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RoboChef

Army tests automated cooking
at dining facility **Page 2**

A new autonomous kitchen prepares a Thanksgiving meal at Camp Walker, South Korea.

ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Army rolls out robotic dining facility

New kitchen cooks, portions and serves meals in minutes

BY ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL
Stars and Stripes

CAMP WALKER, South Korea — A robotic kitchen that cooks, portions and serves fresh meals with almost no human involvement is now operating at Market 19, the Army's first autonomous dining facility.

The fully automated system at the 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command works like a compact industrial kitchen, using refrigerated storage, eight induction stoves and two robotic arms to move raw ingredients through the cooking process.

Meals are prepared in a matter of minutes before the robot places them into heated pickup lockers, said Hendrik Susemihl, CEO and co-founder of goodBytz, the Germany-based company that built the system.

"It's basically designed like a physical kitchen, but the robot takes over the handling between fridges, induction stoves and dishwashing," he said during a tour of the kitchen at Camp Walker. "It takes three to five minutes to cook a fresh dish."

Unlike equipment that reheats pre-cooked items, the robot — called Eric — starts with raw ingredients, following a digital recipe sequence.

"Any ingredient that goes in the robot is still handled by humans," the command's culinary adviser, Chief Warrant Officer 3 River Mitchell, said during the tour. "If carrots come in from a vendor, we still wash them, peel them, dice them, but that's really it. The robot takes care of the cooking process."

Soldiers load the raw items into the system and the robot does the rest.

"You don't just warm up convenience food," Susemihl said. "It's real cooking, and creativity is the limit because the robot can be freely programmed with recipes."

Culinary soldiers supporting the six-month pilot program, which began Nov. 13, said the automated process also ensures accurate portioning, reducing food waste during busy peri-



ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL/Stars and Stripes

A new autonomous kitchen prepares a Thanksgiving meal at Camp Walker, South Korea, on Nov. 28.



DEZIREE KEAY/U.S. Army

Fresh meals prepared by the robotic kitchen are ready for Camp Walker soldiers.

ods.

"Everything here is weighed out in grams," said Spc. Brandon Williams, a culinary specialist with the 541st Field Feeding Company. "The robot's hoppers and baskets are tied to a scale, so we have complete control of portion sizes, and we can see which dishes are

more popular and adjust prep."

A rotating menu offers several options throughout the week. On the day after Thanksgiving, the system served three holiday dishes.

"For the Thanksgiving meal, we have three staples — a ham dish, a roasted turkey that we smoked on the

Traeger pellet grill, and then a vegetarian dish," Mitchell said.

Pfc. Elliott Reyes-Miranda, a member of the command who chose the roasted turkey, said the dish exceeded his expectations.

"The turkey was seasoned, the stuffing was pretty good, and considering a robot made it, it's pretty cool," he said.

The system also allows kitchens to operate with fewer personnel while maintaining production.

"On the weekends, we can run this with one cook," Williams said. "I can set up the robot, do my checks, serve customers and still take care of paperwork and cleaning."

Susemihl said a containerized version of the kitchen designed for field operations can operate with no cook on site.

"It can store roughly five to six hundred portions," he said. "You load it on a truck or even a helicopter, keep everything cooled, and then serve troops fully automatically in minutes."

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MILITARY

\$1.2B set for critical barracks repairs

Focus placed on aging housing for junior enlisted, unaccompanied troops

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth pledged \$400 million to address immediate needs in barracks across the military and another \$800 million for critical renovation projects, though details about how the money will be allocated have not been released.

The \$1.2 billion in funding stemmed from a barracks task force Hegseth launched in October to overhaul the military's aging housing for junior enlisted and unaccompanied service members. The Defense Department did not respond to questions about exactly how and where the money will be spent.

Government reports and the military's own assessments of barracks have found substandard conditions including mold, non-working appliances and air conditioning, plumbing issues, and broken locks and windows. The services have all committed to renovations and new construction but have said that ongoing work has not kept up with the rapidly aging



ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

A barracks building under construction in April 2023 at Fort Polk, La.

infrastructure.

