

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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## Change in the air

Drone-filled skies giving  
soldiers a glimpse of  
the future **Page 2**

Army Staff Sgt. Kristopher Gorbea holds a  
soldier-made kamakaze drone awaiting  
liftoff at the Joint Multinational Readiness  
Center in Hohenfels, Germany.

LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes





## COVER STORY

# Army testing a new way of warfare

## Drone-filled skies giving Bavarian exercise new look

By MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

HOHENFELS, Germany — Army Staff Sgt. Kristopher Gorbea's squad was using a quadcopter to monitor another drone above a training area in southern Germany when the target suddenly buzzed upward, causing a midair collision.

The opposition force's pilot thought the aircraft had been struck by a bird, said Gorbea, a drone squad leader with the 1st Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment. His team managed to fly its off-the-shelf model back to the original position, minus a rotor blade.

"I could put 10 of these in my backpack and it's still a tenth or less the weight of a Javelin (anti-tank weapon)," Gorbea said. "And I can hit targets almost four times the distance, and I don't have to put myself in a position where I can lose my life to shoot it."

The incident at the Hohenfels Training Area in Bavaria is emblematic of the seismic shift taking place in modern warfare, where unmanned systems are used to make first contact with the enemy and shape the battlefield.

This year's Saber Junction exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center features more than 300 drones, the most in the annual exercise's history, said Capt. Matthew Kemelek, the center's unmanned aerial systems program manager.

The drones are performing a host of functions ranging from intelligence gathering to surveillance, reconnaissance and even simulated strikes.

The exercise, which began in August and ends Sept. 21, features more than 7,000 soldiers from Vilseck's 2nd Cavalry Regiment and 14 NATO allies and partners, supported by more than 1,000 vehicles, an Army statement said.

It is conducted by the 7th Army Training Command and tests combat readiness along the rugged, wooded hillsides of the Hohenfels Training Area.



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

**Soldiers with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment watch a homemade attack drone during a flight demonstration for exercise Saber Junction in Hohenfels, Germany, on Sept. 9.**



**Homemade attack drones await a demonstration flight at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center.**

The Polish army is operating as the headquarters command element for this iteration. Poland was the scene of a Russian drone incursion on Sept. 9, prompting NATO to scramble fighter jets to shoot down the offending air-



**An EchoShield drone detector sits atop a 2nd Cavalry Regiment Stryker vehicle during exercise Saber Junction.**

craft in what the alliance called a historic first.

Soldiers at the exercise are also employing a host of anti-drone technology, such as the EchoShield high-fidelity radar, the vehicle-mounted Titan detector and jammer and smaller personal systems like the Beast+, which can fit in a backpack.

"We're constantly under attack in our position right now," platoon leader 1st Lt. Cammack Shepler said.

The evolving reliance on both offensive and defensive drone technology started on the battlefields of Ukraine and quickly became integrated into Army doctrine through modernization initiatives dubbed Transforming in Contact and Project Flytrap.

Squadron commander Lt. Col. Ryan David said the scenes in the skies over the training area will be a regular occurrence in future combat encounters, even if they are new to Saber Junction.

"The modern battlefield is congested; it's contested," David said.

"That isn't uncommon. They'll fly multiple drones at a single time. Now do that across the entire breadth of the brigade and you have five, 10, 20, 50 drones up at a single time."

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## MILITARY

# Army rolls back grooming standards

## No more lipstick or colored nail polish for women and no longer hair for men

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Women can no longer wear lipstick or colored nail polish, and men must keep their hair length within 2 inches as part of the Army's tightening and clarification of appearance and grooming standards while in uniform.

"The force is frustrated with the ambiguous language inside current [Army regulation], which means that it's hard to enforce a standard," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Weimer said during a call with reporters Sept. 8 to discuss the changes.

The new 14-page directive published Sept. 15 covers hair, nails, makeup and earrings. The update does not address shaving requirements.

It follows a loosening of standards four years ago, particularly for women, by allowing for ponytails instead of strict buns that many complained interfered with their helmets and other headgear or led to hair loss.

The Army brought together a group of leaders, including men and women, to inform the changes, which go into effect immediately but are not enforceable for 30 days, Weimer said. This will



NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes Illustration

**Women can no longer wear lipstick or colored nail polish, and men must keep their hair length within 2 inches as part of the Army's appearance and grooming standards while in uniform.**

allow soldiers to understand any changes they need to make.

