

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Volume 17 Edition 1

©SS 2024

U.S. EDITION

[stripes.com](https://www.stripes.com)

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024



A bear rummages through items left out in a housing area of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska in 2014.

U.S. Air Force



Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office

Meal packets are scattered around a storage room that had been visited by a bear at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

## Bear facts in Alaska

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson got about 600 reports of ursine visitors this fall **Page 2**

## COVER STORY

# Annual bear invasion brings 600 sightings

## Joint base in Alaska sees MRE thefts, Humvee break-ins

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Bear sightings at Alaska's largest military installation are nearing a battalion-sized count for 2024.

About 600 reports of black and grizzly bears in and around Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson near Anchorage this year have been filed with the Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office.

"This is Alaska, and bears are very common," said Erin Eaton, the base chief public affairs officer. "The majority of these calls require little to no intervention and are just bears passing through the area."

The more than 30,000 soldiers, airmen and civilians at the base have learned to share the natural space surrounding the nearly 65,000-acre base with moose, elk, and other wildlife of central Alaska.

But the interlopers who get the most attention at Elmendorf-Richardson are the bears. The base is the headquarters of several commands, including the 11th Air Force and the Army's 11th Airborne Division.

Bears have been photographed rummaging through soldiers' curbside belongings, diving into dumpster trash and clawing at discarded home furnishings in the base's suburban-like neighborhoods.

On Oct. 28, the base's Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office received reports of bears getting into a food storage area. By the time the officers arrived, the feasters had moved on, leaving just the cardboard and wrapper carnage of emptied field rations called MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat.

Base officials couldn't ascertain which of the approximately two dozen MRE combinations the bears gorged on. Among MRE offerings listed on an Army website are Jalapeno Pepper Jack Beef Patty, Chicken Chunks, Spinach Mushrooms & Cream Sauce Fettuccine, Lemon Pepper Tuna and Maple Sausage.

Fittingly for Halloween, the most



Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office

**On Nov. 2, a bear was discovered inside one of the vehicles in a motor pool building at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.**



SHEILA DEVERA/U.S. Air Force

**A pair of black bears amble across a road at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska in May 2019. Grizzly bears have also been sighted on the base.**

recognizable element in the photos supplied by the Army of the bear feast were empty bags of M&M chocolate candy.

Less than a week later, Eaton said, a report came in "a little after midnight" of bears sighted inside a motor pool building. The wildlife agents arrived to find what they say was a 1-year-old bear behind the driver's wheel of a Humvee.

Army personnel took photos of the intruder, then opened exterior doors and distracted the bear, allowing it to amble off undisturbed away from the

compound.

The base encourages a "live and let live" approach to the bears, with specially trained wildlife officers responding to reports of sightings around populated areas.

"We strongly encouraged to report all bear sightings near parks, schools, housing and dumpsters," Eaton said.

Colette Brandt, the Elmendorf-Richardson wildlife biologist with the 673rd Civil Engineer Squadron, briefs newcomers on how to keep wildlife away as a bear-related best practices for base residents.

Wildlife safety messages are also put up each spring when bears emerge from their dens. Residents are also reminded to remove outdoor bird feeders before bears begin actively seeking food.

Summer's exceptionally long warm days — with sometimes about 20 hours of sunshine — are a favorite for humans to go hiking and bears to go strolling. If paths cross, a wide berth for the furry travelers is suggested.

James Wendland, the Elmendorf-Richardson wildlife conservation law enforcement officer with the 673d Civil Engineer Squadron, said bear interactions at the end of autumn are common as their usual sources of nourishment diminish with the onset of the prolonged Alaskan winter.

"When more natural food for bears like berries, crabapples and salmon become scarce, bears will seek other sources," he said. "Bears are opportunistic and will follow their noses looking for food, even if that's in open buildings or unlocked vehicles."

Recommendations to Elmendorf-Richardson residents include limiting the Halloween display of pumpkins or jack-o-lanterns, as they attract moose.

Winter comes early at the base, which is 2,200 miles north of Seattle.

The 1,200 service members who enjoyed an early Thanksgiving feast at the base commissary on Nov. 26 reported no bears sniffing around for festive foods.

It helped that the thermometer showed temperatures in the teens and below on a day when the sun was up for less than seven hours.

"It's turned sharply colder lately," Eaton said. "Since the end of October, the bear reports at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson have steadily declined to zero."

