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Seeking Green Berets

Special Forces hoping for more candidates in spite of budget, recruiting strains **Page 2**

Special Forces candidates assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School take part in a raid against enemy role players.

K. KASSENS/U.S. Army

COVER STORY

Help wanted: Green Berets seek soldiers

Army's overall recruiting shortfalls, flat budgets impact Special Forces

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — The Army's 157 newest Special Forces soldiers for the first time donned their iconic Green Berets before a crowd of cheering family and friends packed into the city's Crown Theatre last month.

For those elite soldiers soon traveling to Special Forces operational detachments across the force, the moment highlighted their Jan. 23 graduation from the intensive, monthslong qualification course at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at nearby Fort Liberty. The time-honored graduation ceremony is known in the Special Forces community as the Regimental First Formation, marking the soldiers' entrance into the ranks of the Special Forces regiment and their right to wear the coveted green headgear and Special Forces tab that identify them as members of that elite organization.

"The Green Beret at the end of the day is a piece of fabric that you wear on your head, but it symbolizes something much, much deeper," said Col. Dave Lucas, who commands the 4th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group, which runs the Special Forces Qualification Course for SWCS. "I'm sure they've tried on the berets at home and whatnot, but now they actually get to wear it. And that means something ... because of the trials that they've been through to earn it, but it really means something because of all the people who went before them and what those generations did to make it what it is."

The Army's Special Forces traces its lineage to the 1950s, and the iconic Green Beret was officially authorized for the elite soldiers in 1962 by then-President Kennedy. Green Berets have since become a critical special operations force tasked with conducting sensitive missions around the globe — often focused on working hand-in-hand with indigenous forces to fight with limited U.S. forces and resources. In the weeks after the al-Qaida attacks on



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

New Special Forces soldiers don their Green Berets for the first time during their Special Forces Qualification Course graduation on Jan. 23 in Fayetteville, N.C.

9/11, it was Green Berets who were first sent into Afghanistan on a mission to link with Afghan fighters to attack the Taliban in the opening days of Operation Enduring Freedom.

To enter the ranks of the Green Berets, soldiers must complete the grueling, three-week Special Forces Assessment and Selection course and then pass the Special Forces Qualification Course, or Q Course, which can range from some 50 weeks to almost two years of training, according to the service.

Though the Army in recent years has considered deep cuts to its special operations formations that expanded dramatically during the post-9/11 wars, Special Operations officials have said the demands for Green Berets have not declined, even as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have wound down. President Donald Trump's administration has not made public its plans for the future of special operations forces



Army Maj. Gen. Gil Ferguson, commander of the 1st Special Forces Command at Fort Liberty, N.C., hands a new Special Forces soldier his Green Beret at a graduation ceremony.

since his return to the White House last month, and officials at the Pentagon declined to comment on any impending changes to force structure.

Regardless of any changes to come, one of SWCS primary roles is to keep pushing qualified young men and women through the Special Forces

training pipeline to ensure units have enough Green Berets to conduct missions, said Command Sgt. Maj. Lionel Strong, the senior enlisted leader for SWCS.

Strong, who earned his Green Beret in 2002 and has served with Special Forces units on numerous deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, said in order to keep those units fully staffed, SWCS needs more soldiers attempting Special Forces training than have done so in recent years.

Recruiting shortfalls across the entire Army and flat Special Operations budgets that have failed to keep up with inflation have contributed to a smaller-than-ideal number of Special Forces hopefuls entering training courses, officials said. Nonetheless, Strong said, the special warfare school has managed to produce enough Green Berets to maintain a Special Forces community that is "healthy enough

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

COVER STORY

FROM PAGE 2

now to conduct the operations on behalf of the nation.”

“That being said, we do have to put in some effort into identifying, recruiting and prepare the next generation of [Army Special Operations] soldiers,” he said.

For Lucas, who earned his Green Beret in 2009 after serving previously in another Army special operations outfit, the 75th Ranger Regiment, the pitch to today’s young soldiers to try out for Special Forces is simple: “Don’t limit yourself. Give it a shot,” he said.

“You never know until you try. I’ve met a lot of people over the years that ... were going to do this and going to do that, and I’d say, ‘Don’t look back and say that. Give it a shot because you never know,’ ” the colonel said. “The worst-case scenario is [you don’t pass Special Forces training and] you’re still in the Army, but you never know, it may work out, and you can find yourself having more fun than you ever anticipated.”

