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‘These guys deserve better’

Upkeep of tributes to fallen US soldiers in France is duo’s labor of love **Page 2**

Eric Mueller, left, and Maarten Otte hoist a flag back onto the Henry Gunther memorial in Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, France, after repairing the flag pole on Nov. 6.

PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes



COVER STORY

Maintaining memories of fallen in France

Pair strive to repair forlorn tributes to World War I soldiers

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

CHAUMONT-DEVANT-DAMVILLERS, France — From a hilltop overlooking miles of farmland, American retiree Eric Mueller stood beside a stone monument and pointed to a spot in the valley below where the last U.S. soldier killed in World War I is thought to have fallen.

A former Michigan Air National Guard lieutenant, Mueller has traveled to northeastern France twice a year for nearly a decade, logging the GPS coordinates of trench lines, bunkers and other wartime sites for a digital mapping project.

But while scouring old battlefields, he became troubled by something he never set out to find: monuments to American military units and soldiers weathered by age and suffering from neglect.

At the hilltop monument in the Meuse region, an inscription about the Army's 79th Infantry Division and Sgt. Henry Gunther, the aforementioned soldier, was barely legible and cracks ran through a panel embedded in the stone.

"It bothers me that their sacrifices were recognized by these monuments and then forgotten," Mueller said. "These guys deserve better."

So in 2019, he teamed up with Dutch historian and author Maarten Otte, whose research focuses on U.S. involvement in World War I. Since then, the two have taken it upon themselves to care for some of the more than 140 American memorials Otte says are scattered across the area north of Verdun, where the U.S.-led Meuse-Argonne Offensive occurred in late 1918.

Throughout western Europe, thousands of small, privately funded memorials stand at sites where Americans fought and died during the world wars. As the 107th anniversary of World War I's end was marked Nov. 11, maintaining many of them has never been more difficult.

One of the primary challenges is the disappearance or death of the orga-



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

Eric Mueller, left, and Maarten Otte repair a flagpole at a monument to Henry Gunther, believed to be the last American killed during World War I, at Chaumont-Devant-Damvillers, France, on Nov. 6.

nizations or people originally responsible for the monuments. In such cases, towns and various associations sometimes step in to help with maintenance.

But in sparsely populated areas of northeastern France — where American memorials stand among numerous French and other Allied monuments from both world wars, as well as older ones from the Franco-Prussian War — resources are limited.

Otte, who lives in the region, routinely checks on the condition of the monuments. When Mueller returns for his visits, the pair tend to those that need attention.

They replace worn-out American flags with ones Mueller brings from the U.S. and do light cleaning and restoration work. Occasionally, they hire professionals to remove heavy moss and lichen buildup.

"We always do this before November 11, when more Americans visit the area," Otte said, referring to what is observed as Armistice Day in Europe and Veterans Day in the United States.

Locations with less allure

While the Meuse-Argonne region welcomes a steady stream of visitors each year, it's hardly a tourist hot spot.

In Normandy, by contrast, World War II tourism helps sustain the regional economy, so officials make sure

monuments and cemeteries are kept in pristine condition.

The Normandy American Cemetery alone welcomes more than a million visitors each year. The Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, which holds the graves of more than 14,200 Americans and is the largest cemetery of its kind in Europe, receives only about 15,000 annual visitors, staffers said.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, a 47-day campaign that helped bring World War I to an end, remains the largest and deadliest battle in U.S. military history.

When fighting finished, American units, veterans groups and families independently built hundreds of memorials on European soil to honor fallen soldiers and commemorate military milestones.

But as Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, toured the Continent in the early 1920s, he noticed that many of these tributes lacked coordination and upkeep. Concerned that they might deteriorate and reflect poorly on the United States, he urged the creation of a national body to oversee America's overseas commemorations.

Congress responded in 1923 by creating the American Battle Monuments Commission, appointing Pershing as its first chairman. But the agency's re-

sponsibility does not extend to most privately funded monuments.

Only about three dozen have been accepted into the commission's Private Memorials Program, through which the agency is paid to ensure that contractors maintain sites on behalf of the groups that own them.

Stirring hearts and minds

For Americans and Europeans today who have never experienced the realities of war firsthand, smaller monuments can be especially effective because they often convey more personal details, said Ann Rigney, a former professor of comparative literature at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

She specializes in cultural memory and the ways societies commemorate the past.

