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Drone busters

Army touts Apache helicopters' capabilities after anti-drone demo
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AH-64 Apache attack helicopters fly over Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii. The Army says its helicopters showcased they can deliver after an anti-drone demo.

OLIVIA COWART/U.S. Army



COVER STORY

Apaches can still deliver, Army says

Attack helos defeat various drones in North Carolina tests

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army says its premier attack helicopter successfully defeated various drones during a recent trial aimed at demonstrating the aircraft's viability on modern battlefields, where unmanned weapons pose new threats to old systems.

The drill in North Carolina showcased the ability of AH-64E Apache helicopters to detect, track and destroy drones with a range of munitions, the Army's office on missiles and space said in a Aug. 29 statement.

"These results confirmed that Apache can deliver persistent, flexible and cost-effective options to defeat UAS threats," the statement said.

The Army demonstration comes amid a broad evaluation of weapons systems across the military.

The emergence of cheap drones on the battlefield in Ukraine has prompted military commanders around the world to rethink old assumptions about



SPC. GRANT HOCKLEY/U.S. Army

An AH-64E Apache from the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade fires the SPIKE NLOS missile in Ustka, Poland, on Aug. 27. The U.S. Army said an AH-64E successfully defeated various drones during a drill in North Carolina.

warfighting and weapons systems.

For example, South Korea in June canceled plans to purchase 36 new Apache attack helicopters as it shifts funds toward cheaper unmanned systems. The move was related to concerns about the survivability of expensive legacy systems such as the Apache helicopter, given the proliferation of drone technology, the Korea Times reported at the time.

The Army, however, says the Apache still has a big role to play.

"Existing (counter drone) systems are predominantly ground-based and limited in number, creating gaps that

adversaries can exploit," the Army statement said. "By leveraging Apache helicopters, commanders gain a mobile platform able to deploy rapidly into threatened areas to detect targets."

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Daniel York, who was involved in the demonstration on Aug. 29 said the exercise showed the Apache "continues to be relevant and effective in the face of evolving UAS threats."

U.S.-made Apaches have been a big seller abroad. Poland, now NATO's biggest defense spender per capita, has made the helicopter a central part of efforts to modernize its Army.

Warsaw last year signed a procurement deal for 96 Apaches, which are expected to arrive in 2028.

U.S. Army aviators have been training with their Polish counterparts in anticipation of the attack helicopter's arrival.

The Apache also was part of a recent show of force drill on the coast of the Baltic Sea, where American and Polish troops fired a new long-range missile launched from Apache helicopters that hit targets some 16 miles out at sea.

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JAMES NEWSOME/U.S. Army

A swarm of drones looms overhead during an exercise at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif.

Atomic clock eyed to guide drone swarms

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Companies that can leverage advanced quantum technology to help drone swarms overcome electronic jamming may have a future opportunity in partnership with the Air Force.

Specifically, the service is interested in exploring how this could be achieved with a "next-generation atomic clock" to provide accurate, GPS-free navigation and timing.

A request for information published on a U.S. government contracting site by the Air Force Research Laboratory seeks input from vendors about ways that groups of such aircraft can function together without traditional means of communication.

The objective would be "a highly accurate and resilient timing and synchronization system" that lets drone

groupings maintain communication when GPS navigation is unreliable or unavailable, according to the announcement.

"This system is critical for maintaining coordinated flight, accurate data collection, advanced sensor fusion and effective mission control" for drone swarms, the Sept. 4 Air Force document says.

Input from vendors is due Sept. 19. The request for information is for planning only, and the government is not obligated to acquire any products or services, according to the Air Force document.

The request comes on the heels of a Pentagon statement this summer calling drone development a Defense Department priority for the next several years. It also comes amid Russia's increased employment of GPS jam-

ming in Ukraine, and reports that China is developing similar technology.

Swarms can involve coordination of as few as three drones and as many as thousands, according to the Government Accountability Office.

The system the Air Force has in mind must support swarms of at least four drones and have the scalability for larger swarms, according to the request. In addition, the Air Force seeks "sub-nanosecond accuracy" across the swarm without GPS.

Other requirements include the ability to thwart electronic warfare attacks and jamming and spoofing attempts, as well as integrate into small drone platforms with limited payload capacity and power efficiency.