Making Green Berets

Training to enter the Special Forces is difficult by design, according to Strong. It is meant to ensure Green Beret units are filled with elite, capable troops with the ability to adapt to difficult and stressful situations.

The first course, SFAS, is meant to weed out those who do not display the traits necessary to succeed in the Special Forces — high physical fitness levels, intelligence and personal character, Strong said.

“Your intelligence and your fitness, we have tools and resources to help with that, but the thing that I would say is foundational to us is character,” the command sergeant major said. “We’ve got to know that a person we’re bringing [into Special Forces] has the shared values, beliefs and behaviors with our organization and the Army.”

The highly intensive, three-week SFAS course includes fitness tests, long marches carrying heavy loads, land navigation challenges, obstacle courses, and cognitive tests sometimes conducted with little-to-no sleep, according to the Army. SWCS officials declined to provide a recent estimate of the percentage of soldiers who successfully complete the SFAS course, but a 2019 study published by the U.S. Army Research Institute indicated only about 31% of SFAS participants were selected that year to move on to the Q Course.

The Q Course has a much higher success rate, Strong said, with some



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Senior Green Berets — including Maj. Gen. Gil Ferguson, commander of the 1st Special Forces Command at Fort Liberty, N.C., right, and Col. Dave Lucas, commander of the 4th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Battalion, center — toast 157 new Army Special Force soldiers during a graduation ceremony Jan. 23 for those who recently completed the Special Forces Qualification Course.

80% to 90% completing it on their first try.

Once accepted into the Q Course, soldiers enter the lengthy pipeline that turns them into experts in their chosen Special Forces craft, Lucas said. Those soldiers spend part of the course training with their comrades. In other parts, they split into unique courses to train them to conduct their selected specialty. Those Special Forces specialties include weapons, engineering, communications and combat medicine for enlisted soldiers. Officers and warrant officers train to learn their jobs in Special Forces in separate courses within the Q course.

During the course of about a year, Green Beret hopefuls learn small-unit tactics, how to use foreign weapons systems, train in irregular warfare techniques, learn foreign language skills, complete the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape course, and operate in the two-week culmination exercise known as Robin Sage, in which Special Forces candidates test the skills that they learned throughout the course.

When they have completed all that training, Lucas said, they have almost certainly proved themselves as capable, adaptable and creative soldiers ready to serve in the 12-man operational detachments that form the foundations of Special Forces units.

‘It won’t be boring’

As the latest group of new Green Berets — Q Course class 338 — gath-



Green Berets await their new Special Forces soldiers ahead of the graduation ceremony.

ered Jan. 23 inside Fayetteville’s Crown Complex, where generations of Special Forces soldiers have first donned their earned headgear, Lucas told them he could not predict what their futures would hold.

“Nobody has any idea what’s in store for them ahead,” he said. “I don’t know where their careers are going to take them, and neither do [they]. But I can promise you one thing, it won’t be boring.”

For Lucas, his 28 years in the Army have included assignments in Georgia, North Carolina, New York, Kentucky, Washington, D.C., and at least eight combat tours in Iraq, according to his official biography.

As a captain leading a Special Forces operational detachment from the Fort Campbell, Ky.-based 5th Special Forc-

es Group on lengthy tours in Iraq have been among the highlights during his career, he said. The new Green Berets could find themselves almost anywhere in the world, as Special Forces teams continue to deploy to train or operate in countries across the globe.

“I’ve gotten to do things that I’d never, ever, ever thought I would do,” Lucas said. “You’re truly empowered here, like you are in very, very few other places ... across the Army.”

For Strong, his 23 years in Special Forces have taken him across Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa, South America and Asia. Like Lucas, he said he could not predict where the latest crop of Green Berets might serve, but he promised they would continue to be called upon for decades to come.

“At some point our nation might need to do something that is high risk, time constrained and politically sensitive, and if not one, maybe all three of those things at once, and generally, special operations forces are better suited to do those kinds of missions,” he said. “Special Forces — we’re going to be there at every phase of the operations from shaping, to conflict and back ... [and] we’re going to work by, with and through our partner forces ... building partnership capacity in those relationships, and we’re probably going to have unconventional solutions to complex problems.”

“If anything, the demand [for Green Berets] is going up.”