The \$1.2 billion surge in funds came after Hegseth met with the barracks task force for a 30-day report just before Thanksgiving. The funds came from a massive spending package signed into law earlier this year commonly referred to as the "One Big Beautiful Bill," Hegseth said.

The task force did a "wall-to-wall" assessment of the entire Navy, Marine

Corps, Air Force, Space Force and the Army's 18th Airborne Corps. By the end of January, the task force will fully assess barracks for the Army Reserve and National Guard. The Army confirmed that a full review of active-duty barracks is ongoing.

"The mission was to find and fix now, to provide every warfighter a room that is clean, safe and comfortable — locks that lock, security cameras that work, furniture and

mattresses that aren't older than the service members sleeping on them. And no mold," Hegseth said in a video posted to social media.

The initial \$400 million has gone toward purchasing new furnishings and mattresses for 81 barracks housing more than 15,000 service members, Hegseth said without specifying which services and bases received the support. Roughly \$101 million was spent on "quality-of-life improvements," including new door locks in 10 barracks housing more than 6,000 troops and new security systems in 13 barracks with more than 1,500 service members.

The military services did not immediately respond to questions about how much of the funding each received and which bases have made improvements with it.

Moving forward, Hegseth said he will get monthly reports from the task force "to confirm work is getting accomplished."

"We're just getting started," he said. "Service members must be prepared to win the next fight, and where they live impacts their physical and mental wellbeing."

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Christian jewelry firm reaches deal with DOD on dog tag replicas

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — A Christian jewelry company has reached a "multimillion-dollar" settlement with the Defense Department and regained legal use of military logos after a more than five-year battle over its religious-themed dog tag replicas.

Shields of Strength, a Christian jewelry company based in Beaumont, Texas, filed a lawsuit in 2021 in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas in Tyler, about two years after the Pentagon revoked agreements that allowed the company to put trademarked logos of the military services alongside Christian symbols and Bible verses.

First Liberty Institute, the law firm representing Shields of Strength, an-



Image from lawsuit

A Shields of Strength dog tag featuring "Army Mom" on one side and a Bible verse on the other side.

nounced the settlement but said it could not share the exact amount the Pentagon agreed to pay the company under the agreement. However, the

firm stated the settlement returned a license to the company, and production of jewelry can resume.

The Defense Department "will correct its licensing policy to allow products like Shields of Strength, work to provide notice to military leaders and exchanges that Shields now has a license for its products, and ensure a process is in place to renew the licenses in the future," First Liberty said in a statement.

Defense officials referred all questions about the settlement to the Justice Department, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"Shields of Strength has been a source of strength and encouragement for our military heroes for over 25 years," said Kenny Vaughan, owner of Shields of Strength. "Every dog tag we

ever made was at the request of the troops and their families, and it was our honor to do so. We are blessed that we can once again meet the needs of our fighting men and women."

Vaughan began making the tags in 1998 and received a trademark license in 2011 from the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, which is when the military began requiring the licenses, according to the lawsuit.

At that time the Navy did not grant the license because of the religious nature of the products.

The company lost its agreements in 2019 after a group that advocates for the separation of religion from the military, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, submitted complaints to Defense Department trademark offices, according to the lawsuit.

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MILITARY

DOD aims to buy 300K drones by 2028

BY LARA KORTE

Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon is rushing to catch up with modern warfare — and spending big to do so.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Dec. 2 announced a \$1 billion initiative intended to deliver 300,000 one-way attack drones to U.S. service members over the next two years.

“We now find ourselves in a new era,” Hegseth said in a Defense Department statement, adding that “we cannot be left behind.”

The initiative is meant to kick-start industrial capacity and reduce prices so the military can adequately budget for unmanned weapons, according to the Pentagon.

The program will be broken down into four phases. Each begins with a “gauntlet” challenge, in which service members will test vendors’ products and select the highest-scoring ones for orders from the Pentagon.