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MILITARY



REAGAN HARDY/U.S. Air Force

An Air Force F-35A Lightning II trains during the Lonestar Lightning exercise at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Fort Worth in Texas in July.

Cost overruns dog F-35 upgrade

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The cost of the Pentagon's modernization program for the F-35 Lightning II fighter jet is more than \$6 billion over original estimates, with the date of completion now five years later than the initial timeline, a federal watchdog said.

The so-called Block 4 modernization will not be complete until 2031 at the earliest, the Government Accountability Office said in a 54-page report on the program.

The report also found that the Defense Department was paying incentives to contractors even though production deadlines had not been met.

The F-35 is a fifth-generation single-engine stealth fighter characterized by advanced sensors, electronics and networking capabilities. Its advanced features make it the leading strike-fighter aircraft for the Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy.

The Defense Department is in the seventh year of a \$16.5 billion modernization effort to upgrade the F-35's hardware and software, the report said.

Central to the Block 4 modernization is Lockheed Martin's Technology Refresh 3, or TR-3, a suite of hardware and software upgrades.

Congress in 2023 directed the Defense Department to manage the Block 4 and TR-3 elements collectively as a subprogram of the joint strike fighter program, the GAO said.

"As a major subprogram, DOD will have improved insight into Block 4 cost, schedule, and performance, allowing it to make more informed decisions about the modernization effort," the report said.

Implementation of the subprogram, however, has had drawbacks.

"According to program officials, the new Block 4 major subprogram will have fewer capabilities, will experience schedule delays, and will have unknown costs until the program office finishes developing its cost estimate," the GAO said. That estimate is expected before year's end.

The GAO offered a mix of optimism and warning in the report's conclusion.

"In our reviews of the F-35 program over the last 2 decades, we have routinely recounted cost and schedule

overruns and other shortfalls," the report said. "With the program now focused on production and modernization, it has an opportunity to cut a new path of greater accountability for delivering highly capable aircraft that meet warfighter needs at the pace of relevance."

But after 20 years of production, the F-35 program "continues to overpromise and underdeliver," the GAO said.

Compounding the problem is that contractors are rewarded incentive fees even as "delivery time frames continue to worsen," according to the report.

To avoid rewarding late deliveries, GAO said, the program should reevaluate its use of fees in future contracts and better align them to achieve desired production outcomes.

"It is increasingly important that DOD obtains real value for providing increased fees to contractors, above and beyond the profits already built into the contracts, through incentives," the report said.

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101st Airborne to take over border duty

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division and other units are headed to the United States' southern border to relieve troops who have spent months carrying out security operations.

The fall deployments will provide enhanced logistics, engineering and operational capabilities, the Army said in a statement Sept. 2. The units will replace soldiers already there.

There are now about 8,000 troops involved in security operations on the border with Mexico after President Donald Trump declared a national emergency Jan. 20. Since then, Reserve and active-duty troops have been brought in to help law enforcement efforts to crack down on illegal immigration.

The military has established four military zones allowing troops to conduct activities such as temporary detention, searches and crowd-control operations.

The units headed to the border are:

- The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Headquarters to replace the 10th Mountain Division Headquarters

- The 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, 10th Mountain Division to replace the 1st Infantry Division Combat Aviation Brigade.

- The 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division to replace the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division

- The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Division Artillery to replace the 89th Military Police Brigade

- The 11th Corps Signal Brigade, III Armored Corps to replace the 35th Corps Signal Brigade, XVIII Airborne Corps

- The 130th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, North Carolina National Guard, to replace the 90th Sustainment Brigade, U.S. Army Reserve

In August, the Pentagon authorized a new medal for troops who have been serving along the southern border since Jan. 20 to support Border and Customs Protection agents.

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MILITARY

LOCUST reporting for duty

Army gets vehicles equipped with lasers for downing drones

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

It's no exaggeration to say that the U.S. Army is laser-focused on taking out cheap, deadly drones like the ones that have rained down on Ukrainian battlefields and Middle East bases.

The service now has its first prototypes of specially equipped vehicles that use a 20-kilowatt ray of directed energy to track and shoot down aerial threats, including drones.

The recent delivery of two infantry squad vehicles outfitted with LOCUST laser systems by manufacturer AeroVironment represents the latest Army effort to develop a high-energy weapon to counter one-way attack drones.

The pair now in the service's possession is the first increment of the Army's Multi-Purpose High Energy Laser prototyping effort, according to the company.