By Christmas Eve, the sun rises at 10:15 a.m. and sets just before 3:15 p.m. Temperatures overnight plunge below zero.

The grizzly and black bears that live in the forests around the base are likely snug in their dens, well into their long winter hibernation.

Eaton said everyone knows it's a relatively short break, and bears will return with the longer days of spring.

"They'll be back," she said.



# SAVINGS

## AROUND THE GLOBE

for your holidays and beyond

**Unlock daily SURPRISES in our  
31 Days of Festive Finds!**

**ALL DECEMBER LONG, OPEN A  
NEW DOOR ON OUR VIRTUAL  
SNOW GLOBE  
CALENDAR TO UNVEIL:**



**Exclusive Deals**



**Virtual Recipes**



**Festive Videos**



**Gift Ideas**



**Planning Tips & much more!**

**VISIT DAILY TO UNCOVER  
NEW SURPRISES!**



[commissaries.com](https://commissaries.com)





## MILITARY

# Navy, Marines out of sync on ship schedules

## GAO: Availability of amphibious fleet affects deployments

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Navy's amphibious ship schedules and Marine Corps units that deploy on them are out of sync, and without change, the services will continue to deploy Marines late, according to a federal watchdog agency.

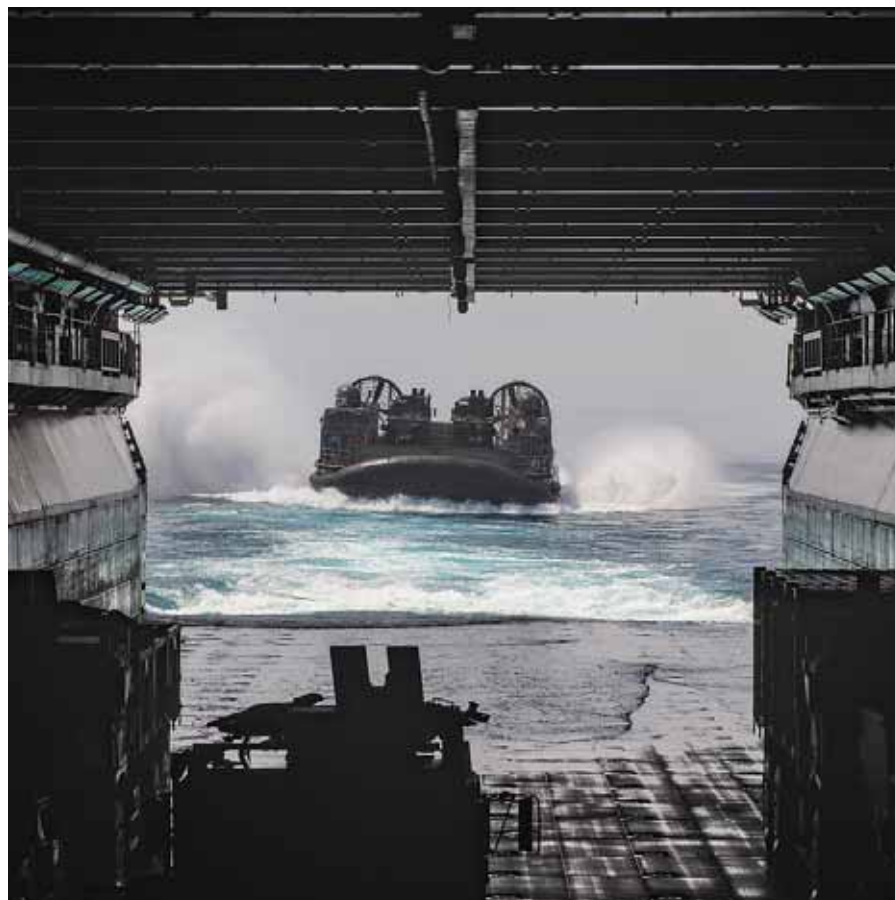
A driving factor is the Navy and Marine Corps are at odds about how many amphibious ships are needed to deploy Marines effectively, the Government Accountability Office wrote in a recently released report. The report outlines recommendations for the services to work together to refine their availability goals for amphibious ships and establish when a joint plan will be implemented to address ship availability concerns. The watchdog also recommended the Navy stop canceling maintenance on ships scheduled to be decommissioned without the required permission from congressional defense committees.