MILITARY

House probes secret Navy study of pilots

Potential traumatic brain injuries were suffered by aviators

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A powerful congressional committee is probing a secret Navy program studying potential traumatic brain injuries suffered by the service's aviators, which may have led to the recent suicides of at least three Super Hornet pilots.

This month, Rep. James Comer, chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, sent a letter to acting Secretary of the Navy Terence Emmert requesting information and documents related to Project Odin's Eye, an internal service review of traumatic brain injuries potentially sustained by pilots with the Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program, popularly known as TOPGUN.

The project, "initiated without formal approval from Navy Medical and Air Commands, raises additional questions about the Navy's knowledge of potential issues and whether it is acting to mitigate these issues in a comprehensive and effective manner," said Comer, a Republican from Kentucky.

Comer noted that while the service's efforts to better understand the impacts of high-speed flight on the human brain are understandable, "it is



NATHAN JORDAN/U.S. Navy

A pilot prepares for a flight in an F/A-18F Super Hornet on the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson on Feb. 4 in the Indo-Pacific area of operations.

concerning that Navy command may not be fully aware of (the program's) existence."

He also informed the Navy that the committee was investigating the service's efforts "to mitigate possible physiological and psychological effects inflicted on certain naval aviators and flight officers."

The letter was first reported and posted by The New York Times.

At issue is the impact on the brain of catapults and arresting gear typically used on aircraft carriers to rapidly accelerate or decelerate aircraft.

Catapults help F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jets go from zero to at least 190

mph in seconds as they launch from the runway of an aircraft carrier. Arresting gear brings an aircraft traveling at about 150 mph to a complete stop within 320 feet, also within seconds.

Other fixed-wing aircraft that take off from or land on Navy carriers include the E-2 Hawkeye, EA-18G Growler, F-35C Lightning II and C-2 Greyhound.

It's not clear how the gravitational forces experienced in repeated launches and landings affect the brain. The impact of G-force also is experienced by Navy aviators during missions and in combat.

The Navy has publicly denied the risk of TBI for pilots. But some aviators have reported sudden and unexplained mental health problems, including insomnia, anxiety, depression and PTSD-like symptoms, all of which can be a result of repeated sub-concussive brain injuries, according to the Times report.

Three former Super Hornet pilots, all in their 40s, died by suicide within months of one another in 2023 and 2024. Their families said the pilots had symptoms consistent with brain injuries, the newspaper reported separately in December.

Project Odin's Eye was created in 2024 to look for brain injuries in Navy SEALs and expanded in November to include TOPGUN aviators, the newspaper said.

In the letter, Comer requests that the Navy schedule a briefing with committee staff no later than Feb. 13 to better understand the extent the service has evaluated and addressed physiological and psychological injuries for naval aviators and flight officers.

He also demands that the service submit all documents, communications and drafts of Project Odin's Eye, along with research protocols, funding information and the names of all Defense Department officials overseeing the project.

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Navy asks sailors for feedback on housing, child care

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is asking sailors and their families for feedback on installation quality-of-service programs, including housing, child care and gyms.

Specifically, the Navy wants to hear recommendations from sailors and their families regarding unaccompanied and family housing, fleet and family support centers, child and youth programs, and morale, welfare, and recreation facilities and activities. These programs, the Navy said, are meant to enhance the quality of service of sailors and their families.

"We continually seek ways to im-

prove customer-focused programs that support warfighters and their families," said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, who manages all 70 Navy installations around the globe. "We want to hear from them. Their feedback is important to driving meaningful change, and we are committed to turning their input into tangible improvements."

To submit recommendations, sailors and their families are asked to email navyqualityofservice@us.navy.mil.

The request for recommendations on how to do better comes after more than two years of persistent effort to

improve sailor quality of life following a rash of suicides in 2022 among mostly young sailors.

In 2023, the Navy introduced the unaccompanied housing Resident Bill of Rights and Responsibilities and QR maintenance codes to make it easier for residents to report maintenance requests and track their progress. In 2024, the Pentagon launched a website to track problems with military housing managed by private companies.

Additionally, in 2024, the service rolled out a free Wi-Fi pilot program for 12 Hampton Roads, Va., barracks and expanded cooking capabilities

throughout its unaccompanied housing by allowing sailors to use small cooking appliances in their barracks.

Some Navy bases also began offering in recent years access to free, 24-hour fitness centers to help improve physical and mental fitness.