The service first awarded a \$45.7 million contract to BlueHalo in 2023 to develop the laser systems. The company was later acquired by AeroVironment.

The LOCUST systems are mounted on the backs of highly mobile, lightweight squad vehicles and are operated via a common gaming controller, according to the company. The system uses automated tracking to easily switch between targets in high-density threat environments.

The prototypes were tested at Yuma Proving Ground in Arizona before the Army trained soldiers on the equipment at Fort Sill in Oklahoma.

"The need for these systems from real world events is clear," company executive John Garrity said in the statement. "The time is now for directed energy to get into the hands of war-fighters everywhere."

AeroVironment is set to deliver a second round of laser-mounted tactical vehicles to the Army next month that will also feature LOCUST, radar and command and control systems.

Directed energy weapons such as the LOCUST can be far more cost-



AEROVIRONMENT/Facebook

The Army has its first two prototypes of squad vehicles equipped with lasers designed to track and shoot down aerial threats including drones, the laser weapons' manufacturer, AeroVironment, said.

effective than traditional methods when it comes to shooting down drones.

Using missiles for that purpose costs millions of dollars per shot, whereas the cost of using a laser to accomplish the task is an estimated \$1 to \$10 per engagement, a 2023 Government Accountability Office report said.

Iran and its proxies have used the highly regarded Shahed drones in Tehran's arsenal as part of their layered attacks on Israel, and Russian drone operators have wreaked havoc in Ukraine.

Directed energy weapons also aren't burdened by magazine capacities, unlike traditional weapons, the GAO said. Lasers can repeatedly fire as long as the systems can generate sufficient power and manage the heat created.

The Army has spent years testing lasers against airborne threats, with mixed results.

In early 2024, the service sent four Stryker-mounted 50-kilowatt laser prototypes to the U.S. Central Command region for testing, but soldiers found it difficult to incorporate the technology into a moving vehicle, the Army's then-head of acquisition, Doug Bush, said in Senate testimony.

The service had more success with lower-powered weapons, including

those that fired at 20 kilowatts in stationary settings, Bush said.

Earlier this summer, the Army performed a live-fire exercise of laser weapons at Fort Sill alongside traditional kinetic ones.

The laser tests were done in concert with existing short-range air defense systems, or SHORAD, and pitted prototype lasers against a drone swarm, the Army said.

"Now that we have delivered directed energy capabilities to the Army, we are developing and maturing the domains of policy, doctrine, organization, training, and personnel to employ the capability optimally," Col. Steven Gutierrez, project manager for directed energy at the Army's Rapid Capabilities and Critical Technologies Office, said in a statement following the June trial run.

Those tests provided a glimpse into a layered air defense approach that will help shape the Army's future development and procurement, the service said in a statement.

In 2026, the Army plans to launch a competition known as the Enduring High Energy Laser program to develop a laser weapons system.

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Admiral: Pacific is included in homeland defense

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

WAIKIKI BEACH, Hawaii — The commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said he was unfazed by media reports that the Pentagon's draft National Defense Strategy will prioritize defense of the American homeland over challenging Beijing and Moscow globally.

"The homeland is in the Pacific," Adm. Samuel Paparo told reporters Sept. 8 on the sidelines of INDOPA-COM's four-day International Military Law and Operations Conference on Waikiki Beach.

The American territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are in the Western Pacific, while the state of Hawaii is in the Central Pacific, he said.

Meanwhile, the United States is joined in compacts of free association with Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Marshall Islands, which means the U.S. is responsible for their national defense, he said.

"Defense-in-depth means that the Pacific is a priority theater because four of the five priority threats to the United States of America — to the security, freedom and well-being of the United States — traverses the Indo-Pacific geography," Paparo said.

The Pentagon has up to now regarded those primary threats as China, Russia, North Korea, Iran and terrorism.

Each incoming administration typically issues a defense strategy that reflects its priorities, but China's emerging military has been a concern for more than a decade.

Donald Trump's first administration in 2018 regarded China a priority challenge in its defense strategy.

Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's policy chief who supports a more isolationist American policy, is heading the revamped strategy, Politico reported Sept. 5.

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Paparo

EUROPE

NATO defense spending surges to \$1.6T

Increased goal of 5% of GDP looms

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Defense spending among NATO allies will increase by more than 15% in 2025, the second largest annual jump in more than a decade as collective expenditures rise to \$1.6 trillion, according to new alliance figures.