The Navy has 32 operational amphibious ships — just one more than the Congress-mandated minimum of 31 ships. The Navy's amphibious fleet, which includes amphibious assault ships, dock landing ships and amphibious transport docks, transports Marines and their equipment, including vehicles and aircraft, for assault and humanitarian missions.

But half the fleet is in poor condition, and some ships have been unavailable for years at a time, the GAO wrote.

"Historically, we have an example where the Navy had one amphibious ship that hadn't deployed in over 12 years because it ran into major challenges in modernization. But that ship is counted toward its number of available ships," said Shelby Oakley, director of contracting and national security acquisitions for the GAO.

On paper, a ship in maintenance was previously considered available. But ships in maintenance cannot always deploy and conduct missions or exercises, making it useless to the Marine Corps, Oakley said.



**A U.S. Navy landing craft transports personnel and equipment to the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer in the Pacific Ocean.**

"Agreeing on that number of how many of these do we need actually [not to be] in major maintenance and ready to conduct operations and training. That's one thing they are working through right now," Oakley said of the services.

In June, the Navy and Marine Corps agreed on what constitutes an available ship, specifying a ship in a maintenance phase is unavailable.

But the GAO found the definition failed to address the types of maintenance that would deem a ship to be unavailable.

"The Navy considers a ship undergoing an intermediate maintenance period to be capable of stopping maintenance work and getting underway within four days (96 hours) to perform a mission. However, when we toured the USS Germantown in October 2023, officials told us that the ship could not deploy within 96 hours due to the extensive amount of maintenance in its ongoing intermediate maintenance

period," the report read.

The GAO audit spanned April 2023 to December 2024 during which representatives visited six amphibious warships at Naval Station Norfolk, Va., and Naval Base San Diego, Calif., to see maintenance issues affecting the ships.

The audit was conducted after years of amphibious ships deploying late. Marine Corps documentation shows that between 2011 and 2020 amphibious warfare ships were only available for operational tasking 46% of the time, according to the watchdog report.

In 2024, the USS Boxer and USS America amphibious ready groups and Marine Expeditionary Units experienced operational challenges that resulted in delayed deployments and missed exercises due to lack of available ships. Additionally, ship spotters observed the USS Wasp in March and the USS Iwo Jima in September limping back to port following training exercises off the coast of Virginia. In both instances, Navy officials con-



**GAO teams visited six amphibious assault warships to see maintenance issues affecting the ships.**

firmed the ships had experienced mechanical problems.

Adding to the struggle, 16 degrading amphibious ships are on track to fall short of their expected 40-year lifespan.

To keep up with the 31-ship mandate, the Navy will need to keep nearly all its legacy amphibious assault ships in service past their expected service lives while it waits for new ships, the report said. Doing so will cost about \$1 billion per ship.

A Navy deal to pay nearly \$10 billion to build three new amphibious warships will help the service satisfy the congressional demand to have 31 operational amphibious ships, but it will be years before those ships join the fleet.

"Absent establishing time frames for completion of a Navy and Marine Corps agreement on the number of amphibious ships that should be available at a given time, with objective and measurable metrics to guide it, the services will be at continued risk of late or disaggregated Marine deployments," according to the report.

Burchett.caitlyn@stripes.com  
@CaitlynBurchett





## MILITARY

# Army seeks lieutenants for support roles

## Service wants better balance of future officer force

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army is asking for about 300 lieutenants serving in combat arms branches to switch into support roles as it seeks to avoid an unbalanced future officer force, service officials said.

The second-year program is seeking volunteers among officers commissioned into the infantry, armor, field artillery or engineer branches in the 2022 year group to transfer into an understrength combat support branch or functional area early next year, the Army said in a news release.

Combat-support branches the Army is looking to fill out are its adjutant general, air defense, finance, logistics and signal corps. It also needs officers to volunteer to enter functional areas for information technology engineering, space operations, public affairs and simulation operations, the service said.

Army officials said a pilot program launched early this year for combat arms officers to voluntarily transfer into similar support jobs was successful, convincing the service to continue the effort. The pilot, announced in January, saw about 130 infantry and armor lieutenants from the 2021 year group voluntarily transfer into the adjutant general, finance and signal corps, said Maj. Thomas Mussman, a readiness analyst for Army Human Resources Command's Force Shaping Directorate.

