

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

Volume 17 Edition 45

©SS 2025

**U.S. EDITION**

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

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2025



## More than 'stories from the past'

Veterans posts seek new ways to stay relevant as membership declines  
**Page 2**

VFW Post 350 "Hells Bottom" hosts an open blues jam earlier this month in Takoma Park, Md. The post has a band playing almost every night of October.

ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes



## COVER STORY

# Veterans groups seeking to stay relevant

## Younger generations show less interest in traditional posts

By LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Adam Evans, a retired Air Force master sergeant, said he receives more than a dozen emails each week from veterans groups clamoring for his membership. Evans, 55, does not bother to open the invitations.

"I'm not about to join a local post, drink stale beer and talk about stories from the past," said Evans, who worked on intelligence systems and served for 20 years with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Once popular gathering spots and community hubs, many local posts have fallen into disrepair or closed as participation from younger generations drops and shows scant signs of a turnaround.

Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans and other national groups are reporting long-term membership declines that pose a challenge to their survival. A core mission of these groups is providing free assistance to veterans with their benefit claims before the Department of Veterans Affairs.

But changing interests and negative stereotypes discourage younger generations from joining, according to leaders who are trying new initiatives to modernize their image and appeal to more veterans.

DAV membership fell below 1 million in 2024 for the first time in nearly 40 years. VFW is at 1.5 million members — about half of what it was 30 years ago at its peak. The American Legion, chartered by Congress in 1919, also has had a significant membership drop as members die and new generations do not replace them in the same numbers.

The overall veteran population is falling, which contributes to the decline. There are 18 million veterans in the U.S., but that number is projected to be 12 million by 2048, according to census figures.

Adams, of Maryland, admits he has little interest in joining a veterans organization. He carries an image of



Wounded Warrior Project

**Wounded Warrior Project sponsors a Soldier Ride, a multiday cycling event. The organization, which serves post-9/11 active-duty troops and veterans, has seen registrations for its programs double since 2018.**



VFW Post 7272

**VFW Post 7272 in Bellingham, Mass., runs popular yoga classes for veterans and the general public.**

local posts as smoke-filled buildings where veterans go for cheap drinks and to swap war stories.

"I'm too busy with family and an active lifestyle to fall into that," said Adams, who recently remarried and is planning a cross-country RV trip with his wife.

But some newer and smaller organizations that do not have brick-and-mortar social clubs are drawing interest with hands-on programs and services.

At Wounded Warrior Project, which serves post-9/11 veterans and active-duty service troops, registration has doubled to 300,000 since 2018. The organization, established in 2003 by a Marine Corps veteran, provides a range of no-cost programs spanning health care, career assistance and emergency financial help to veterans and service members.

Programs include healthy-living expos and outdoor events, such as road-cycling, snowboarding and skiing. Wounded Warrior Project does not have memberships or bricks-and-mortar social hubs.

"We help [veterans] feel a sense of purpose again. They may want to isolate and self-medicate when they come home. But we help get them out, get moving again and feel reconnected," said retired Army Lt. Gen. Walter Piatt, chief executive officer at Wounded Warrior Project.

Some of the nation's oldest and largest veterans groups are updating their approach — growing their social media presence and providing activities geared for younger veterans. Some chapters are even offering yoga at local posts.

"The low price of the yoga classes makes it very affordable and covers the cost of professional cleaning of the carpet in the hall where the classes are conducted," said Kevin Calnan, commander of VFW Post 7272 in Bellingham, Mass., which started the weekly classes four years ago.

Jim Hastings, a 78-year-old Marine Corps veteran and longtime trustee at Post 7272, said veteran turnout has gone up with the recent introduction of several community events, including classic car shows and an annual barbecue cookoff that drew more than 500 people. The initiatives have brought in more revenue, enabling the post to rehab the hall and rent the facility as a public event space, he said.

VFW Post 350 in Maryland — known as Hell's Bottom — books rock bands for late-night jam sessions that run for hours. On Oct. 10 it welcomed "local legend" Swampoodle for a fundraiser that supports disabled veterans in the Takoma Park community who need to rehab their home.