NATO, in an update released in late August, said 31 of 32 member states will hit the required benchmark that calls for dedicating 2% of gross domestic product to military matters. Iceland, which was admitted into NATO in 1949 because of its strategic location, doesn't maintain armed forces and was excluded from the report.

For NATO, the surge pushes spending to historic levels and comes as allies move toward an even higher spending target. In June, member states agreed that the minimum level must rise to 5% of GDP by 2035, in line with President Donald Trump's priorities.

The plan calls for 3.5% of GDP to be directed to traditional priorities such as weapons and troops, while 1.5% of GDP would go to related infrastruc-



H. HOWEY/U.S. Army

Estonian soldiers set up an overwatch location with a .50-caliber machine gun, during an exercise with U.S. soldiers near Camp Tapa Estonia, in 2024. Estonia is one of the biggest defense spenders in NATO on a per-capita basis.

ture.

NATO has not detailed what precisely would qualify as viable military public works projects, but some analysts have raised concerns that the metric could be used to inflate defense budgets by directing money to initiatives without a clear military purpose.

Some members are already looking at the infrastructure improvements as

a means for boosting their NATO defense spending levels.

For example, Italy plans to construct a bridge that connects Italy's southern mainland to the island of Sicily. The move would ease civilian travel but also enhance military maneuvering in a country with thousands of U.S. and allied troops, project advocates say.

The United States remains by far the

biggest defense spender, accounting for well over half of overall military investments in the alliance in 2025, according to NATO.

However, on a per-capita basis, the U.S. came in sixth place behind Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Norway. Twenty-four member states still spend under 3% of GDP, which means they'll have to sharply increase spending to reach the 5% mark in the next decade.

Current spending signifies a major turnaround from where NATO was in 2014, when it first agreed to the 2% level. That year, collective spending decreased across the alliance by roughly 1%, NATO data shows.

Russia's 2014 armed intervention in Ukraine brought on new urgency inside NATO. In subsequent years, spending gradually increased.

But it was Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 that delivered a major jolt.

NATO defense spending rose 9.3% in 2023 and 18.6% in 2024 amid concerns about further Russian aggression in Europe. The annual overall spending increase for 2025 was 15.9%, down slightly from the previous year's annual boost but still larger than at any other time in recent NATO history.

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NATO says ammo stocks are catching up to Russia's

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — NATO is narrowing the gap with Russia when it comes to ammunition production, with allies increasing their output sixfold over the past two years, the alliance's top official said.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, speaking at a security conference Sept. 4 in Prague, said the situation is a marked turnaround from where the alliance was when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"Until recently, Russia was producing more ammunition than all NATO allies, including the U.S., including Turkey, the whole of NATO together," Rutte said. "Much faster than we

possibly could. And their economy is not bigger than Texas."

A push inside Europe to ramp up production has allies catching up, however.

"If we look only at the countries of the European Union, their annual capacity to produce artillery ammunition will be six times that of just two years ago. Six times," Rutte said. "That's two million rounds by the end of this year."

As a result, stockpiles are filling up and NATO is "narrowing the production gap with Russia," he said.

But while there have been gains in ammunition production, allies are still lagging in other areas.

Russia now allocates 40% of its budget to its warfighting efforts,

Rutte said.

While Russia has suffered heavy losses in manpower and equipment connected to the war in Ukraine, its wartime economy has enabled it to churn out new weaponry.

This year, Russia is expected to roll out at least 1,500 tanks, 3,000 armored vehicles and hundreds of Iskander missiles, Rutte said.

"This trend is not going to shift or reverse anytime soon," he said.

To counter such threats, NATO has increased defense spending requirements for its members, going from the current level of 2% of gross domestic product to 5% in the coming years.

The larger defense budgets should help allies meet a wide range of de-

fense requirements.

Rutte detailed some of the items on NATO's shopping list.

"We need to increase the number of air and missile defense systems fivefold. We need thousands more armored vehicles and tanks. We need millions more artillery shells," he said.

Rutte said NATO should look to Ukraine as an example of what's possible when it comes to dialing up production.

"Since February 2022, Ukraine has ramped up its yearly artillery systems production from nearly zero to well over 200 heavy artillery systems.