"By offering more options this year we hope to get greater participation and have a greater impact on readiness," Mussman said.

Combat arms branches — especially the infantry and armor — have long been among the most sought-after branches for new officers because of better prospects for career advancement.

The service has long required large numbers of junior officers to commission into combat arms fields to lead platoons and serve in other staff roles,



KENNETH RODRIGUEZ/U.S. Army

**Army 1st Lt. Hayley Farmer leads her squad through a training exercise at Vilseck, Germany. The Army is seeking lieutenants who want to switch from combat arms to support roles in anticipation of an imbalance.**

**"The Army will eventually face shortages at the battalion, brigade, division and corps level if we don't shape the force now."**

Col. Shay O'Neal

director for readiness for Army Human Resources Command

but it needs fewer officers in those fields at higher ranks.

The Army has other programs that allow junior officers to serve in those combat branches before transitioning into support roles, but it only began seeking volunteers for these unplanned, seamless transition opportunities into understaffed career fields this year.

Service officials said no officers would be moved out of their current combat arms roles without volunteering. They have pitched the transitions as necessary to fill current open assignments and especially to ensure these critical support roles are manned in the years ahead.

"Offering these opportunities allows us to retain individual officers at the beginning of their careers while rebalancing the force for long term readi-

ness," said Col. Shay O'Neal, the director for readiness for HRC. "The Army will eventually face shortages at the battalion, brigade, division and corps level if we don't shape the force now."

Combat arms officers in the 2022 year group have from Jan. 7 to Feb. 17, 2025, to volunteer to switch into one of the support branches or functional areas, according to the news release.

To volunteer, they must log into the Integrated Personnel and Pay System-Army, or IPPS-A, portal, enter the Talent Management, or TAM, soldier work center and select "closed marketplace preferences in the 'self-service' window to provide their rebranching preferences," Army officials said.

Those seeking to re-branch into one of the open combat-support branches must place their desired new branch above their current branch in their

preferred order. Those looking to transfer into one of the functional areas must place their desired functional area as their No. 1 choice. Officers will be pre-screened before being accepted into their chosen functional area, according to the release.

Among those who volunteered to change branches in the 2024 pilot program, 57% received their first-choice branch and the other 43% got their second choice, according to the Army.

Those who transfer branches or enter functional areas during the upcoming volunteer process will not be forced to move, said Maj. Jesse Lansford, a senior marketplace analyst at HRC.

"We're not looking to accelerate the officer's [permanent change of station] timeline," she said. "After transferring, an officer can seek out a post internal move to align themselves with their new branch until it's time to schedule Captain's Career Course with their new branch."

The Army expects to announce branch transfer and functional area moves in March, she said.











## EUROPE

# Rutte: NATO must prep for hybrid warfare

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Countries in the U.S.-led NATO alliance must find new ways of countering the stepped-up efforts by Russia and China to destabilize Europe with sabotage campaigns, the bloc's top official said recently.

Cybercrime, attacks on infrastructure and the weaponization of energy are among their tactics, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said during a meeting of allied foreign ministers.

"We have to discuss how we will defend ourselves," Rutte said. "And that means that you will look at ways to have better intelligence sharing, but also making sure that we can protect our critical infrastructure."

Foreign ministers agreed to a set of "proactive measures," including more exercises, Rutte said.

Allies also will get tough on Russia's shadow fleet of oil-exporting ships, said Rutte, who did not offer specifics on the various plans in the works.

Rutte, who hosted the two-day meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels, emphasized that increased cooperation between China and Russia poses challenges on a variety of fronts.

The military and financial support Russia has received from Beijing for Moscow's war effort point to the increasingly global nature of the battle in Ukraine, Rutte said.

Iran and North Korea's separate contributions to Russia's military cam-

paign also raise broader security risks for the West, he said.

Meanwhile, U.S. and European military officials have been alarmed by increasingly brazen acts of sabotage that are believed to have been carried out by Russian agents. China also has been suspected of recent mischief.

"Both Russia and China have tried to destabilize our countries and divide our societies with acts of sabotage, cyberattacks and energy blackmail," he said.

Swedish officials recently launched an investigation into a Chinese cargo ship that was navigating in the vicinity of two Baltic Sea communications cables connecting Germany and Finland and Lithuania and Sweden, re-

spectively, that were severed.

The vessel is suspected of having dragged its anchor over the cables, severing them.

