Allvin, the service’s chief of staff, said in a statement.

Both services hitting their recruiting goals continue the trend across the military, with the Army and Navy hitting their goals before the Sept. 30 conclusion of the fiscal year. Defense

Secretary Pete Hegseth last month ordered the formation of a task force charged with bolstering and coordinating recruitment by military services.

Each of the services has made decisions to boost recruiting after the Army, Navy and Air Force each missed their recruiting goals in 2023.

Relaxed tattoo rules and increased bonuses are factors that helped the Air Force reach its recruiting goal in 2024. In December, the service added several medical conditions to its waiver program to open career opportunities for recruits.

The new policy allows waivers to be granted in certain cases for asthma, hearing loss and food allergies.

The Space Force, since its inception in 2019 during President Donald Trump’s first term, met its goal for a sixth consecutive year.

“It’s clear Americans are excited about the Space Force, and this achievement is a direct reflection of the talent our mission continues to attract,” Gen. B. Chance Saltzman, chief of space operations, said in a statement.

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Watchdog: Navy didn’t document its process in recruiting rebound

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The Navy reversed a major recruiting slump in 2024 and even met its 2025 goals early, but a lack of documentation on how it achieved those gains could undermine future efforts, a government watchdog agency said.

Accepting lower Armed Forces Qualification Test scores, allowing more nonmedical waivers and increasing the maximum recruitment age from 39 to 41 were among the initiatives that expanded the recruitment pool, the Defense Department inspector general said in a June 27 report.

In 2024, the Navy began daily operations meetings for a more data-driven approach, the report said.

It also added staffing to address a backlog of about 8,600 pending medical waiver requests. That led to 10,917 approved waivers, which resulted in 5,845 recruits in May and June last year.

Instead of taking about 40 days, the medical waiver process now averages just one day per decision, the report said.

Those changes helped the Navy contract 40,978 future sailors in 2024, surpassing its goal by 378. Last month, the service announced that it already had met its 2025 goal of 40,600 future sailors.

The rebound follows a dismal 2023 recruiting year that saw the service miss its active-duty enlisted recruit goal by 7,464.

However, the service didn’t document the 2024 changes to its medical waiver and operational recruitment processes, IG inspectors found.

The omission occurred because recruitment personnel were focused on implementing the new processes and “lacked the time to develop and publish guidance documenting the changes,” Navy officials explained in the report.

During the evaluation, service officials said Navy Recruiting Command was taking steps to formalize the



STUART POSADA/U.S. Navy

Recruits sit in formation during team skills training at U.S. Navy Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes, Ill., on June 3.

changes, such as documenting the establishment of a recruiting operations center, and eliminating unneeded paperwork and other roadblocks for recruiters.

This would help ensure that the changes are maintained as personnel rotate out of the command, the IG said.

“Until the NRC updates these procedures, it will lack controls over program operations and will be unable to provide reasonable assurance that the program will meet its objective,” the report stated.

The Navy submitted revised guidance last month, the report stated.

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MILITARY

4th military zone established in Arizona

Border areas target migrant crossings

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The military established a fourth defense zone along the U.S. border with Mexico recently — creating a strip of land in Arizona where anyone crossing the border is subject to charges of trespassing on military property as well as border crossing violations.

The Yuma National Defense Area is a 140-mile extension of Marine Corps Air Station Yuma and includes federal property near the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range southwest of Phoenix, chief Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said during a news briefing.

Similar defense areas already exist in Texas and New Mexico and will “continue to enhance the department’s ability to protect the southern border from unlawful entry,” he said.

Creating these military areas allows troops to conduct law enforcement activities just as they would at any other military base, including temporary detention, searches and crowd-control operations.

However, officials with the Joint Task



ERICA ESTERLY/U.S. Army

Army Sgt. Georgiana John and Sgt. Ashanti Boatwright dismount during a patrol last month along the protective barrier in Yuma, Ariz.