So, going from a single prototype to mass production in really record time," Rutte said.

MILITARY

Army revises leadership selection rules

Service ends command program that used expanded evaluations, feedback

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army has cut a program it used in recent years to pick officers to lead battalions and brigades and select the top enlisted leaders for those formations, the service's Human Resources Command announced.

The Command Assessment Program, or CAP, has been discontinued after a review of Army officer promotions systems ordered by the Pentagon's personnel and readiness office in June, Maj. Travis Shaw, an Army spokesman, said.

CAP — which was also known as the Army Warrior Leader Certification — was first piloted in 2019 when service leaders billed it as a more thorough vetting solution to select the top officers and enlisted leaders for the service's battalions, brigades and medical services and acquisitions formations led by lieutenant colonels and colonels.

CAP was billed as “a true 360-degree assessment” of leaders by former Army Secretary Christine Wormuth who on Jan. 13 made the process an official Army program just days before leaving the office when President Donald Trump's administration re-

turned to the White House. She and other Army leaders touted the program as a means to filter out any “conscious or unconscious” biases against soldiers seeking command, especially those from minority groups.

CAP added various assessments including physical, psychological and communications evaluations before a selection board determined which candidates would be OK'd for command or senior enlisted leadership. CAP also included subordinates' evaluations and peer feedback in the selection process instead of only performance reviews from superior officers.

The Army previously said CAP had been used to evaluate some 2,000 officers and command sergeants major for top leadership positions annually since 2020.

The service now will return to its legacy system for selecting brigade and battalion commanders and enlisted leaders, according to HRC. In that process, a board of senior officers considered candidates from a centralized selection list, or CSL, and generates an order-of-merit list based on the board's evaluation of soldiers' “past assignments, performance and



JOSE LORA/U.S. Army

Army Col. Joshua Gaspard, outgoing commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, passes the guidon to Maj. Gen. Andrew C. Gainey, commanding general of U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, during a change of command ceremony at Caserma Del Din in Vicenza, Italy, in June.

demonstrated potential,” Shaw said.

He and other Army officials did not provide a specific reason for the service's decision to end CAP. Army Secretary Dan Driscoll ordered a review of the program earlier this year.

“The Army remains committed to selecting the best leaders to lead our formations and fight and win our nation's wars,” Shaw said.

Under the legacy CSL system, can-

didates' positions will be determined by the boards' ranking of them against their peers, with the most favorable candidates ranked highest on the order-of-merit list making them eligible for their top assignment choices, according to the Army. Past results from the CAP program's evaluations will not be considered going forward, Shaw added.

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Army signs record \$9.8B deal for almost 2K Patriots

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The Army is spending big to ramp up Patriot missile production as demand surges for interceptors that have been used heavily in Ukraine and by U.S. forces in the Middle East.

Earlier this month, the service awarded a \$9.8 billion contract to Lockheed Martin to produce nearly 2,000 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 surface-to-air missiles and associated hardware through 2026.

The deal is the largest in the history of the company's missiles and fire control unit, and is intended to drive record manufacturing levels of the in-demand weapons, according to Lockheed Martin.

The Patriot, which is considered one of the best defense systems in the world, uses a “hit-to-kill” technology to intercept ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, hypersonic threats and aircraft, according to the Army.

It's used by the U.S. and 16 other countries, including fellow NATO members as well as Japan, South Korea, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The PAC-3 missiles have been a critical component of Ukraine's defense against Russia, and U.S. and Israeli forces in the Middle East have also leaned on the system in recent months to defend against Iranian attacks.

They were used to shoot down more



DARRELL AMES/U.S. Army

A Patriot Advanced Capability-3 Missile Segment Enhancement interceptor is fired in 2024.

than a dozen Iranian missiles fired on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar earlier this year.

That record of performance has

solidified the Patriot interceptors “as a must-have capability for America and its allies around the world,” Jason Reynolds, vice president and general manager of integrated air and missile defense at Lockheed Martin, said in a statement.

The defense industry has been scrambling in recent years to keep up with the growing global demand for Patriot systems.

Lockheed Martin has been working to increase its production for years and plans to deliver more than 600 interceptors in 2025, topping its record-breaking production of 500 last year.