In the U.S., corporations were urged to strengthen communication networks following news of a sprawling hacking campaign that authorities say gave China access to private phone conversations of an unknown number of Americans.

Allies also have complained about acts of arson, an assassination attempt on an industrial leader in Germany and instances of sabotage at various logistics centers.

vandiver.john@stripes.com  
@john\_vandiver

## First Patriot plant outside US being built in Germany

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — Construction has begun on a facility in southern Germany that will produce upward of 1,000 Patriot missiles for NATO allies, as member nations act to boost munitions stockpiles depleted in the defense of Ukraine.

German government officials broke ground last month on an assembly line facility in Schrobenhausen, about 85 miles southwest of Tower Barracks in Grafenwoehr.

The site, a joint venture between European missile conglomerate MBDA and U.S.-based Raytheon, will be the first Patriot production facility outside the United States.

Russia's war on Ukraine "shows the great importance of ground-based air defense and the high consumption of ammunition in a symmetrical, high-intensity conflict," MBDA spokesman Guenter Abel said. "The limiting factor for NATO for numerous missile systems remains the ammunition supply. The challenge is to ramp up production quickly."

Missile deliveries are scheduled to begin in 2027, Abel said.

The new facilities will feature several thousand square feet of added production space, a large bunker and

storage space, a German Defense Ministry statement said Nov. 18. MBDA plans to increase its workforce at the site by 25%, to over 1,700 employees, by the end of next year.

The missiles produced at Schrobenhausen will be sent to U.S. allies Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain, and will replace stocks donated to Ukraine, according to NATO statements.

They can be sold to other countries like Ukraine within the rules of U.S. export regulations, said a German Defense Ministry official, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to agency rules.

Patriot batteries have been operated by at least eight U.S. allies in Europe and Ukraine to defend against cruise and ballistic missiles, drones and aircraft, according to a Raytheon statement earlier this year.

The initial \$5.5 billion contract, part of the European Sky Shield Initiative, was awarded in January by the NATO Support and Procurement Agency. It was awarded to COMLOG, a joint venture between Raytheon and MBDA.

A follow-on \$478 million contract was awarded to Raytheon to replenish German missile stocks for shells supplied to Ukraine, a NATO statement in August said.



Twitter

**German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, left, poses in front of a Patriot launcher with Bavarian governor Markus Söder at the groundbreaking of a assembly line facility that will produce Patriot missiles in Schrobenhausen, Germany.**

MBDA and Raytheon were chosen due to their long-standing partnership, which goes back decades, Abel said. COMLOG has already maintained more than 5,000 Patriot missiles for German and European consumers.

Since the site aside from the new facility has been churning out missiles since 1959, it already has robust security to protect against potential spies

and saboteurs, Abel said.

In November, U.S. authorities said American defense industrial sites in Europe should step up their security over concerns that Russian saboteurs could target them.

Stars and Stripes reporter Marcus Kloeckner contributed to this report.  
burke.matt@stripes.com @MatthewMBurke1



## PACIFIC

# 73rd Operation Christmas Drop pushes off

## Air Force takes supplies to remote islands in longest-running humanitarian mission

BY ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — Massive military transport aircraft took to the skies over the weekend as the U.S. Air Force set in motion the Defense Department's longest-running humanitarian mission for the 73rd year.

The aircraft — predominantly C-130J Super Hercules from Yokota Air Base, Japan — took with them crates filled to the brim with food, camping gear, medical equipment, toys and other supplies to be dropped to remote islands as part of Operation Christmas Drop.

The Dec. 8 drops, spread across six sorties, covered thousands of miles and delivered the packages to far

flung islands, including Palau and Kapingamarangi, an atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Additional sorties will continue until the operation concludes Dec. 16.

To celebrate the start, hundreds gathered at Andersen's Hangar 2 for the annual Christmas Drop "push ceremony," which traditionally includes key speakers loading one of the crates onto an aircraft.

"We had a great set of drops; we did not crush the beach huts, and we had not lost boxes. That's a good day in our book," Bruce Best, a Guam-based telecommunications expert who has assisted in the operation for decades, said during the ceremony.

Last year's Operation Christmas Drop saw 210 packages delivered to

60 remote islands in the South Pacific. This year is bigger than ever with at least 220 packages set to be delivered to 60 islands, according to Col. Richard McElhaney, commander of Yokota's 374th Airlift Wing.