Force Southern Border have said troops continue to allow Customs and Border Protection agents to take the lead as often as possible. Troops have only temporarily detained four of the 450 people detected as trespassing in the roughly two months since patrols began in defense areas in New Mexico and Texas, said Maj. Geoffrey Carmichael, spokesman for the task force, which was established at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., soon after President Donald Trump

returned to the White House in late January.

The defense areas are just one part of Trump’s ramped-up border security measures that aim to have no unauthorized crossings across the southern border. Roughly 8,500 troops are deployed under the task force, working primarily to detect possible illegal activity along the border. This includes the use of the Army’s Stryker combat vehicles that have cameras able to observe a

two-mile radius.

“We have made incredible progress and will continue to work towards achieving 100% operational control of the border,” Parnell said.

Those troops have conducted about 3,500 patrols, including about 150 in coordination with Customs and Border Protection and Mexican military on the other side of the border, he said.

The New Mexico National Defense Area, established more than two months ago, was the first of these narrow military zones that have been created. It’s roughly 60 feet wide and encompasses about 170 square miles of noncontiguous land. It falls under the Army’s Fort Huachuca.

The El Paso National Defense Area soon followed as part of Fort Bliss in Texas. It includes more than 50 miles of border land from the state’s western edge to the town of Fort Hancock, according to the task force.

The military recently confirmed the South Texas National Defense Area as part of Joint Base San Antonio. It was the first such zone to belong to an Air Force installation.

It includes 250 miles of federal property along the Rio Grande, Parnell said.

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Air Force halts planned rocket landings on atoll

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Department of the Air Force has suspended plans to use an isolated Pacific island as a test site for landing rockets as it considers alternative sites.

The service had chosen Johnston Atoll, an unincorporated U.S. territory about 700 nautical miles southwest of Honolulu, for testing a program using rockets to rapidly deliver tons of cargo around the globe.

The Air Force had announced in the Federal Register in March that it was undertaking an environmental assessment for the construction of two rocket landing pads on the atoll.

It anticipated issuing a draft assessment by April, but publication was delayed as opposition to the plan by environmental groups surged. A pet-

ition calling for the Air Force to abandon the plan had recently garnered 3,884 signatures.

“The Department of the Air Force has elected to hold the preparation of the Johnston Atoll Environmental Assessment for a proposed rocket cargo landing demonstration on Johnston Atoll in abeyance while the service explores alternative options for implementation of the rocket cargo Vanguard program at a location other than Johnston Atoll,” Laurel Falls, an Air Force spokeswoman, said recently by email.

“A notification will be published via Federal Register if the DAF decides to restart the action or ultimately cancel the Environmental Assessment,” she said.

Falls was unable to provide a reason for the expanded site search during a

phone interview.

The environmental assessment would have evaluated the impact of construction and operation of two landing pads at Johnston Atoll for up to 10 re-entry landings per year over four consecutive years.

“Current military modes of transportation require days to weeks of planning and logistics to provide materiel to distant locations at the time and place of need,” the Air Force said in explaining the need for the rocket program in the Federal Register notice.

The rocket cargo program would use commercial rockets, such as those made by Elon Musk’s Space X, although the Air Force has not announced industry partners.

The Air Force had also considered building the landing pads on Kwajalein

Atoll, Midway Island and Wake Island, all of which have ongoing operations by the U.S. military.

Johnston Atoll has also had a long history of military operations — and extensive contamination as a result.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was used for numerous missile launches during nuclear weapons testing. Launch failures during several of those tests led to plutonium contamination on the atoll.

The Pacific Islands Heritage Coalition, which launched the change.org petition, said in a March 13 news release that building the launch pads on Johnston “only continues decades of harm and abuse to a place that is culturally and biologically tied to us as Pacific people.”

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MILITARY

Bill calls for tracking PFAS cleanups online

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Cleanups of cancer-causing chemicals by the Defense Department at hundreds of military installations across the nation would be tracked through a public dashboard and an “acceleration strategy” for higher risk sites would be monitored by lawmakers, according to newly proposed legislation.