"Our sailors and families are the heart and soul of everything we do in defense of our nation," Gray said. "We recognize that their quality of service maintains their readiness, morale, and overall well-being, which the Navy takes seriously."

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MILITARY

Hegseth restores name of NC Army post

Fort Liberty once again Fort Bragg, but without tie to the Confederacy

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

Fort Liberty, the Army's largest post, is once again Fort Bragg, but without the Confederate tie.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently ordered the base renamed while en route to Stuttgart, Germany, from Joint Base Andrews, Md., aboard an Air Force C-17 Globemaster III, according to Pentagon chief spokesman John Ulyot.

"Bragg is back," Hegseth said after signing the order that changes the name to Fort Roland L. Bragg, according to a video on the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service.

The name change refers not to Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg, for whom the base was named in 1918, but to Pfc. Roland L. Bragg, "a World War II hero who earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart for his exceptional cour-



ALEXANDER KUBITZA/U.S. Navy

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth signs a memo reversing the name of Fort Liberty, N.C., back to Fort Bragg while flying in a C-17 to Stuttgart, Germany.

age during the Battle of the Bulge," Ulyot said in a news release.

"This change underscores the installation's legacy of recognizing those who have demonstrated extraordinary service and sacrifice for the nation,"

the release states.

Bragg, a building mover and sawmill operator from Sabbatus, Maine, was an Army paratrooper in Europe who "saw considerable action during World War II" and died in Nobleboro, Maine, at

age 75 in 1999, according to his obituary on MaineMason.org.

Bragg, a Mason, was captured briefly during the war by a German soldier, also a Mason, who let Bragg escape, his daughter Linda French said in the obituary.

"The guy said, 'hit me over the head and take off,' and he did and took off with an ambulance," French said in the obituary. Bragg drove the ambulance, with other prisoners on board, through enemy fire to safety.

The North Carolina base was renamed Fort Liberty in 2023 after a yearslong process mandated by Congress at the end of President-elect Donald Trump's first term to rid the military of ties to the Confederacy.

Trump promised on the campaign trail last year that he would reinstate Fort Bragg as the Army post's name and work to return Confederate-linked names to eight other Southern bases changed in 2023.

Stars and Stripes reporter Wyatt Olson contributed to this report.
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Transgender recruits halted from joining the force

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has stopped new transgender recruits from joining the military and halted medical procedures for service members diagnosed with gender dysphoria, according to a new memorandum.

"Effective immediately, all new accessions for individuals with a history of gender dysphoria are paused," Hegseth wrote in the memo filed with the U.S. District Court in Washington. "All unscheduled, scheduled or planned medical procedures associated with affirming or facilitating a gender transition for service members are paused."

Hegseth said individuals with gender dysphoria already in the military would be "treated with dignity and respect."

The move follows four executive orders signed Jan. 27 by President Donald Trump that directly impacted the U.S. military, including revising the Defense Department's transgender

policy.

Trump's executive order does not ban transgender troops but requires the Defense Department to update medical standards "to establish high standards of readiness, lethality ... and integrity." It will end the use of pronouns in the military "that inaccurately reflect an individual's sex" and prohibits men from "sharing sleeping, changing, or bathing in facilities" designated for women. The order also applies to women using facilities for men.

The executive order also directed the Pentagon to determine a policy for service members based on readiness within 30 days.

A U.S. judge last week asked lawyers for Trump's administration to ensure six troops who sued to stop the executive order targeting transgender troops are not removed from service before further court proceedings are held, Reuters reported.

Former President Joe Biden ended Trump's de facto ban on transgender service members and allowed individu-

als who meet military entrance qualifications to enlist, serve in their self-identified gender and access care deemed medically necessary for gender transition.

In July 2017, Trump issued a series of tweets announcing his intention to ban transgender men and women from serving "in any capacity." The Pentagon's de facto ban on transgender men and women enlisting in the military went into effect in April 2019, following nearly two years of legal battles launched after transgender service members and military hopefuls sought to halt its implementation.

The Pentagon long insisted its policy was not a blanket ban because of its protections for those transgender service members who came out after the 2016 policy, and a waiver process that could allow some transgender people to join the military.

But the policy barred nearly all people diagnosed with gender dysphoria — described by the American Psychiatric Association as "a conflict between a

person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify."

It did allow people to enlist with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria who had doctor certification that they had remained stable in their biological sex for 36 months.