The operation also has at least four active partners — Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea — and the Philippine air force may also join later in the operation, wing spokeswoman Capt. Emma Quirk said.

The 374th is scheduled to fly 36 sorties, while partner nations will fly a combined 42 sorties.

An additional 14 observer nations are participating this year, Quirk said.

While the humanitarian side of the mission is by far the most important aspect of Christmas Drop, it also

provides a unique training opportunity.

"The training challenges out here are the remote island destinations, and the things we do in the aircraft — we have to do some distribution planning and whatnot. That's a fantastic test for some of our younger aviators," McElhaney told reporters before the ceremony.

It also builds relationships and fosters cooperation between the partner and observer nations.

"I think if we could reach more people, it's fantastic," McElhaney said. "I think the growth potential is great."

wilson.alex@stripes.com  
@AlexMNWilson

## Volunteers prep care packages for holiday drop

BY ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — Hundreds of volunteers crowded into a hangar over the weekend to decorate about 220 boxes of food, supplies and toys to be air-dropped to isolated communities across the South Pacific.

At least 1,000 people from local charities, school groups and churches joined U.S. airmen and their families for the "Bundle Build" at Andersen's Hangar 5, the finishing touches for the U.S. Air Force's 73rd Operation Christmas Drop.

The packages were full of canned goods, water, rice, clothing, diving gear, first aid kits and toys. They are bound for 60 remote islands, according to Master Sgt. Theresa Buck, this year's operation president.

"We've had such amazing support this year that each box gets six toys," she said. "So, for the kids on the islands, it gives them something to look forward to as well."

For some volunteers, the event de-



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

**At least 1,000 volunteers helped prepare boxes for Operation Christmas Drop at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, on Saturday.**

finishes the Christmas season.

December Taisakan, 18, said she grew up on Yap, an island in Micronesia of about 11,000 people. She recalled how close to the ground the massive C-130J Super Hercules aircraft would fly as they dropped the packages.

"I remember there would be four boxes, and all the people from the island would come together and divide them among the families," she said at the event.

One of Taisakan's favorite childhood

presents, a toy makeup set, was included in one of the boxes. Taisakan, who moved to Guam to attend Okkodo High School in Ukudu, said she was excited to be on the other side of the operation.

"It just makes Christmas better," Taisakan said. She said she hopes the box she and the volunteers from Bethel Baptist Church decorated would make it to Yap.

Throughout the morning, volunteers added their own personal flair to the



**Bruce Best, wearing a "Love from Above" T-shirt and a Santa hat, discusses Operation Christmas Drop with a volunteer.**

boxes, painting Christmas- or island-themed images and writing messages such as "Merry Christmas" or the operation's signature "Love From Above" catchphrase.

Bruce Best said the supplies will mean even more this year due to several droughts and other hard times for the islands.

To compensate, supplies this year include extra water jugs that can also serve to collect rainwater, he told Stars and Stripes.

"The outer islands are really waiting, this is Christmas for them, and it's the one day of the year where everybody stops — they stop school, they stop everything," he said.



MILITARY

# Test gives DOD civilians access to commissaries

## 16 stores in 7 states are part of program

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Defense Department civilian employees at more than a dozen locations in the United States can now shop at their base commissary for about four months under a pilot program.

Sixteen stores in seven states, from Alaska to Virginia, opened their doors recently to DOD appropriated-fund and nonappropriated-fund employees, the Defense Commissary Agency said in a statement.

Family members of DOD civilian employees and former or retired DOD civilian employees are not included in the pilot, according to the statement.

During the 120-day trial, DOD civilian employees won't be able to purchase tobacco or alcohol or use the commissary Click2Go online ordering service.

The agency is testing the feasibility



Defense Commissary Agency

**The Defense Department is testing an expansion of commissary shopping privileges to its civilian employees.**

of expanding commissary access to DOD civilians at all stateside stores. The change is expected to increase sales and allow the agency to pass on more savings to patrons worldwide, DECA said in the statement.

The Pentagon directed DECA to keep tabs on the effects of increased patronage and report those findings. Stores were selected based on several

factors, including store size, capacity for more patrons and demographic range.