Carol Whitmore, the newly installed national commander in chief at VFW, said a major goal is to modernize the 125-year-old organization. Whitmore pointed to nontraditional activities at some VFW posts, including e-gaming leagues, art shows and yoga classes that welcome the public.

She said the VFW is changing along with the makeup of the veteran population.

"While the overall pool of veterans is smaller, VFW is seeing membership growth among women and people of color consistent with the changing face of the military," said Whitmore, a retired Army master sergeant and the first woman to lead the organization.

Disabled American Veterans also is reminding veterans of the advocacy work it does on Capitol Hill to support and protect for disability, health care coverage and transition assistance.

A handful of well-established veterans groups handle much of the advocacy work for veterans on Capitol Hill. DAV, VFW, American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Amvets and Vietnam Veterans of America are among them.

"Without a robust and active membership, DAV wouldn't have had the capital needed to drive through the PACT Act," Disabled American Veterans stated in a letter to members in December 2024. The PACT Act was landmark legislation granting veterans disability compensation for toxic exposures connected to military service that caused illnesses and injuries.

"VFW advocates fiercely for legislation that improves the lives of veterans," Whitmore said.

But Evans said he would like to see these legacy veterans groups work more to explain their relevance and convey their mission to veterans.

"Many veterans groups I hear from say they influence policy for veterans. But what does that mean? They need to do a better job telling their story."



## MILITARY

# Army testing the ‘Widowmaker’ drone

## Ordnance dropper can be made cheaply in-house

By MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

HOHENFELS, Germany — Spc. Basil Holland looked on with keen interest this month as a Performance Drone Works C100 quadcopter with an invention of his attached took to the sky carrying four simulated grenades.

Holland created a new 3D-printed ordnance dropper called the “Widowmaker,” which was getting additional field action in test runs in the forested expanses of Bavaria.

“We looked at what a lot of people are doing in Ukraine, and we were like, ‘How can we utilize this system?’ ” Holland said. “So we designed everything from scratch.”

As the drone hovered 350 feet above a vehicle at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center on Oct. 9, two specks fell from the aircraft, followed by a thud on the vehicle’s hood.

Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment were testing the durability of the Widowmaker and learning the controls on the new Anduril Bolt-M one-way attack drone.

The Bolt-M uses artificial intelligence to track targets before silently slamming into them at a terrifying pace.

The assessments ahead of Combined Resolve, an annual multinational exercise that started Oct. 14 and will run sporadically through summer 2026, were evidence that not even a government shutdown can stop the evolution of drone technology.

The growing reliance on drones and autonomous systems to fight modern wars was born from battlefields in Ukraine and has quickly become integrated into Army doctrine through the modernization initiatives dubbed Transforming in Contact, and the counter-drone Project Flytrap.

The dropper is not a new concept, company commander Capt. Jacob Moberly said. The Islamic State militant group was using similar systems in Iraq a decade ago, but what makes



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

**Spc. Basil Holland, an infantryman with 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, maneuvers a drone attached with a 3D-printed grenade dropper at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany.**



**Soldiers attach a 3D-printed grenade dropper on a C100 drone for target practice at Hohenfels, Germany.**

the simple dropper special is its ability to be mass-produced, he said.

The Widowmaker can be printed in house with materials costing less than \$50 and scaled for use by any infantry platoon that has the C100 and access to a 3D printer, he said.

The Army has signed three separate

contracts with Performance Drone Works for an unspecified number of the portable heavy-lift quadcopters. The last was on Sept. 16 for \$20.9 million.

The unit previously used the dropper with training grenades at a live-fire range in Poland in August. The C100

dropped two smoke grenades into a trench.

Once the smoke obscured the simulated enemy’s vision, two blue body grenades followed. Then an assault team entered the dugout. The dropper is equipped to hold M67 fragmentation grenades.

The unit also has first-person attack drones and the Anduril Ghost-X reconnaissance aircraft.