The directive calls for women to keep their hair in a ponytail or one or two braids not hanging more than 6 inches below the top of the collar of their combat uniform. Otherwise, it must be in a bun.

All women with hair that reaches their collar must have it in a bun while in their dress uniform.

The previous standards stated ponytails worn while in any uniform couldn't hang beyond the bottom of a woman's shoulder blade, which isn't easily measurable, said Sgt. Maj. Christopher Stevens, the Army's depu-

ty chief of staff for personnel. He helped work on the changes.

"Really what I would have to do is walk up to them and say, 'Hey, do you mind if I touch you and show you exactly where the bottom of your shoulder blade is, so that we can understand what the standard is?'" he said during the briefing with Weimer.

No leader should have to do that to see if a regulation is being followed, he said. Instead, six inches is easily measurable because it is the exact size of the enlisted leader's Army Blue Book or the length of two military ID cards.

Men's haircuts must have a stricter taper or fade, and the maximum length

and bulk of hair cannot exceed 2 inches. Men and women can have shaved heads. Any dyed hair must appear natural.

Makeup must maintain a natural appearance and be conservative. It cannot include lipstick with any color. While semi-permanent makeup is OK, eyelash extensions are not unless approved by a medical provider for loss of natural eyelashes.

Only clear nail polish can be worn by women, not by men. Women's nails can't be longer than a quarter inch while men's cannot exceed the fingertip. There was debate about whether men could use hardening products on their nails, which they still can as long as it doesn't leave a shiny finish on the nail.

The only earrings allowed are for women and they must be a gold, silver, diamond or pearl stud. Only one earring is allowed per lobe.

While some may find the specificity of nail color or ponytail length trivial, Weimer said it all is important. It's about a commitment to standards.

"It's fitness, it's wearing my uniform properly, it's how I go to a position at parade rest or attention if I'm addressing an officer or a senior [noncommissioned officer]," he said. "All those things absolutely matter because if you can't do that in peacetime in garrison, then I'm really worried about what you're going to be able to do in a combat situation."

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## High fitness scorers exempt from Army fat standards

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Soldiers who score at least 465 points on the Army Fitness Test are eligible to be exempt from the service's body fat standards, the Army announced.

"This is a welcome continuation of our previous policy under the former Army Combat Fitness Test," Sgt. Maj. Christopher Stevens, the senior non-commissioned officer for the Army personnel office, said in a Sept. 10 statement. "It rewards soldiers who

consistently demonstrate high levels of fitness, which supports readiness, health and creates a culture that values performance."

The maximum score that soldiers can get on the AFT is 500 points. To be eligible for the exemption, soldiers are required to score 80 points or more on each of the five events.

Soldiers who qualify for exemptions but do not meet the Army's height and weight standards will not be required to be measured by a tape test, according to the Army announcement.

The directive is effective immediately. Exemptions are valid until the next record test, or no longer than eight months for active-duty soldiers or 12 months for National Guard and Reserve soldiers.

The announcement follows revisions to the fitness test. In June, a revised version called the Army Fitness Test replaced the 3-year-old Army Combat Fitness Test.

The updated test features five events and introduces higher, sex-neutral and age-normalized standards

for soldiers in combat arms roles.

The new test began phased implementation June 1 and will take full effect at the start of 2026 for active-duty personnel and on June 1, 2026, for Reserve and National Guard members, the Army announced at the time.

Changes to the test came in the wake of a March memo from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth calling for a review and enhancement of physical fitness standards in combat arms roles.





## MILITARY

# GAO: DOD didn't do enough to vet mover

## \$17.9B contract nixed after less than 4 years because of ineptitude

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon spent more than \$100 million on a nine-year global household goods moving contract that was terminated after less than four years because of the company's ineptitude, a government watchdog agency found.

That total included payments for work that was never done, the Government Accountability Office said in a Sept. 11 report that goes beyond previously reported issues with HomeSafe Alliance, which was awarded a \$17.9 billion global household goods contract from U.S. Transportation Command in November 2021.

The report highlights Defense Department oversight failures, including insufficient verification beforehand of HomeSafe's ability to manage a global military relocation system.

"TRANSCOM identified contractor capacity as a risk before rollout," the GAO said, but added that it didn't obtain detailed data confirming the contractor's ability to meet demand as the program scaled up.