Reps. Jack Bergman, R-Mich., and Kristen McDonald Rivet, D-Mich., the bill’s sponsors, said the legislation will yield site-specific information about contamination from per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances at more than 600 military sites and surrounding communities across the country.

The Military PFAS Transparency Act instructs the Defense Department to improve disclosures about PFAS investigations and cleanups through enhanced public outreach and annual reports to Congress.

“The bill requires DOD to commit

to more efficient cleanup strategies. These strategies will prioritize cleanup based on risk, increase lab testing capacity and set standards for evaluating cleanup efforts,” the lawmakers said in a statement.

The legislation is expected to be introduced as an amendment to the fiscal 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, the annual must-pass bill that sets Congress’ policy and spending priorities for the Pentagon, according to Bergman’s office.

Known as “forever chemicals,” PFAS are a large group of synthetic chemicals that persist in the water, soil and air for decades after being released, according to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, a federal research agency.

The Defense Department’s plan for PFAS cleanup “consists of following the CERCLA process to investigate releases, prioritize responses, and determine appropriate cleanup actions based on risk to human health and



Air National Guard

Air Force fire protection specialists douse a simulated ship fire with foam during a training exercise at the Military Sealift Command Training Center East in Freehold, N.J.

the environment,” according to the agency. “The process ensures that

facilities take and document a consistent, systematic, and thorough approach to investigate and cleanup releases.”

CERCLA is the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, also known as “Superfund,” the federal cleanup law, according to the Defense Department.

PFAS chemicals have been detected in drinking water and ground water in and around military bases, according to a July 2024 report by the Government Accountability Office that examined the Defense Department’s efforts to transition away from using PFAs in firefighting foams.

The Defense Department is phasing out PFAS in firefighting foams because of the potential harm from exposure to human health that includes cancer and liver damage, the report said.

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General: Real-time command system offers a global blueprint

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army in Europe has established a command-and-control capability with allies that could deliver a big battlefield advantage if it’s integrated worldwide, a top U.S. commander said.

Gen. Christopher Donahue, head of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, said the race to harness live data will deter-

mine “who wins the next war.” USA-REUR-AF has made headway on that front, he said.

“With this successful command-and-control system established in Europe, it must be rapidly scaled and connected globally, ready to meet any threat,” Donahue wrote in an essay asserting that the Army mission in Europe is at the center of global deterrence efforts.

In Europe, Donahue said, USA-

REUR-AF and NATO ground forces are now able to integrate allied sensors, data and artificial intelligence-powered machine learning tools into decision-making.

“This is not a projected capability or an operational needs statement to inform future investment,” Donahue wrote. “This is what we are doing today.”

The setup enables troops in Donahue’s command to accelerate how it targets enemies, enabling soldiers to be “first to fire,” he said.

The four-star commander’s comments come as the Defense Department carries out a force posture review that is assessing whether troops overseas are positioned in the right places.

Top Pentagon officials have said the highest priority is countering China in the Asia-Pacific, which has raised questions about whether U.S. forces in Europe need to be shifted elsewhere.

Several officials now working in key Pentagon jobs, such as Elbridge Colby, the undersecretary of defense for policy, have long argued that the U.S. should reduce its presence in Europe to better deal with China.

Donahue, whose essay was published by the Association for the U.S. Army after his recent appearance at that organization, has said he is confident that troop levels in Europe will hold steady.

When it comes to countering Russia and China, the threats are linked, Donahue wrote.

“The threat we face fights globally, so we must rise to the challenge of establishing global deterrence, and it has already started on the battlefields of Europe,” Donahue said.

He said the harnessing of live data in command and control is akin to technological breakthroughs of past conflicts, such as radio-enabled command and control, which powered the German blitz that overwhelmed French forces in World War II.

“Europe now offers the ideal conditions to build a lethal force equal to the threats posed by China, Russia or any future adversary,” said Donahue, adding that Europe is the “premier battle laboratory.”

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