It disqualified all people who had medically transitioned their sex.

The Pentagon in March 2021, when the department unveiled the policy change to allow transgender troops, estimated the number of service members who identified as transgender ranged from 1,000 to 8,000. The Human Rights Campaign in November estimated a ban on transgender troops could impact about 15,000 service members.

A Gallup poll published Monday said 58% of Americans favored allowing openly transgender individuals to serve in the military, down from 71% in 2019.

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MILITARY

Drill showcases Army's new drone strategy

Various new models tested at readiness center in Germany

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — Drone pilot Spc. Farouk Muhieddine sat calmly in his concealed foxhole at the Army's vast training range in rural Bavaria, a laptop open in front of him.

After receiving targeting information from a Ghost-X reconnaissance drone, he simulated striking an opposing force over a mile away with a loitering munition.

"We've been getting kills left, right and center without even having to see the enemy," said Muhieddine, who is assigned to 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division.

Muhieddine works with the Army's newest unmanned aerial systems, applying tactics of a fighting strategy influenced by lessons learned from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

His lethal unmanned systems platoon, an experimental unit, endured freezing temperatures as they took on an opposing force of soldiers from 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, during the Combined Resolve exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels.

Combined Resolve, which runs until Feb. 16, features 4,000 U.S. and allied soldiers from 16 NATO and European countries.

The monthlong drill is giving Muhieddine and his fellow participants a crash course in the new strategy, which the Army has dubbed "transforming in contact."

Drones like the Ghost-X and loitering munitions — known as LASSO, or low altitude stalk and strike ordnance — are integral to it.

Last year, the Pentagon signed a \$990 million contract to receive an indefinite number of AeroVironment Switchblade-series loitering munitions over the next five years.

The single-use munitions, often referred to as kamikaze drones, are launched from a tube and use a mounted camera to fly to and strike their target. They have a range of up to 25 miles depending on the antenna and



PHOTO BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

Spc. Jacob Milligan, a rifleman with 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, pilots a Skydio drone during exercise Combined Resolve at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, on Feb. 3. The monthlong NATO exercise is allowing U.S. soldiers to test a variety of drones.



A U.S. Army Ghost-X reconnaissance drone sits in a field waiting for soldiers to prepare it for flight.

can stay airborne for up to 45 minutes, Muhieddine said.

A short distance away, drone maintainer Spc. Layton Waller watched a Ghost-X land like a helicopter on grass just outside the tree line.

The 55-pound reconnaissance drone can be deployed rapidly, is equipped with infrared and can figure out its precise location even when global positioning is down, Waller said.

It can fly 15.5 miles for up to 75 min-

utes and uses artificial intelligence to help its human operators identify targets, the website of manufacturer Anduril states.

"Two of the biggest progressions (from previous drones are) being able to fly in (poor) weather conditions and how simple the system is to use," Waller said. "It can be used by anyone in the Army."

The exercise also has shown the soldiers how to better manage the



Milligan flies a small-range reconnaissance drone.

limitations of the new systems.

On one day of the drill, one Ghost-X was overused, causing it to malfunction and crash. The drone's AI target identification is helpful but doesn't currently stack up to the human eye's ability to spot targets, Waller said.

The new Army fighting doctrine receiving its baptism in Hohenfels calls for troops to be more mobile, adaptable and technologically savvy.

Tactics include fake command posts, electromagnetic decoys and transport vehicles that help keep troops moving and increase their odds of surviving.

As the action unfolded, Brig. Gen. Steven Carpenter surveyed the troops. Carpenter is in charge of the 7th Army Training Command, the resident operator of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center.

"By fielding a number of new mobility platforms, the Army is trying to equip light-infantry units with the ability to rapidly reposition throughout the battlefield," he said.

He added: "One of the lessons that we've learned from the war in Ukraine is that the battlefield is essentially transparent now in the sense that you can always be seen."

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MILITARY

'We want to optimize their potential'

Center brings holistic health under one roof at Fort Liberty

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT LIBERTY, N.C. — The massive new gym space on Fort Liberty boasts more than 40 weightlifting power racks, state-of-the-art strength and conditioning equipment, an indoor turf field and some 30,000 pounds of weights.

But the \$43 million facility is for far more than working out, officials at the Army base said.