The pilot program locations are:

**Alaska:** Eielson Air Force Base.

**California:** Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake and Fort Irwin.

**Georgia:** Marine Corps Logistical Base Albany and Robins Air Force Base.

**Maryland:** Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

**Oklahoma:** Altus Air Force Base.

**Texas:** Laughlin Air Force Base.

**Virginia:** Naval Support Facility Dahlgren; Joint Base Langley-Eustis (Fort Eustis and Langley Air Force Base commissaries); Fort Gregg-Adams; Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story (Little Creek Commissary); Naval Base Norfolk; Naval Air Station Oceana; and Norfolk Naval Shipyard (Portsmouth).

DECA operates 235 stores on military installations worldwide, serving about 8.3 million households in 13 countries and two U.S. territories, according to a report to Congress last

month.

The agency strives to provide savings of over 25% compared with civilian marketplaces, even while tacking on a 5% surcharge to pay for modernizing and maintaining its facilities, according to the congressional report.

In 2022, a government watchdog agency found that DECA couldn't assure customers that it was meeting its target savings rate, particularly in the continental U.S.

The Government Accountability Office also noted in the same report that DECA's sales of groceries and other goods have fallen by more than \$1 billion in the past the past six years.

Overseas commissary privileges are covered by agreements with host nations. Military exchange stores expanded shopping privileges to DOD and Coast Guard civilian employees in the United States and its territories and possessions in 2021.

svan.jennifer@stripes.com  
@stripesksttown

# East Coast gets its first squadron of Marine F-35Cs

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Marine Corps activated its first F-35C Lightning II stealth fighter squadron on the East Coast recently, with the reactivation of the legendary Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point near Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The return of VMFA 251 marked a significant moment in the Corps' efforts

to modernize its fleet to fight a modern, large-scale war against an enemy with similar capabilities to the United States, officials said.

The squadron was inactivated in April 2020 at its prior base Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, S.C., after flying the F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet since 1986, including numerous operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The unit, nicknamed the Thunder-

bolts or T-Bolts, traces its lineage to World War II in which its pilots flew the F4F Wildcat, an aircraft carrier-based fighter. They flew the Wildcat in Pacific campaigns including the battles of Guadalcanal, the southern Solomons, Santa Cruz, Luzon and the southern Philippines, according to a Defense Department history of the squadron. The unit earned two Presidential Unit Citations "for extraordinary heroism" for its efforts during World War II. VMFA 251 also fought in the Korean War and flew NATO no-fly zone enforcement sorties over Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s.

"The T-Bolts are humbled and honored for the privilege of carrying that proud legacy forward," Lt. Col. Evan Shockley, the squadron's commander, said in a statement. "Our immediate focus is working toward initial operational capability, which means that VMFA 251 has enough operational F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers and support equipment to self-sustain its mission essential tasks. Following that, we will turn our attention toward reaching full oper-

ational capability to ensure that, when called upon, the T-Bolts will stand ready to serve our great nation."

The squadron is expected to reach initial operating capability next year, said 1st Lt. Jacob Ballard, 2nd Marine Air Wing spokesman.

It's expected be fully operational no later than 2026, which would allow the squadron to deploy globally, Ballard said.

All Marine F-35 squadrons are planned to have 10 primary aircraft, according to a 2022 service aviation plan.

The unit's 2020 inactivation came shortly after it returned to MCAS Beaufort from the Middle East, where it was flying anti-Islamic State group operations in Iraq and Syria. Marine officials at the time said the inactivation would be temporary as the Corps transitioned the unit to fly the F-35 from Cherry Point.

VMFA 251 received its first F-35C in September as it prepared to reactivate with the Corps' most advanced aircraft, service officials said.

Dickstein.corey@stripes.com

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief  
Brian Bowers, U.S. Edition Editor  
Scott Foley, Revenue Director

## CONTACT US

633 3rd Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, D.C. 20001

Editorial: (202) 886-0005  
Advertising: (202) 886-0014

Additional contact information: [stripes.com](https://www.stripes.com)

This publication is a compilation of stories from Stars and Stripes, the editorially independent newspaper authorized by the Department of Defense for members of the military community.

The contents of Stars and Stripes are unofficial, and are not to be considered as the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. government, including the Defense Department or the military services. The Guam Edition of Stars and Stripes is published jointly by Stars and Stripes and this newspaper.

The appearance of advertising in this publication, including inserts or supplements, does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Defense or Stars and Stripes of the products or services advertised.