"Sometimes you need these very shocking small little details to bring home in a new way the awfulness of war ... rather than being something you ritualistically yawn at when November 11 comes around," Rigney said.

Another American who understands the impact of such monuments and shares the sense of urgency to preserve them is Lilian Pfluke, a retired U.S. Army major who formerly ran the Private Memorials Program.

During her decadelong tenure beginning in the 1990s, Pfluke often heard from people concerned about neglected American war monuments that fell outside the agency's authority.

The steady stream of complaints inspired her to establish the nonprofit American War Memorials Overseas in 2008.

The organization documents, promotes and helps preserve smaller, privately built military memorials honoring Americans around the world, often encouraging local groups to act and assist with fundraising. Its database now includes more than 4,600 sites.

"We don't have troops in France anymore," said Pfluke, who lives in Avignon. "Our monuments and cemeteries are our strategic presence here. They show what America has done, reflect our alliance with France and preserve the legacy of our cooperation during the world wars."

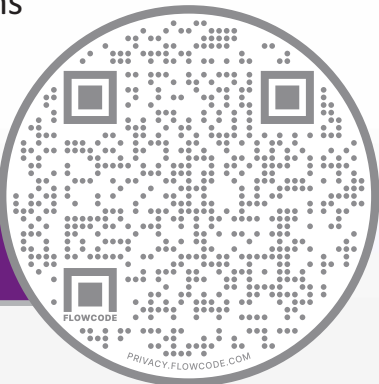
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MILITARY

Black Hawk flies as drone in first test

It took less than an hour for Guard soldier to train to fly helicopter

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

It took less than an hour for an enlisted Army National Guard soldier with no past aviation experience to train to fly a Black Hawk helicopter during a training exercise this summer, according to utility chopper's manufacturer.

But the sergeant first class was not in the cockpit. Instead, he flew the aircraft remotely using a tablet in the U.S. Army and Black Hawk-maker Sikorsky's first real-world, soldier-run test of its optionally piloted Black Hawk helicopter, the company announced in a news release this month.

The training occurred in August as part of the National Guard's Northern Strike exercise in Michigan, during which some 7,500 Guard forces from 36 states trained for two weeks with the latest military tech including drones and electronic warfare capabilities, according to the National Guard.

During that exercise, the noncommissioned officer — who was not named publicly — flew the optionally manned Black Hawk, or OPV Black Hawk, from the deck of a Coast Guard vessel on Lake Huron, according to Sikorsky.

Using the tablet, the soldier instructed the helicopter to perform "racetrack patterns" over the lake while soldiers inside the OPV Black Hawk performed resupply parachute drops some 70 miles away.

It marked the first time Sikorsky's OPV Black Hawk conducted a mission entirely planned and controlled by soldiers.

Sikorsky — which is owned by weapons giant Lockheed Martin — has spent most of the past decade developing the optionally piloted Black Hawk program with the Defense Advanced Research Projects



SIKORSKY

A National Guard soldier uses a tablet to command the Sikorsky OPV Black Hawk to autonomously transport a 2,900-pound water buffalo sling load for the first time during the Northern Strike exercise in Michigan in August.

Agency, or DARPA.

The advanced, semi-autonomous helicopter is meant to give the Army options to fly it with an in-cockpit pilot when the mission calls for it or to fly it remotely in situations that could prove especially dangerous — like when enemy contact is likely, officials have said.

"An optionally piloted Black Hawk aircraft can reduce pilot workload in a challenging environment or complete a resupply mission without humans on board," Rich Benton, Sikorsky's vice president and general manager, said in a statement. "In contested logistics situations, a Black Hawk operating as a large drone offers commanders greater resilience and flexibility to get resources to the point of need."

Sikorsky's UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters have been an Army staple since the 1970s.

The helicopters shuttle troops and

supplies around battlefields and military posts across the globe and conduct the Army's air medevac mission. The service expects Black Hawks to fly into the 2070s.

But as the Army faces potential conflict with a near-peer power like China or Russia, service leaders want to be able to conduct operations with as few American forces on the front lines as possible.

Sikorsky — like other big and small defense manufacturers — has spent recent years focused on building unmanned systems loaded with autonomous and artificial intelligence capabilities, like its MATRIX autonomy system on the unpiloted Black Hawk.