"It's really cool. It's actually incredible," Lt. Col. Michael Handlan said as he looked out at the 43,000 square feet of gym space inside the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's new Human Performance Force Generation building on Jan. 23, a day after officials on the North Carolina post officially opened the facility.

Handlan, the Special Forces officer who directs the human performance program for the Special Warfare Center, known as SWCS, said the opening of the 90,000-square-foot building known as HP Forge marks a new step in his program's efforts to build soldiers best suited for special operations. SWCS is responsible for running the courses that produce Green Berets and psychological operations soldiers. It also provides advanced military education for experienced special operators.

HP Forge "is a place where we have a wide range of human performance and wellness resources housed in one place so that we can synchronize our efforts and provide a holistic approach to training and supporting our service members," Handlan said.

The human performance program dates back roughly 15 years and was essentially a precursor to the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness — or H2F — program the service adopted for its conventional forces in 2018.

The program aims to provide its forces with the opportunity to improve their mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing, while also training them in ways that would aid them in completing the grueling courses to enter the Special Forces or psyops fields and on



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

A physical therapist works on a Special Forces soldier at the new Human Performance Force Generation, or HP Forge, facility for the Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Liberty, N.C.

the front lines in combat, Handlan said. HP Forge provides those troops access to strength coaches, physical therapists, mental performance coaches, nutritionists and behavioral health specialists all within the building.

The access to that team of professionals for SWCS soldiers in the training pipelines and the cadre that runs those programs, Handlan said, is the key for ensuring the service produces elite special operators.

"This building, this facility is incredible," the lieutenant colonel said. "But the resource is the people, the experts that we hire — the people that we bring who are willing to do this ... for our folks."

The human performance program has come a long way since its beginnings a few years into the Global War on Terror, when the command founded the program to focus on rehabilitating soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Command Sgt. Maj. Lionel Strong, the SWCS senior enlisted leader, who is a Green Beret.

The program began in makeshift gyms — about 500-square-foot repurposed supply rooms, he said. Units within SWCS each had one strength coach and one physical therapist who shared space in those facilities, instead of the large teams of coaches that they have access to now.

"You would literally be tripping over each other working out with one strength coach while the teammate was 10 feet away being worked on by the one and only sole physical therapist," Strong said. "It's important to



The new center houses a 43,000-square-foot gym and access to physical therapists, nutritionists, behavioral health specialists and mental coaches.

understand where we came from and evolve to where we are."

The HP Forge facility now includes a physical therapy facility with more than a dozen beds and a host of specialized recovery equipment designed to get injured troops back into the field as quickly and safely as possible, Handlan said. The facility also has digital tools that can help troops understand their physical makeup including muscle and fat tissue and their bone density.

The program seems to be working. Mike Fields, the deputy director of the SWCS human performance program, said the command is gathering data on injury prevention and return to duty times among its population. Recently, SWCS saw 149 of 170 candidates who trained with its human performance program after failing a training stage in the Special Forces pipeline return to their course, often after an injury, and complete it.

"That saves a lot of money," Fields said. "Horses are not cheap."

Handlan is also focused on preventing injury and maximizing performance for SWCS' troops. That includes focusing on proper sleep and proper nutrition — two of the areas that he said SWCS officials have long struggled to convince young soldiers to embrace.

"Getting everyone to buy in on the nutrition and the sleep is really tough," he said. "What we're learning is those are the things that ultimately affect us the most significantly long term. If your sleep and your food are horrible for years, no matter what you do in the gym, you're not going to be able to continue to perform because all the other things are falling off."

Nutritionists opened a "performance kitchen" in the HP Forge facility where they are focused on providing troops with knowledge about food and the tools to prepare it properly.

"Our dietitians are teaching people how to fuel with the right things at the right time to perform at max level on the objective," he said. "So, if you're carrying a ruck for 12 hours through the woods and you know you're getting ready to hit an objective at [3 a.m.], it's when do I need the fuel so that my body and my mind are functioning in the right place?"

SWCS has long been great at physically training its soldiers, Handlan said, but its coaches are really working now to develop proper lifestyle habits the troops can adopt for their entire careers.

Strong credited the human performance program with improving what the special warfare school can accomplish with its students, and he said the holistic health approaches that they learn at that early stage of their special operations careers should set a baseline for them as they move forward in the Army and even after they leave the military.

"We want to meet them where we're at, and we want to optimize their potential across these physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional domains throughout their career," the command sergeant major said. "And on the other side of that service, whether it's a five-year career or 20-year career, we want to push a healthy veteran back into society."