Integrating drones with traditional systems and move-and-shoot tactics has made the force deadlier, Moberly said.

The soldiers in Holland’s regiment hope his Widowmaker will soon be sent out and adopted by every infantry unit that has the same drone.

“Right now, we’re at a tipping point in technology and we need to meet that challenge,” Moberly said. “It all starts from the bottom up with soldiers being empowered, like Specialist Holland, to actually implement their ideas into real practice.”

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## MILITARY

# Task force to take on base housing woes

## Hegseth announces new team to address barracks, quality-of-life issues for troops

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

A new Pentagon barracks task force unveiled recently is charged with tackling the military's persistent base housing woes, with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth demanding a strategy within 30 days.

Speaking to an audience of new recruits at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia, Hegseth said the task force also will ensure that unit commanders are empowered to act on quality-of-life issues facing troops.

"It is simply unacceptable that in some cases, our warriors continue to live in substandard housing," Hegseth said, adding that every service mem-

ber "deserves housing that is clean, comfortable and safe."

Hegseth cited a 2023 Government Accountability Office report that detailed the squalid living conditions of some troops as one of the factors behind the formation of the task force.

The GAO investigation detailed an array of problems — such as raw sewage overflows, mold and rodent infestations — that undermine quality of life and overall troop combat readiness.

Barracks problems vary from base to base. In some cases, the issues go back years and stem from underinvestment spanning decades.

In Europe, many U.S. soldiers have

long been dissatisfied with living conditions on garrison installations. A 2025 Army tenant satisfaction survey found that soldiers and their families in Europe were the least satisfied when it comes to government housing.

Some top concerns included overcrowding and outdated facilities that resulted in "depressing" living conditions.

In some cases, garrison housing areas in Europe date back roughly 70 years and lack modern amenities, Army officials have said.

More money has flowed into Europe in recent years to address such problems, and major projects are now underway.

In the Italian city of Vicenza, home to the 173rd Airborne Brigade, an ongoing \$500 million housing project is slated to create more than 470 homes by 2028. The first 111 of the units at Caserma

Ederle and Villaggio were scheduled to be completed later this year.

And in Baumholder, Germany, there are numerous plans for upgraded family housing and new soldier barracks.

But it can take years for new barracks and family housing to go from planning to completion.

A sprawling spending bill passed this summer by Congress will deliver an initial jolt to improving barracks, with more than \$1 billion being directed toward troop housing, Hegseth said.

His office also will review and approve the forthcoming task force's plan "in crucial ways, big and small."

"Barracks are where warriors go to rest and recover, the place they go to mentally and physically prepare for winning the next fight," Hegseth said.

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## Development of Harrier 'jump jet' ends with final flight

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

A fire truck spraying a rainbow-making flume of water marked one of the final steps toward retirement of a storied Marine Corps attack jet.

The torrent above the AV-8B Harrier taxiing on the tarmac at Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake in the California desert late last month signaled the end of flight development of the famous Marine "jump jet" after more than 40 years in service.

The Dust Devils of VX-31, the U.S. Navy's Air Test and Evaluation Squadron, gave the liquid salute to mark the final mission by the versatile attack aircraft that once had the singular ability of any U.S. jet to take off and land vertically.

The Harrier was applauded by a crowd of Marines and Navy personnel, defense industry representatives and others who'd come to see the last sortie.

"It's the most fun airplane I've ever flown," Lt. Col. Timothy "Little Buddy" Burchett, VX-31 commanding officer, told the audience. "There are no computers. It's cables, pulleys and skill that keep that thing in the air."

Burchett praised the China Lake test team for keeping the program safe and



MICHAEL L. SMITH/U.S. Navy

**The last AV-8B Harrier to fly with the U.S. Navy's Air Test and Evaluation Squadron at Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, Calif., is given a water cannon salute to mark its final "sundown flight" last month.**

mission capable to the finish.

Although development of new systems and tactics for the aircraft ended with the China Lake ceremony, the jet will still serve until next year with one

unit, the "Bulldogs" of Marine Attack Squadron 223, based at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C.