With each new phase, DOD will increase the number of drones it purchases while at the same time narrowing the number of vendors and decreasing the per-unit cost, according to a request for information posted this month.

The first phase is set to run from February to July 2026 and will include 30,000 drones purchased from a maxi-



JOSE NUNEZ/U.S. army

Pfc. Mason Davis, a drone operator in the 25th Infantry Division, watches a Ghost-X drone take off for a mission at Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii.

mum of 12 vendors for \$5,000 apiece. The Pentagon expects to invite 25 vendors to compete in the first challenge, according to the department’s “Drone Dominance” webpage.

By the final phase of the program, which will conclude around the start of 2028, the Pentagon plans to purchase 150,000 drones from five vendors at a

price of \$2,300 per unit.

Hegseth called it a “stable demand signal to expand the U.S. drone industrial base.”

Small, inexpensive drones are estimated to account for about 70% of all casualties in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Such aircraft have also increasingly become a favorite tool of Iran and its

proxies, including the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have used them in recent years to target commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

The technological shift has presented a quandary for U.S. forces, who find themselves expending costly air defense munitions to defend against swarms of the disposable aircraft.

“We cannot afford to shoot down cheap drones with \$2 million missiles,” Hegseth said. “And we ourselves must be able to field large quantities of capable attack drones.”

In addition to shoring up its own supplies, the Pentagon is investing in anti-drone technology, fielding tools like lasers, signal jammers and artificial intelligence software.

Since taking office, Hegseth has moved to streamline the acquisition program for unmanned aerial vehicles and catch up with U.S. adversaries, who are producing “millions of cheap drones each year,” he wrote in a July memo.

Part of the plan for what Hegseth has called “drone dominance” is bolstering the nascent U.S. drone manufacturing base by approving hundreds of American products for purchase by the military.

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Bursting ammunition sought for grenade launchers

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

The Army is seeking contractors capable of turning the Vietnam-era 40 mm belt-fed MK19 automatic grenade launcher into a drone killer.

The service, which posted a request notice on the government’s contracting site on Nov. 18, hopes to pair proximity-sensing fuse technology with a programmable air-burst cartridge capable of knocking out small drones.

The system must fit into existing weapons platforms, fire control systems and remote weapons stations to detect, track, target and defeat enemy aerial threats, the proposal says.

The initiative is the latest Defense Department effort to create or retrofit existing platforms to counter the growing battlefield drone threat.

The MK19 launcher, fired from a tripod or vehicle mount, weighs about 75 pounds and primarily fires high-explosive M430 grenades that come in belts of 32 or 48, according to Army Training and Doctrine Command’s worldwide equipment guide. The grenades can kill anyone within a 15-foot radius and wound anyone within 50 feet, the guide says.

The MK19 can also punch through 2 inches of rolled homogeneous armor, which means the destruction of most infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, the guide says. It has been adapted over the years for use on Humvees, Strykers and even small attack boats.

The Army’s Combat Capabilities Development Command planned to request white papers on or after Nov.



BRANDON BRUER/U.S. Army

A soldier from the 16th Combat Aviation Brigade uses an MK19 grenade launcher.

25, the contract announcement said.

The solicitation closes 30 calendar days later. The performance period is listed as up to four years, and further contracts could be awarded following a successful prototype.

Drone warfare has developed rapidly in recent years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The ability of small, off-the-shelf drones to carry munitions to strike personnel, armor and command posts has dramatically changed military strategy and tactics.

Drones have frequently been the focal point of Army exercises at the Grafenwoehr Training Area and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in the German state of Bavaria.

They’ve also been integrated into Army doctrine through modernization initiatives dubbed Transforming in Contact and the counter-drone Project Flytrap.

Stars and Stripes reporter Marcus Kloeckner contributed to this report.