Sikorsky first flew the OPV Black Hawk in 2022. The company is also working on a fully unmanned version of the Black Hawk, which it has nicknamed the U-Hawk, according to the company.

During Northern Strike, the option-

ally manned Black Hawk hit a series of additional firsts after the parachute drop planned by soldiers on the Coast Guard boat.

On another mission, the OPV Black Hawk completed its "first ever autonomous hookup of an external load while airborne," according to Sikorsky. The helicopter hovered over a group of soldiers who attached a 2,900-pound water buffalo tank to be sling loaded elsewhere.

In a third exercise at Northern Strike, the optionally manned Black Hawk completed six autonomous hovering hookups to transport High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, to other locations during the training, according to Sikorsky.

A soldier then operated the helicopter remotely to conduct a simulated medevac mission, another first, the company said.

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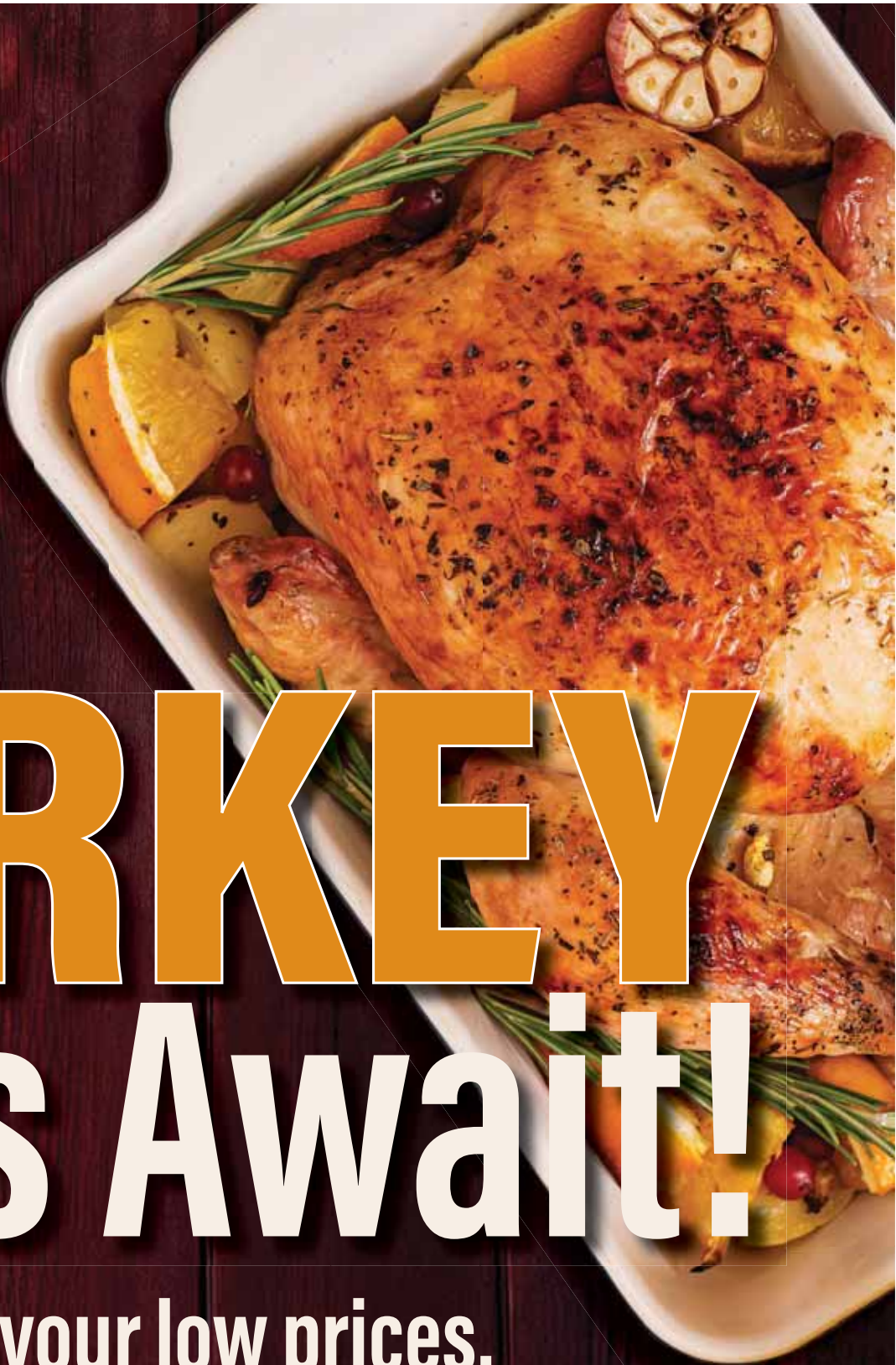
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MILITARY