The other Marine squadrons that flew the Harrier have transitioned to

the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, a multirole fighter whose Marine "B" version features vertical takeoff and landing capability.

The Bulldogs are scheduled to completely transition to the F-35B by September 2026.

The first British-designed version of the jump jet — the Hawker Siddeley Harrier — made its maiden flight on Aug. 31, 1966. This aircraft was the world's first operational vertical/short takeoff and landing jet fighter.

The British exported the AV-8A Harrier to the Marine Corps in the 1970s, and the advanced Sea Harrier version saw action with the British during the Falklands War in 1982.

The Marines went on to fly the AV-8B Harrier II, a redesign by McDonnell Douglas and British Aerospace, featuring improved performance.

At its peak, the Marine Corps flew 102 AV-8A Harriers and eight two-seat trainers in the 1970s, then procured 340 AV-8B Harrier aircraft during the production run from 1981 to 2003.

The Marine Corps plans to retire all Harriers from its inventory by the end of next year.

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## MILITARY

# Driscoll demands changes to acquisitions

## Secretary: Soldiers shouldn't go into modern battles with decades-old gear

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Army Secretary Dan Driscoll said he would not tolerate sending soldiers into a modern conflict with decades-old weapons, using an expletive in a public speech to highlight his distaste for the service's slow acquisition system.

"No one can predict the next war, but we cannot wait — we cannot f— wait to innovate until Americans are dying on the battlefield," Driscoll said in his keynote speech at the outset of the annual Association of the U.S. Army convention Oct. 13 in Washington. "We must act now to enable our soldiers. Our window to change is right now, and we have a plan to do it."

The Army's top civilian — an ex-Army officer, Iraq War veteran, lawyer and former venture capitalist — pledged to adopt a Silicon Valley-like approach to weapons and tech development and procurement. Driscoll demanded that Congress and arms developers allow the Army to quickly adopt new technology in communications, artificial intelligence, drones and robotics outside of the traditional acquisition system that has proven slow and expensive.

The Army has long failed its soldiers,

he said during his speech at the Army's largest soldier development conference and trade convention, where manufacturers show off their latest gear and gadgets from rifles and tiny drones to helicopters and armored vehicles.

Driscoll spent part of the day listening to small companies pitch their latest technology to Army leaders in a competition dubbed XTechDisrupt for a chance at a potential contract to supply the service their tech.

But there's also more soldiers can do themselves to improve their battlefield kits, he said.

In some cases, soldiers can develop their own technology, like those in the 101st Airborne Division who have built their own 7-inch drone systems, known as "attritable battlefield enablers." The tiny drones cost about \$750 a piece, can travel more than a mile and reach speeds approaching 90 mph, according to the Army.

"They are modular (and) you can swap components, make software updates, transition between attack, recon or defense," Driscoll said. "Trained soldiers can assemble it in 20 minutes and then deliver it to the front lines — 100% soldier assembled."

Soldiers can also solve other costly problems on expensive platforms like



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

**Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll speaks at the opening ceremony of the AUSA convention in Washington.**

UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, which manufacturers have long limited how much the service can repair on its own because of intellectual property rights agreements. Driscoll has pushed for Congress to remove such agreements and grant the service "right-to-repair" powers even in its most expensive legacy programs.

Driscoll held up a small black and tan fin for a Black Hawk external fuel tank that soldiers 3D printed for about

\$3,000. The vendor charges the Army more than \$14,000 to replace the part, which he said breaks often.

Another Black Hawk part, a quarter-size screen control knob can be 3D printed by soldiers for about \$60, Driscoll said. The manufacturer will not replace the knobs — which Driscoll said break at an Army-wide rate of about four every month — alone but requires the service to replace the entire screen assembly for some \$47,000.

"We're spending around \$188,000 every month for what we can solve for \$60," Driscoll said. "Now multiply this across thousands of components, and you see why our \$185 billion budget simply doesn't buy enough combat power, and in some cases, the parts take literally years to arrive for our soldiers."