MILITARY

Critics say museum shortchanged airman

Petition urges display for Medal of Honor recipient Chapman

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

A petition calling for the National Medal of Honor Museum to include a dedicated exhibit for Air Force Master Sgt. John Chapman has revived long-standing criticism that the Navy SEAL community sought to “diminish his contributions.”

More than 24,000 people have signed the Change.org petition requesting that the museum add Chapman’s story to approximately 200 focused presentations when it opens next month in Arlington, Texas.

Chapman, a combat controller, was killed in action on March 4, 2002, during the Battle of Takur Ghar in Afghanistan. He was the first airman to receive the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War and only the 19th in the service’s history.

His photo will be displayed at the museum entrance, and his story will be included in a video inside, his sister, Lori Chapman Longfritz, wrote Jan. 10 on Facebook.

However, she argued that his legacy warrants a dedicated display, similar to one planned for retired Navy SEAL Master Chief Petty Officer Britt Slabinski, who fought alongside Chapman that day.

“The museum’s choice to honor Britt Slabinski without acknowledging John Chapman appears influenced by poli-



U.S. AIR FORCE

Air Force Master Sgt. John Chapman died during the Battle of Takur Ghar in Afghanistan, on March 4, 2002.

tics and seems like an extension of the Naval Special Warfare’s efforts to diminish Chapman’s contributions,” states the petition, written by David Parke, who identified himself as a veteran of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

Slabinski, who attended Chapman’s Medal of Honor ceremony in 2018, has credited Chapman with saving the lives of their team at Takur Ghar and supported his posthumous award.

Longfritz said the museum initially indicated her brother would receive a dedicated exhibit but later reversed course.

“This whole thing has blown up and didn’t have to happen,” she said.

Longfritz reiterated claims that Slabinski, now a museum board member, left her mortally wounded brother behind on the mountain.

That allegation, along with reports of interservice tensions over competing accounts of heroism, resurfaced when both men were awarded the Medal of Honor.

In an interview with The New York Times published Aug. 17, 2016, Slabinski “acknowledged that he might have made a mistake under intense fire” in believing Chapman was dead and said he was “still haunted by what happened on the mountain.”

Slabinski did not respond to multiple requests for comment through the museum and the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

His story was chosen for inclusion in an extensive exhibit featuring multiple recipients, which will rotate over time, museum vice president Cory Crowley said recently.

“Neither Slabinski nor any of the seven Medal of Honor recipients who have served on our board since exhibit planning began had a role in selecting the recipients included in the first rotation,” he wrote. “Decisions about the included recipients were made by a team of museum professionals employed by our foundation and an outside advisory board.”

The museum shared plans for Chap-

man’s presentation with Longfritz during a visit, Crowley said. The museum did incorporate text suggested by the family to highlight Chapman’s role as a combat controller, he added.

Longfritz’s Facebook comments prompted Parke to launch the petition in support of a Chapman exhibit.

“I felt as though John Chapman was getting left behind again,” he said Feb. 1.

In 2002, Chapman was a technical sergeant serving on Slabinski’s SEAL team when their Chinook helicopter landed under fire to rescue Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts, who had fallen from the aircraft.

Chapman and Slabinski stormed an al-Qaida position, clearing it in close combat, according to their Medal of Honor citations.

Chapman was gravely wounded and lost consciousness as Slabinski maneuvered the team — including multiple wounded personnel — to a more defensible position. Slabinski continued fighting and called in airstrikes until the team was extracted the next day.

Chapman, however, regained consciousness and continued battling enemy fighters for an hour before an Army Ranger assault force arrived.

As a second Chinook helicopter approached, Chapman charged two al-Qaida fighters preparing to launch rocket-propelled grenades, firing on them before being killed by enemy fire.

Crowley, aware of the petition, acknowledged that Chapman deserves further recognition but said the museum is unlikely to alter its initial exhibits. He emphasized that space limitations prevent the museum from creating individual displays for each of the thousands of Medal of Honor recipients.

However, he said Chapman’s story could receive more focus in the future.

“We’ve had very nice conversations with John Chapman’s widow, and she was able to give us a few pieces of memorabilia,” Crowley said. “We’re working to further develop that relationship so that, hopefully, she’ll want to entrust us with the things we need to do a deeper dive on his story in the future.”

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