Products or services advertised in this publication shall be made available for purchase, use, or patronage without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, physical handicap, political affiliation, or any other nonmerit factor of the purchaser, user, or patron.

© Stars and Stripes, 2024





*Thank you*  
**VETERANS**



# EXTRA SAVINGS ON CUSTOM REPLACEMENT WINDOWS FOR THOSE WHO'VE SERVED

**20% OFF** **+** **\$100 OFF** **+** **\$300 OFF**  
**Windows & Doors<sup>1</sup>** **Your Entire Purchase<sup>1</sup>** **Your Entire Purchase<sup>1</sup>**  
MINIMUM OF 4 MINIMUM OF 4 NO MINIMUM

**+ NO MONEY DOWN, NO MONTHLY PAYMENTS, NO INTEREST FOR 12 MONTHS<sup>1</sup>**  
MINIMUM PURCHASE OF 4 - INTEREST ACCRUES FROM PURCHASE DATE BUT IS WAIVED IF PAID IN FULL WITHIN 12 MONTHS

**CALL BY JANUARY 31**  
to schedule a FREE consultation.

 **888-708-0398**  
FINDYOURWINDOW.COM



**RENEWAL**  
**by ANDERSEN**  
FULL-SERVICE WINDOW & DOOR REPLACEMENT




**<sup>1</sup>DETAILS OF OFFER:** Offer expires 1/31/2025. Not valid with other offers or prior purchases. Get 20% off your entire purchase, and 12 months no money down, no monthly payments, no interest when you purchase four (4) or more windows or entry/patio doors between 12/1/2025 and 1/31/2025. Additional \$100 off your entire purchase, minimum purchase of four (4) required, taken after initial discount(s), when you purchase by 1/31/2025. Military discount applies to all active duty, veterans and retired military personnel. Military discount equals \$300 off your entire purchase and applies after all other discounts, no minimum purchase required. Subject to credit approval. 12-month Promo Period: while no payments are due, interest accrues but is waived if the loan is paid in full before the Promo Period expires. Any unpaid balance owed after the Promo Period, plus accrued interest, will be paid in installments based on the terms disclosed in the customer's loan agreement. Financing is provided by various financial institutions without regard to age, race, color, religion, national origin, gender, or familial status. Savings comparison based on purchase of a single unit at list price. Available at participating locations and offer applies throughout the service area. See your local Renewal by Andersen location for details. License numbers available at [renewalbyandersen.com/license](http://renewalbyandersen.com/license). Some Renewal by Andersen locations are independently owned and operated. "ENERGY STAR" is a registered trademark of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Renewal by Andersen" and all other marks where denoted are trademarks of Andersen Corporation. © 2025 Andersen Corporation. All rights reserved. RBA14140 <sup>2</sup> \*Using U.S. and imported parts.




*Join us in* **2025**  
★★ **MILITARY APPRECIATION MONTH**






**PURPLE HEART | MAY 6-10, 2025**  
Recipients are invited to come to Branson and stay at Westgate Branson Woods Resort. The event will feature a Meet & Greet, Clay Cooper Show, a Fishing Tournament, and Dinner/Dance. <https://qrco.de/bfSuTL>


**TRIBUTE TO VALOR | MAY 10-11, 2025**  
Tribute to Valor Armed Forces Day STEAM-Liner Expo at the Branson Airport, will be a free event that celebrates American heroes and showcases STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) initiatives in aviation. This is the 2nd annual trip to Branson for Tribute to valor, which now serves as home base for this organization. <https://qrco.de/bfSuOz>





**RALLY POINT BRANSON | MAY 23-26, 2025**  
Rally Point Branson is a new event designed to bridge the gap between different military groups and generations. This initiative on Memorial Day Weekend will bring together active duty military, Veterans, their families, and supporters to foster connections, share experiences, and strengthen the community. Stay tuned for more details as we prepare to launch this exciting event. <https://qrco.de/bfT9ge>

**MEMORIAL DAY SERVICE | MAY 27, 2025**  
Branson Veterans of America Chapter 913 host an annual Memorial Day Service at Ozarks Memorial Park Cemetery. This is a program of remembrance to honor those who have faithfully defended our Nation and preserved our freedom. <https://qrco.de/bfW2eo>



**SAVE THE DATE | BLUE ANGELS LABOR DAY WEEKEND IN BRANSON!**

★