Driscoll vowed to "cut red tape" until soldiers have battlefield technology more advanced than they "use at home."

"When you train you literally step into the same platforms that we fielded 30 to 40 years ago, like the Humvee," Driscoll said. "You struggle to communicate beyond line of sight, and you wonder why the hell you can't just use the smartphone in your pocket."

"Before and after work our soldiers live in the real world, but when they're on duty, our soldiers time travel to the [technology of] the early 2000s at best — or earlier."

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## Army looks to expand dining privatization to 10 more facilities

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — With new privatized dining facilities yet to open at five Army bases, the service is already planning to privatize 10 more facilities within the next year and a half.

Col. Craig Thompson, deputy chief of staff for logistics, facilities and environment at Army Materiel Command, announced the intentions to expand contracting opportunities at dining facilities during a panel Oct. 13 at the Association of the U.S. Army's annual conference in Washington. The service also is considering hiring a private

contractor for one or two overseas dining facilities, he said.

The first five bases selected for the private facilities, which will mirror the dining halls at major university campuses, are: Fort Bragg, N.C.; Fort Stewart, Ga.; Fort Carson, Colo.; Fort Hood, Texas; and Fort Drum, N.Y. Compass Group USA was announced last month as the contractor.

The Army will assess each of the five dining facilities after 90 days.

The first is expected to open in winter 2026, and all should be open by the following summer, Thompson said.

"We're going to learn with these first

five pilots. We're going to learn for all the services," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer said during the panel. "We have some really good ideas about how far we can go with this. ... We've got to learn fast, and then we've got to take what we learn and we have to implement it quicker."

Army Secretary Dan Driscoll emphasized in his opening remarks to the conference that bringing in industry partners will fix many systemic issues he sees in the service, including how the Army cares for its soldiers.

"We have to take care of them, so we are fixing the basics of food and billet-

ing. Our dining system is absolutely broken. It's a poster child not only for corrupted systems but poor quality and unhealthy food," Driscoll said.

He also said laws, such as the 1936 Randolph-Sheppard Act — which prioritizes companies owned by blind people to operate food service operations on federal property — have been "manipulated" to prioritize profit.

"The result: a dining experience that soldiers hate. We are going to break through this barrier," Driscoll said.

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## MILITARY

# Special operators drill in High North

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. special operators have been working on quick-reaction drills in Norway pairing elite American troops and hundreds of allied forces with a focus on securing the increasingly strategic High North.

Exercise Adamant Serpent, which began Oct. 12 and lasts two weeks, brings together some 400 allied special operations troops, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe said in a statement ahead of the exercise's start.

U.S. special operators "will provide critical capabilities that address complex security challenges in response to adversarial aggression," SOCEUR commander Lt. Gen. Richard Angle said in the statement.

The drills are staged from Rygge Air Base, which has become a focal point for the Pentagon in the Arctic. The U.S. has an array of projects underway at the location, where \$200 million is being invested to develop the site into a

hub for American troops rotating into the area.

This year's exercise is focused on rapidly deploying U.S. and allied units to arctic and subarctic environments to rehearse fighting as a unified force, the Stuttgart-based SOCEUR said.

The strategic value of the High North has increased over the years, as melting sea ice opens the possibility of new shipping lanes and greater access to undersea natural resources that the Kremlin has its eye on. Russia has sought to fortify its position in the region with numerous military bases now in operation.

"Adamant Serpent is a very strategic exercise and with current global security dynamics, this gives a realistic backdrop," Norwegian Brig. Gen. Thomas Harlem said in the statement.

Danish and Swedish troops also are taking part in the exercise, with Sweden hosting some of the training events.

Adamant Serpent kicked off on the heels of NATO's inauguration Oct. 10 of



CODY MOTT/U.S. Air Force

**U.S. Air Force special tactics commandos perform military free-fall operations during exercise Adamant Serpent in Sweden last year. This year's iteration brings together around 400 U.S. and Scandinavian forces for two weeks of drills.**

the new Combined Air Operations Centre in Bodo, Norway. It is focused on enhancing the alliance's ability to perform operations across the Arctic.