MILITARY

Final report: Afghan rebuilding doomed

Effort plagued by incoherent strategy, corruption, waste

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The failed U.S. bid to rebuild Afghanistan over two decades cost \$148 billion and nearly 2,500 American lives, according to the final report from the agency tasked with oversight of the gargantuan undertaking.

Incoherent strategy, corruption, waste and unrealistic expectations led to the deterioration of the U.S.-backed government in Kabul and the ensuing takeover by the Taliban amid the Pentagon's military withdrawal four years ago, as detailed in the audit released Dec. 3 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

"The rapid collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 laid bare the fragility that had been concealed by years of confident assertions of progress," the agency, known as SIGAR, wrote in its report. "The gap between ambition and reality was vast."

In the end, the entire endeavor cost far more than the U.S. spent on the Marshall Plan, the strategy to reconstruct western European economies after World War II, the agency said.

The audit released this month is the first summary of the totality of SIGAR's work overseeing U.S. reconstruction in Afghanistan during a war that lasted from 2001 to 2021. It's also the final report before the agency permanently shuts down next month.

SIGAR identified a number of "fundamental flaws" in the United States' mission, including continuous failures to develop a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve, unrealistic timelines that prioritized rapid spending and led to increased corruption, and a failure to tailor its efforts to Afghanistan's complex social, economic and political dynamics.

Although the U.S. initially entered Afghanistan with a simple security mission, it quickly expanded into a broader nation-building effort that may have been doomed from the start, the audit says.



DREW BROWN/Stars and Stripes

Army 2nd Lt. Seth Maldonado walks through a poppy field during a patrol near in the Maiwand district of Afghanistan in 2009. The U.S. counternarcotics program in Afghanistan cost around \$7.3 billion, according to a watchdog report.

Unlike the post-World War II reconstruction efforts in Europe and Japan, where the U.S. sought to rebuild countries with modern economies, industry and infrastructure, Americans in Afghanistan were attempting to create systems and institutions that the nation had never possessed.

Furthermore, the report said, Americans failed to appreciate how an ongoing war could hamper those reconstruction efforts.

The seeds of failure had been sown long before the U.S. withdrawal, according to senior officials and others interviewed for the report.

"Many (interviewees) concluded that success, when measured against the U.S.'s ambitious goals, may have never been achievable, regardless of strategies adopted or resources invested," auditors wrote.

From 2002 to 2025, funding for security initiatives, at \$88.8 billion, made up the largest portion of appropriated funds sent to Afghanistan, followed by \$35.9 billion for governance and development, \$16.3 billion for agency operations, and \$7.1 billion for humanitarian aid.

The counternarcotics program the U.S. instituted in Afghanistan was one of the largest sources of waste, costing \$7.3 billion, a 2018 report by the agency said.

Despite the billions spent by the U.S.



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Jorden Newman marks children's hands at a village in Zabul province, Afghanistan, to ensure fair aid distribution.

to stem the drug market, Afghanistan at the time was still the world's largest opium supplier, the earlier SIGAR report said.

The U.S. also wasted \$4.7 billion on ineffective programs to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan, which were meant to help locals peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence, according to SIGAR.

American expectations about what could be achieved were unrealistic, and the U.S. spent far too much money far too quickly in a country that was "woefully unprepared to absorb it," SIGAR said in its final report.

"Large sums of U.S. stabilization

dollars often exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption and bolstered support for insurgents," the audit said.

The Taliban takeover in 2021 also meant the loss of billions of dollars in infrastructure and equipment that the U.S. had spent to develop the Afghan military and security forces.

According to SIGAR, nearly \$20 billion in U.S. funds had helped to purchase 96,000 ground vehicles, 51,180 general purpose or light tactical vehicles, 900 armored combat vehicles, 427,300 weapons and at least 162 aircraft for Afghan forces, all of which were lost during the U.S. military withdrawal.

It's also likely that after the Taliban seized Kabul, they gained access to at least a portion of the \$57.6 million in American funds that were left in accounts at the Afghan finance ministry.