When shipment volumes increased after initial operations began in April 2024, "the contractor faced limits in capacity," leading to delivery failures



JENN DEHAAN/Fort Knox News

**A mover loads boxes into a truck at Fort Knox, Ky., for transfer to a service member's next duty station.**

and disruptions, according to the GAO.

The contract was canceled in June after military families reported missed or delayed pickups and poor customer service, the report said.

The agreement had aimed to overhaul the Defense Personal Property Program and streamline more than 300,000 personal property shipments annually made by service members and their families.

In the report, the GAO also focused on contractor communication breakdowns with service members.

Military families reported having difficulties getting in touch with HomeSafe throughout the process, with some said to have waited weeks for

updates.

Transitioning to the Global Household Goods Contract ended up costing the DOD more than it initially anticipated, despite the substandard service, according to the GAO.

"DOD incurred unplanned transition costs (and) paid management fees for task orders ultimately not completed by the contractor," the report said, adding that DOD terminated the contract "after spending over \$100 million on it."

The department then established a joint task force on permanent change of station moves and announced plans to reform how future relocation services are managed.

"When a service member is worried about their household goods, they are not focused on the mission," Maj. Gen. Lance Curtis, the task force commander, said in an Army statement in July. "That is unacceptable. We are here to restore trust and ensure that no military family feels alone during their move."

The task force is handling a switch back to the department's Tender of Service program, which Curtis said is familiar to most military families.

Local transportation offices began directly managing PCS moves in coordination with the task force, the statement said.

In addition, the task force established a call center staffed around the clock by personnel who have firsthand experience with military moves. It was due to become fully operational at the beginning of August, the statement said.

The overhaul also includes recommendations for long-term changes to the Defense Personal Property Program.

The GAO report called on the undersecretaries of defense for acquisition and sustainment and for personnel and readiness, in coordination with TRANSCOM, to gather comprehensive program data to "effectively oversee and manage risks" going forward.

The Defense Department concurred with the recommendation.

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# Air Force plans to move units from Florida to Arizona

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force plans to move several special operations units from Florida to Arizona's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in a shakeup of initial plans to replace the installation's retiring A-10s with a special operations wing, service officials said.

Air Force Special Operations Command announced Sept. 12 that it has modified plans to build out the 492nd Special Operations Wing at Davis-Monthan because of mission and cost considerations and Defense Department priorities. Instead of moving two MC-130J Commando II gunship squad-

rons and a single OA-1K Skyraider II armed overwatch aircraft squadron to Davis-Monthan it will now move two Skyraider II squadrons and a CV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft squadron to the Arizona base, the service said in a news release.

The new plan calls for the Air Force to move the 492nd Special Operations Wing's headquarters, its 319th Special Operations Squadron and the 34th Special Operations Squadron from Hurlburt Field, Fla., to Davis-Monthan. The 319th and 34th squadrons are transitioning from flying the U-28 Draco intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance plane to the new

OA-1K.

The Air Force will also move the new 492nd Special Operations Theater Air Operations Squadron from Duke Field, Fla., to Davis-Monthan, activate a new Air Combat Command Intelligence Squadron there, and move Osprey-flying 20th Special Operations Squadron and its 20th Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron from Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., to Davis-Monthan to operate under the 492nd Wing.

The Air Force originally announced its plans to replace the legendary A-10 Thunderbolt II close air support jets with the 492nd Special Operations

Wing at Davis-Monthan in 2023.

Under that plan, the 492nd has spent recent years transforming from a special operations training unit to a wing "capable of executing [special operations forces] strike; SOF mobility; SOF intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and SOF air-to-ground integration," according to AFSOC.

The Air Force will begin the required environmental studies for its revamped plans in fall 2025 and hopes to have the full 492nd Special Operations Wing at Davis-Monthan and fully operationally capable by 2028.

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## MILITARY

# Guard brigade becoming more mobile

## Washington state unit switching from Strykers to lighter squad vehicles

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

TACOMA, Wash. — For the second time in just over 10 years, a Washington National Guard unit is being ordered to get faster and lighter in its combat role.

The 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team will “take on a new mission and transform” to the 81st Mobile Brigade.

The 2,900 soldiers will begin turning in their Stryker vehicles in October to start using smaller mobile Infantry Squad Vehicles, along with new technologies such as drones.