In addition, the special operations drills in Norway and Sweden overlap with another major NATO training event this week.

On Oct. 13, the alliance kicked off its annual nuclear readiness exercise Steadfast Noon, which involved airspace over the North Sea. That exercise is focused on refining NATO procedures for executing its nuclear mis-

sion.

"We need to do this because it helps us to make sure that our nuclear deterrent remains as credible and as safe and as secure and as effective as possible," NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said in a statement last week. "It also sends a clear signal to any potential adversary that we will and can protect and defend all allies against all threats."

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## US-South Korea ties evolving after September summit

By DAVID CHOI  
AND YOOJIN LEE  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The United States and South Korea are deepening their "future-oriented" strategic alliance, senior officials said this week, even as Seoul works to reclaim wartime control of its military from Washington.

Speaking Oct. 13 before lawmakers during a parliamentary hearing in the capital, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun said the two countries have formed "deepened trust" since Presidents Donald Trump and Lee Jae Myung held their first summit last month in the U.S. capital.

Lee urged Trump to be proactive in building ties with North Korea and later pledged to raise Seoul's annual defense spending by more than 8%.

"South Korea and the U.S. promised

to closely cooperate to peacefully solve the problems on the Korean Peninsula," Cho said at the hearing. "South Korea expressed its strong determination to pursue the modernization of a reciprocal, future-oriented alliance, in response to the changing environment."

The U.S. "welcomed the proposal, reaffirmed its firm defense commitment and agreed to further strengthen the extended deterrence between the two countries," he added.

Cho's remarks came a month after the presidential office in Seoul pledged to reclaim wartime operational control of its forces within five years.

The U.S. has held operational authority over South Korea's military since the Korean War. Seoul may assume that authority once it demonstrates agreed-upon military capabilities, which are not publicly dis-



JAMESON HARRIS/U.S. ARMY / Jameson Harris/U.S. Army

**South Korean soldiers work security during a Freedom Shield drill at Goyang Training Center in Dongduche-**

closed.

The Combined Forces Command, headquartered at Camp Humphreys, now heads South Korea's military during wartime. The command is led

by a U.S. four-star general with a South Korean general serving as deputy.

Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back echoed Cho's comments during the hearing and said he disagreed with the notion that U.S. Forces Korea's deterrence extends beyond North Korea to China.

USFK is responsible for about 28,500 American troops stationed on the peninsula. Its official mission is to defend South Korea from attack, though its presence is also viewed as a regional counterbalance to China, one of Pyongyang's closest allies.

Beijing has long opposed the 2017 deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, anti-ballistic missile battery in South Korea, calling it a regional threat.

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## MILITARY

# Icebreaking cutter to be built in Finland

## First of four new Coast Guard ships to come from ally

BY WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

President Donald Trump authorized construction of four Arctic security cutters for the Coast Guard to be built in Finland rather than domestically because of “urgent national security needs” in the polar region, according to the White House.

The vessels would be the first of the Coast Guard’s new class of medium-size icebreakers.

Expertise gained from construction of this first batch of cutters in Finland will be leveraged to build up to seven more at American shipyards, according to an Oct. 9 news release.

Construction will be done on an “accelerated schedule,” the release states.

The Trump administration directed the Coast Guard to “submit a plan for phasing ASC construction in a manner that promotes the on-shoring of expertise to build follow-on ASCs domestically.”



ASHLY MURPHY/U.S. Coast Guard

**The Coast Guard Cutter Storis floats near the Johns Hopkins Glacier in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Alaska, in August.**

The choice of building ships in Finland is a departure from Trump’s Make America Great Again agenda, which aims to boost domestic manufacturing.

A 2023 Coast Guard fleet analysis concluded that the service needed eight to nine polar icebreakers to perform its missions in the Arctic and Antarctic in coming years.

The service has three icebreakers, with only two — Storis and Healy — in the Arctic.

The half-century-old Polar Star is

primarily used for work in the Antarctic.