The U.S. experience in Afghanistan should serve as a cautionary tale for policymakers contemplating similar reconstruction efforts in the future, the report concluded.

"If there is one overarching lesson to be learned from a tragedy that unfolded over 20 years, it is that any U.S. mission similar in context, scale, and ambition must confront the real possibility of failure," auditors wrote.

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MILITARY

Drug test can sniff out chemical threats

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Troops could one day carry portable devices to detect the “chemical fingerprint” of hazardous substances in the field, thanks to a system developed by Army researchers at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland.

Weighing about 10 pounds, the PMCDS — short for Portable Microscopy Chemical Detection System — is both a microscope and a spectrometer that can read the presence of amounts of substances smaller than the human eye can detect.

Developed by the U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command Chemical Biological Center, the device has already been used to identify narcotics such as fentanyl at sites along the U.S.-Mexico border, according to the Army.

Its primary role for now is in drug identification, but follow-on testing could expand its use to combat or the detection of biochemical warfare substances or hazardous materials, the Army said.

The system first locates potential threats using its microscope, then



Research scientists Dr. Jason Guicheteau and Dr. Ashish Tripathi use the Portable Microscopy Chemical Detection System to test samples containing trace amounts of particles and identify the substance.

shoots a laser capable of capturing a “Raman spectrum” — the unique characteristics of any given substance. The

system then matches the chemistry of the captured sample against a library of known chemicals, irritants and other

dangerous materials.

“Current Raman systems are for bulk detection,” said Dr. Jason Guicheteau, an Army chemist on the project. “The challenge is when it becomes invisible or it’s a residue. We went from bulk detection to trace detection.”

Because it uses a microscope and a spectrometer, the system does not need to destroy the sample to analyze it, unlike some traditional identification methods.

“With the PMCDS, we can take an oxycodone pill that looks normal but isn’t,” Guicheteau explained. “Agents can scan it and instantly know it’s fake and potentially laced with fentanyl.”

The device can detect as little as 1% fentanyl.

“We needed to detect particles on various surfaces hours or days after contamination,” said Dr. Ashish Tripathi, DEVCOM CBC physical scientist.

Next-generation plans for the project aim to expand PMCDS into a chemical-biological sensor capable of detecting droplets as well as solids.

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Soldiers told to report any job, academic project offers

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

All U.S. soldiers and Army civilian employees must report to the service any offers for secondary employment or requests to participate in academic projects amid an uptick in adversary efforts to steal classified or sensitive

information, according to a recent Army-wide message.

Army counterintelligence officials have seen increasing efforts by foreign intelligence agents to pursue access to restricted U.S. national security information by posing online as “consulting firms, corporate recruit-

ters, think tanks and other seemingly legitimate companies,” according to the All-Army message published Nov. 25. The recent government shutdown may have contributed to increased efforts by adversary governments to target frustrated or financially insecure government workers and service members, according to the memorandum.

“This threat from foreign intelligence entities is real, persistent and evolving,” Brig. Gen. Sean Stinchon, who heads Army Counterintelligence Command, said in a statement. “Army Counterintelligence Command is working tirelessly to identify and neutralize these threats and impose cost on our adversaries, but we need every member of the Army team to remain vigilant and proactive in protecting themselves and their information.”

Army officials approached with offers of secondary employment, academic projects, or frequent contacts with foreigners or any other “threat-

related incidents” are instructed to report them to an Army counterintelligence special agent. Those reports can be made at www.usainscom.army.mil/iSALUTE or at 1-800-225-5779.

Such contacts must be reported within 24 hours of the incident.

Lt. Gen. Tony Hale, the service’s outgoing intelligence chief, has spent recent months warning of new and growing efforts by foreign governments to trick American soldiers into revealing secret national security information. In a message to the force ahead of his upcoming retirement, Hale warned that soldiers and civilians could face criminal or other punishment if they do not report such incidents.

The general has said in recent months that employment offers to U.S. soldiers may include invitations to write white papers or articles, which could benefit adversaries.

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