Army orders quicker notifications when soldiers go missing

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army wants its leaders to act more quickly when a soldier does not report for duty and cannot be found, according to a new directive from the service's top civilian.

Commanders must report a missing soldier to law enforcement within three hours and notify family members of the soldier's missing status within eight hours, according to an Oct. 28 memorandum issued by Army Secretary Dan Driscoll.

The memo was meant to provide a more specific course of action for leaders dealing with missing soldiers, according to the Army. Previous Army policy gave commanders a day or more before they had to act on a soldier's disappearance.

Driscoll's directive instructs Army commanders to place missing soldiers in the duty status of "absent-unknown" within three hours of discovering they are missing "and make every effort to locate the soldier."

Commanders must also alert Army law enforcement officials to the missing soldier during that time frame. Law enforcement officials must then "create a blotter entry," issue a "Be-On-The-Lookout," or BOLO, order

for the missing soldier and enter "all relevant information into the Missing Persons File of the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database," which provides information to law enforcement officials nationwide.

Local law enforcement officials must also be notified of the missing soldier's status during that three-hour period, Driscoll wrote.

If the soldier cannot be located in 48 hours, commanders are to determine "by a preponderance of evidence" if that soldier's absence is voluntary or involuntary.

Those found to be missing intentionally will be reported as Absent Without Leave, or AWOL, and potentially face criminal charges.

Those found to be involuntarily absent, or if there is a lack of evidence to determine if they left intentionally, should be reported missing to law enforcement and their status declared "duty status-whereabouts unknown," or DUSTWUN.

Missing soldiers who have indicated the potential for self-harm are also to be reported missing to law enforcement, according to the memo.

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ASHA WILTSHIRE/U.S. Air Force

Air Force Staff Sgt. Lance Perkey at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., on Nov. 25. A new Air Force guideline says mustaches must be neatly trimmed.

Air Force has new rules on mustaches, sideburns

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has new regulations on how long mustaches and sideburns can be, a spokesperson confirmed Nov. 4.

"The new guidance mandates that sideburns must be above the ear opening and mustaches are prohibited from going beyond the corners of the mouth or into a respirator seal zone," an Air Force spokesperson said on the condition of anonymity.

The grooming standards were outlined in an Oct. 29 memo, with graphics provided as examples. Mustaches must be neatly trimmed, and handlebar styles, twists, curls, and goatees are prohibited, according to the 10-page memo.

Beards are not authorized unless for "medical reasons, recommended by a medical official, and approved by applicable unit commander or as authorized pursuant to a request for a religious accommodation," the memo states.

"When authorized for medical reasons, members will keep all facial hair trimmed to the same length and it may not exceed 1/4-inch in length," the memo reads.

The policy comes following Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's speech to top military officers in Quantico, Va.

"No more beardos," Hegseth said

during a 45-minute presentation Sept. 30. "The era of rampant and ridiculous shaving profiles is done. Simply put, if you do not meet the male-level physical standards for combat positions, cannot pass a [physical training] test or don't want to shave and look professional, it's time for a new position or a new profession."

Hegseth has railed against bearded troops for months and ordered a military-wide review of grooming standards in March. The Army and Marine Corps tightened rules on medical shaving waivers shortly after that order.

The Pentagon published a memo following the secretary's speech that it would cease granting permanent medical shaving exemptions and end most religious exemptions that have allowed some U.S. military troops to wear beards in uniform in recent years. The department gave military branches 60 days to construct plans for implementing the new grooming policies and about 90 days to enforce them.

Hegseth's policy allows male service members to wear sideburns "above ear openings," and "neatly trimmed" mustaches that cannot "extend past the mouth corners or into a respirator seal zone."

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