As Arctic ice continues to recede due to global climate change, military and economic competition in the region has grown among the U.S., Russia and China.

The region is believed to possess massive stores of natural resources.

Louisiana-based Bollinger Shipyards was selected to design and build six Arctic cutters in partnership with Seaspan Shipyards in Vancouver, British Columbia, and two Finland-based

firms, Rauma Marine Constructions and Aker Arctic Technology Inc., according to a Bollinger news release on Oct. 9.

“The Arctic Security Cutter will enable the United States to rapidly project American power, enforce our sovereignty and reassert American dominance in the Arctic,” Ben Borden, president and CEO of Bollinger, said in the release.

Bollinger said that construction will begin immediately in both Finland and the U.S., with full production eventually transitioning to America.

“The first three vessels will be built simultaneously by Rauma in Finland and Bollinger in the United States, with production of the remaining three vessels to be built in the United States,” the news release states. “Delivery of the first three vessels is expected within 36 months of the contract award.”

In a document published in April, the Coast Guard described the general capabilities it sought in the new class of Arctic vessel.

It is to be no longer than 360 feet and be capable of “independently” breaking through ice 3 feet thick at a continuous speed of 3 knots.

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# Veterans’ lawsuit over antimalarial drug gets new life

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Four former service members who say they suffered a range of symptoms after taking an antimalarial drug while serving in the military can proceed in suing the companies that manufactured and distributed the product, an appellate court decided.

Andrea Caston, Richard Githens, Patrick Wagher and Kendrick Allen filed the original lawsuit in 2023 on behalf of themselves and all service members who were severely sickened by side effects of mefloquine.

The plaintiffs took mefloquine pills before and during overseas deployments to Africa and Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, according to court papers. They served in the Army, the Army National Guard and the Navy.

They later exhibited symptoms such as pain, sleep disturbances, skin disorders, suicidal thoughts, depression, fatigue and cognitive decline that have persisted beyond their military careers.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Oct. 7 partially reversed a 2024 ruling by U.S. District Judge Trina Thompson in California, who had dismissed the complaint with prejudice, meaning it couldn’t be refiled.

The lawsuit accuses Roche and Genentech of using the “prospect of war-time profits” to provide mefloquine to the U.S. military despite knowing that it “causes significant and irreversible neuropsychiatric harms.”

It also refers to what it calls “mefloquine toxicity” as “the modern-day version of Agent Orange in scope and scale.”



TIMOTHY SOLANO/U.S. Marine Corps

**A Marine in Senegal in 2011 holds doxycycline, an anti-malaria medication taken in combination with mefloquine.**

In the Oct. 7 ruling, a three-judge panel of the 9th Circuit determined that a legal consideration known as the political question doctrine does not bar the suit against Genentech, a San Francisco-based biotechnology company that distributed mefloquine under the trade name Lariam to U.S. military

bases.

The doctrine is applied by courts seeking how to avoid issues better handled by Congress or the president.

Thompson had ruled that it would be inappropriate for the court to second-guess federal regulators who had approved the drug. She also tossed out a similar suit against Roche in 2022.

In its decision, the 9th Circuit affirmed the dismissal of the case against Roche affiliates, which previously provided the drug to bases before merging with Genentech in 2009.

But the appellate judges said Thompson had erred in dismissing the claims against Genentech with prejudice, and they sent the case back for review.

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## VETERANS

# CDC recognizes Gulf War illness

BY LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Gulf War illness, a debilitating medical condition linked to military service, has received formal recognition as a legitimate illness after more than three decades of reports by veterans about unexplained symptoms they developed during active duty in the Persian Gulf.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has announced a medical diagnostic code for Gulf War illness that will enable doctors and scientists to more effectively track, document and treat the cluster of symptoms reported by tens of thousands of veterans who served in the early 1990s.

The new diagnostic code — which became effective Oct. 1 — is part of a standardized system doctors use to identify diseases and medical conditions. The National Center for Health Statistics at CDC is responsible for modifications to those codes.