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MILITARY

CNO pledges off-ship housing for all

Navy's top admiral also seeking free Wi-Fi in barracks, review of payroll

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The Navy's new top officer pledged to bring free barracks Wi-Fi, off-ship housing for every sailor and a payroll review as part of a broad effort to improve quality of life across the fleet.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle outlined the initiatives in his second fleetwide message since assuming the role Aug. 25.

"I am committed to the well-being of our Sailors and their families — providing them with state-of-the-art platforms, world-class facilities and dependable support through our Total Sailor and Family Action Plan," he wrote Sept. 3.

The message was the first of Caudle's "C-Notes," administrative updates intended to maintain transparency, provide guidance and unify efforts across the service.



ELLIOTT FABRIZIO/U.S. Navy

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle speaks with a sailor aboard the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman in Norfolk, Va., last month.

His initiatives include reviews and reforms of payroll policies, food services, uniforms, communications, and housing.

"Today, I have directed your Navy leadership to take the steps necessary to ensure that No Sailor Will Live Afloat," Caudle wrote.

He said the Navy plans to optimize basic allowance for housing and invest in both unaccompanied and family

housing to ensure every sailor resides in clean, safe and comfortable accommodations.

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy James Honea, who is set to retire this month, told Congress last year that the inability of junior sailors to live off-ship after monthslong deployments was a major concern.

He said about 800 sailors per aircraft carrier, or roughly 8,800 across the

fleet, do not have access to barracks other than the vessels on which they serve.

"We can't find a bed for them, we don't have barrack space, and we are not allowed by law to pay them house allowance for them to go find themselves an apartment in town, so they live on board the ship," Honea said during a Jan. 31, 2024, House Armed Services Committee hearing on military quality-of-life issues.

Caudle also pledged to modernize galley facilities to provide healthier, more flexible food options. He said Navy Secretary John Phelan ordered a review of uniforms and seabags to ensure service clothing is affordable, durable and available.

Other planned improvements include better cellphone coverage on bases, free Wi-Fi in barracks, a revamp of Navy administrative messaging, and a review of payroll policies to ensure sailors are paid correctly and on time.

"You are my priority and I need you focused on the fight," Caudle wrote. "This is the first of many efforts to improve your Quality of Life — so, stand by for what's coming next."

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USAF blames engine stall for F-16C crash off S. Korea

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — An Air Force F-16C Fighting Falcon that crashed off South Korea's western coast last year went down after an engine stall caused by hardware failure, according to a Pacific Air Forces' investigation.

The jet took off from Kunsan Air Base at 8 a.m. Jan. 31, 2024, for a routine training mission that included midair refueling from a KC-46 Pegasus over the Yellow Sea, the Aug. 22 report said.

The fighter and three other F-16Cs in the formation were assigned to the 35th Fighter Squadron, 8th Fighter Wing, based at Kunsan.

Roughly 30 minutes into the flight, the F-16C received 1,700 pounds of fuel from the KC-46 when the pilot "heard

a loud bang" inside the aircraft, according to the report. Witnesses saw black smoke coming from the engine exhaust, and flashes appeared from the jet's nose and tail.

The pilot disengaged from the tanker, and the engine stalled and could not be restarted, the report said. Instrument readings were unreliable, displaying "multiple failure indications."

The nearest airfield, Seosan Air Base, was about 74 miles east. Investigators determined the jet could glide only about 35 miles without power, leaving no chance for a safe landing.

The pilot ejected at 2,000 feet, according to the report. A South Korean coast guard helicopter from Seosan rescued him 35 miles west of the base at 9:17 a.m., 36 minutes after the aircraft crashed into the sea.

He was treated for hypothermia at



U.S. Air Force

This debris was recovered from the Air Force F-16C Fighting Falcon that crashed into the Yellow Sea in 2024.

Humphreys, about 35 miles east of Seosan.

Small pieces of debris were recovered, but the \$25.8 million jet's air-

frame was not found, the report said.

Investigators were unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the stall without flight data but ruled out weather and maintenance issues.

Conditions were clear at the time, inspections were current, and the jet had logged about 8,260 operating hours, the report said. The pilot had nearly 2,100 flight hours, including more than 1,350 in the F-16C.

The mishap was one of three F-16C crashes in South Korea between May 6, 2023, and January 2024. Investigators attributed the first to bad weather and loss of electrical power, while the second, seven months later, was blamed on a navigation system failure and adverse weather.