“Veterans have been told it was in their heads. The medical establishment cannot do this anymore with this [medical diagnostic] code. This is an official illness,” said Ronald Brown, an Army veteran and toxic wounds specialist.

The lack of a formal medical diagnosis for Gulf War illness until now meant doctors and researchers were unable to easily identify and treat veterans with the condition “inside and outside the VA health care system,” according to Veterans for Common Sense, a nonprofit advocacy group.

The medically unexplained symptoms include chronic fatigue, breathing problems, joint pain, skin rashes, di-



Stars and Stripes

**U.S. service members are silhouetted against the desert sun during the Gulf War. Gulf War illness continues to affect up to a third of the 700,000 troops deployed for the war.**

gestive disorders and memory loss that may worsen over time, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The VA instead assigned other diagnoses — such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia and “undiagnosed illnesses” — to the ailments many Gulf War veterans experienced.

Gulf War illness continues to affect up to a third of the 700,000 troops deployed during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm more than 30 years ago, according to the VA.

“The first time I got sick was within 15 minutes of the demolition of an Iraqi chemical weapons depot in Khamisiyah in March 1991,” Brown said.

The formal medical recognition of Gulf War illness should make it easier for veterans with chronic illnesses to obtain VA benefits, Brown said. “I am hoping it will be less complicated when veterans have these claims for chronic complex illnesses,” he said.

# VFW to offer cannabis drinks at local posts

BY LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

Veterans of Foreign Wars — the national advocacy group for former service members — has signed a deal with a national beverage maker to offer cannabis-infused drinks at VFW chapters in states and jurisdictions where recreational marijuana use is legal.

Sales of Torch cannabis seltzer drinks at hundreds of VFW posts nationwide are part of a new marketing partnership announced Tuesday by the veterans organization. The initiative will place VFW branding on select Torch hemp-derived beverages, with proceeds supporting veterans initiatives, according to the VFW.

“Under the licensing agreement, select VFW-branded Torch beverage products will be made available, and proceeds will directly support VFW initiatives such as the National Veterans Service program, which provides no-cost assistance to veterans navigating the VA claims process, and veterans and military support programs, which deliver financial assistance to military families,” the VFW said in a written statement.

This marks the first time a major veterans service organization has collaborated in such a way with a cannabis company. VFW has 1.4 million members.

“This new relationship between Torch Drinks LLC and the VFW brings a federally compliant and responsibly formulated alternative to one of the most respected veteran service organizations in the United States,” the VFW and the beverage company said in a joint statement.

Torch beverages contain Delta-9 THC, the primary psychoactive compound found in cannabis plants, according to the company. The compound creates the “high” effect associated with cannabis use.

VFW chapters and posts will begin offering the low-dose version of the flavored seltzer drinks later this year.

“Oh, wow. That’s amazing. Cannabis has saved my life,” said Army veteran Matthew Gibson, who served from 1998-2008, with deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. The former ser-



TORCH BEVERAGE CO.

**Veterans of Foreign Wars partnered with Torch Beverage Co. to place VFW branding on some cannabis-infused beverage products with proceeds supporting initiatives for veterans.**

geant said cannabis has helped ease his chronic migraines and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as anxiety and insomnia.

The canned drinks will be offered at local VFW posts and other meeting facilities in states and jurisdictions where cannabis use is legal.

“Torch Drinks is proud to work with the VFW to provide veterans with a safe, federally compliant, social alternative that is like none other,” said Collin Kerrigan, co-founder of Torch Beverage Co.

“Working with Torch helps us raise funds for those vital programs while also allowing us to explore better ways to meet the needs of an evolving veterans community,” VFW National Commander Carol Whitmore said.

“While the VFW is not a pro-cannabis organization, we understand the need for adult consumption alternatives to better meet the needs of an evolving veterans’ community,” Whitmore said.

Forty states, three territories and the District of Columbia have legalized cannabis for medical use.

Twenty-four states, two territories and the District of Columbia have legalized small amounts of cannabis for adult recreational use, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

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