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MILITARY

Exchanges mull future of on-base EV charging

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Navy plans to install electric vehicle charging stations at 72 installations worldwide, including bases in the Pacific, Europe and Middle East, according to the Navy Exchange Service Command.

The command hopes to release a request for proposals from contractors next fiscal year, spokeswoman Kristine Sturkie said in an email. She did not specify which bases would be included.

“Once a contract is awarded, we anticipate it would take a minimum of 12 months for any EV chargers to be installed,” she wrote.

Sturkie said the request will include Bahrain, Italy, Japan, Guam, Guantanamo Bay and Spain.

“Once the [proposal request] has been awarded, more information on which specific bases will receive EV chargers will be available,” she added.

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service opened its first charging station this summer at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., in partnership with a local utility, AAFES spokesman Travis Day said in an email.

“This pilot will help the Exchange evaluate usage and gather insights, with the goal of exploring potential expansion to additional installations in the future,” he wrote.

AAFES has no immediate plans for charging stations outside the continental United States, Day said.

“EVs represent approximately 1.4% of all registered vehicles in the U.S. as of 2024,” he wrote. “Currently, for those who own EVs the predominant method of EV charging is done at the residence, and the demand for public charging remains low and insufficient to generate an adequate business case.”

The exchange will consider expansion in the United States and overseas as adoption increases, Day said.

“Insights from our test pilot at Luke AFB will help guide future decisions on how to best serve our military communities,” he wrote.

In Japan, electric cars are common and sometimes seen on U.S. bases, though few troops own them. A Tesla Cybertruck spotted this year at Yokota Air Base drew attention because it is not road legal off base in Japan.

People who want to charge electric vehicles at homes on Yokota must procure a standalone meter approved through the 374th Civil Engineer Squadron, base spokeswoman Capt. Emma Quirk said by email.

“The member would be billed monthly which would be collected as a utility reimbursement toward Yokota Air Base’s utility funds,” she wrote.

Anyone can submit a request for approval to charge an electric vehicle in military family housing, Quirk said.

Stars and Stripes reporter Hana Kusumoto contributed to this report.



U.S. Navy

Aerial view of Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and portions of the adjacent Naval Base Kitsap, Wash.

Shipyard starts new phase of quake resilience overhaul

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

BREMERTON, Wash. — The U.S. Navy plans to invest \$377.7 million to strengthen Dry Dock 4 at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard & Intermediate Maintenance Facility, enhancing its survivability in the event of a major earthquake in the Pacific Northwest, the Navy announced.

The project, awarded to Kiewit-Alberici Joint Venture, is part of the Pentagon’s 20-year, \$20-billion Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Program (SIOP) to overhaul all four of the nation’s public shipyards in Puget Sound; Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Norfolk, Va.; and in Kittery, Maine.

Recent Government Accountability Office surveys have indicated the cost of the SIOP program could be significantly higher; retrofitting the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard alone could cost up to \$21 billion.

The shipyard on the Kitsap Peninsula just west across Puget Sound from Seattle is the “primary provider for the maintenance, repair, modernization, inactivation and disposal of ships, submarines and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in the Pacific Fleet,” the Navy said in a statement.

Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command Northwest is providing oversight on the project.

In early 2023, the Navy temporarily closed three dry docks at the shipyard after seismic assessments revealed

vulnerabilities to major earthquakes. A delta pier at the nearby Trident Refit Facility in Bangor, home to ballistic missile and attack submarines, was also shut down.

Initial retrofitting began in 2023, with anchors installed through Dry Dock 4’s walls to reinforce its structure. The Navy ultimately plans to replace Dry Dock 4 by 2040.

The shipyard is about 100 miles east of the offshore Cascadia Subduction Zone — a 700-mile fault stretching from British Columbia to Northern California.

According to the Pacific Northwest Seismic Network, the zone has produced seven major earthquakes in the past 3,500 years, with recurrence intervals of 400 to 600 years. Other estimates have that number at as little as 250 years.

The last occurred in 1700. The National Seismic Hazard Model created by the U.S. Geological Survey estimates a 15% chance of a magnitude 8.0 or greater quake in the Seattle area in the next 50 years.

A magnitude 9.0 event could trigger tsunami waves up to 100 feet. Most Navy installations in Puget Sound are shielded from direct wave impact. However, the earthquake shaking would damage facilities and lead to flooding in low-lying areas around the shipyards.

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