It’s the second switch for the brigade in little more than a decade.

In July 2015, the 81st Armored Brigade was operating M1A1 Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles when it was redesignated as the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

“Change isn’t always easy, but this is a big win for us,” Brig. Gen. Paul Sellars, commander of the Washington Army National Guard, said in a statement Sept. 10.

Sellars said the move would keep the brigade “relevant and ready” as the Pentagon implements the Army Transformation Initiative announced May 1.

As the Army blueprint for its future, the initiative calls for converting Infantry and Stryker brigades into mobile brigade combat teams.

As part of the transition at the 81st Mobile Brigade, an infantry battalion from the Utah National Guard will be added to the new 81st Mobile Brigade.

“As we’ve learned before, transformations like these take a lot of time and patience,” Sellars said. “It’s nice to have a partner to go through this process with. We look forward to working with Utah and welcome their men and women to the 81st Brigade.”

In its federal military role, the brigade deployed more than 3,000 soldiers to Kuwait and Iraq from Febru-



JOSEPH SIEMANDEL/U.S. Army

**Col. Craig Broyles, commander, 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, talks about the Infantry Squad Vehicle with visitors during Exercise Raven Focus at the Yakima Training Center in Washington state in July.**

ary 2004 to May 2005. The brigade again deployed to Iraq from August 2008 to August 2009.

Soldiers from the 81st Brigade were sent to Ukraine in 2021 to train and equip the armed forces. The Washington unit returned to the United States in January 2022. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, starting a war that is now in its fourth year.

In its state role, the 81st Brigade has also responded to major floods, fires and civil disturbances in Washington.

The 81st Brigade has its headquarters at Camp Murray, in Tacoma, near Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The brigade makes up half of the Washington National Guard troop strength and draws soldiers from around the state.

It includes soldiers from Oregon National Guard units, headquartered in Bend, and California National Guard units based in San Bernardino.

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DAVID CARNAHAN/U.S. Army

**An M1132 Engineer Squad Vehicle belonging to the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team sits under the night sky. The sun will be setting on the unit’s Strykers as it transitions to Infantry Squad Vehicles.**



## MILITARY

# Lawmakers target Pentagon over UFOs

## Air Force vet told Congress he faced retaliation that included blacklisting

By LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Descriptions of mysterious aircraft that withstood a missile strike and hovered over a U.S. Air Force base highlighted veterans' firsthand reports of UFO sightings at a dramatic hearing by a special House task force collecting evidence on "unidentified anomalous phenomena."

But one of the veterans speaking Sept. 9 before the House Oversight and Government Reform Task Force on the Declassification of Federal Secrets complained he faced retaliation by the Defense Department and intelligence officials that included blacklisting from employment at federal intelligence agencies.

Air Force veteran Dylan Borland, a former geospatial intelligence specialist at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, claimed he faced reprisal after reporting a UAP event he witnessed.

Borland said a triangular aircraft hovered above him for several minutes after he stepped outside for a cigarette break while on overnight duty at Langley AFB in 2012.

"This craft interfered with my telephone, did not have any sound and the material it was made of appeared fluid or dynamic," Borland told the task force. "It displayed zero kinetic disturbance, sound or wind displacement."

The UAP then rapidly "ascended to commercial jet level" and left the area at a high rate of speed, he said.

Borland said he was interviewed by the Pentagon's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office in 2023 about the incident, but his claims were dismissed.



Borland

AARO was established to investigate UAP sightings by military personnel. He said the agency's assessments do not support the reported sightings by military personnel.

AARO has maintained it has no verifiable evidence from anecdotal reports of extraterrestrial activity or technology.

"AARO uses a rigorous scientific framework and data-driven approach to better understand UAP. We will follow the science wherever it leads," according to the agency's website.

Borland said he faced discrediting because of his report, as well as workplace retaliation and "manipulation of his security clearance."

"I am unemployed now and have no job prospects," said Borland, who met with the Office of the Intelligence Community Inspector General about his experience.

"I and many other individuals [who



SCREEN CAPTURE FROM VIDEO/Facebook

**Rep. Eric Burlison, R-Mo., played a video during a House hearing that he said showed an MQ-9 Reaper striking an unidentified orb moving fast off the coast of Yemen in October 2024. The orb kept flying after being hit by a Hellfire missile, he said.**

made UAP reports] feel discarded and separated from the country they served," he said. "I have endured sustained reprisals from government agencies for more than a decade."

Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, R-Fla., who is chairwoman of the task force, accused the Defense Department and intelligence community of a "lack of transparency."

She said the task force has been denied access to video and files related to UAP incidents.

Luna suggested there is a cover-up by defense officials of evidence about

UAP encounters. "The American people are not fragile and do not need to be shielded like children from reality," Luna said.

"For too long, the issue of unidentified anomalous phenomena — commonly known as UAPs — has been shrouded in secrecy, stigma and in some cases outright dismissal," Luna said at the start of the 2½-hour hearing. "This is about national security and government accountability."

The Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment.

Rep. Eric Burlison, R-Mo., a task force member, played a video he said showed an MQ-9 Reaper striking an unidentified orb moving fast off the coast of Yemen in October 2024. The orb kept flying after being hit by a Hellfire missile, he said.

"I'm not going to speculate what it is. But the question is, why are we being blocked from this information?" said Burlison, who complained the Defense Department is not fully disclosing what it knows about UAP incidents.

Rep. Jasmine Crockett, D-Texas, said many UAP sightings may be the work of adversaries with new capabilities to gain military advantage. "Those are the likely explanations for these mysteries," she said.

But Crockett emphasized that military personnel who "risk careers and reputations" to report UAP sightings need protection.

"We need to ensure that people who come forward and make reports can do so without fear of retaliation," she said.

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## Coast Guard uses record funding to buy 10 more cutters

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Coast Guard said it has moved to accelerate the acquisition of 10 more Fast Response Cutters using money from the record \$25 billion one-time funding it received in the 2025 reconciliation bill passed by Congress.

"This is a historic accomplishment for the service," said Rear Adm. Mike Campbell, the Coast Guard's top acquisition officer.

The \$507 million in contract options

signed with Bollinger Shipyards of Lockport, La., is the first money to be spent by the Coast Guard from the congressional boost in its bottom line. The Coast Guard currently operates 57 of the Sentinel-class cutters and had planned to buy 10 more. The funds will increase the purchase by another 10 to 77 total.

The first of the extra cutters would be delivered in 2028, Campbell said.

The 154-foot-long, Sentinel-class Fast Response Cutters were first introduced in 2012 as a larger, faster successor to

the 110-foot Island class patrol boat. The ships are 353 long tons, have a top speed of over 28 knots and a range of 2,500 miles. They carry a crew of four officers and 20 enlisted personnel.

The Coast Guard will spend \$6.6 billion on building, upgrading and maintaining its shore facilities.

The Coast Guard plans to spend over \$8.6 billion on icebreakers, \$4.3 billion on offshore patrol cutters, \$2.3 billion for MH-60 Jayhawk search-and-rescue helicopters and just over \$1 billion on HC-130J Hercules long-range patrol

aircraft.

The spending will also go for \$266 million to buy long-range unmanned drones, and \$170 million for maritime domain awareness infrastructure, which includes radar, communications monitoring and other equipment.

The Coast Guard has about 55,000 members operating 250 cutters, including three icebreakers and 1,600 smaller boats. The aviation component flies 200 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft.

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## MILITARY

# Privatized barracks coming to Fort Irwin

## Rooms designed like apartments

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Soldiers assigned to Fort Irwin, Calif., will soon have resort-style barracks complete with a pool, clubhouse and rooms designed like apartments as part of a pilot program for privatized housing for the Army's junior enlisted force.

The groundbreaking for the new barracks builds on other privately managed single-soldier housing projects across the service, including apartments at Fort Meade, Md., and Fort Bragg, N.C., that offer amenities available in many modern complexes built off base.

"Today's groundbreaking reflects a bold step forward in how we care for our soldiers," said Col. Steven L. Chadwick, Fort Irwin garrison commander, said during a groundbreaking ceremony earlier this month. "Fort Irwin Apartments is not just new housing. It represents a new standard of living for unaccompanied junior enlisted soldiers. It's a deliberate investment in their quality of life."

The project replaces existing barracks and will open in April 2028 to house 545 junior enlisted soldiers assigned to Fort Irwin and the National Training Center.

The Michaels Organization, which also manages on-post housing at the base, said the barracks will cost about



The Michaels Organization

**A rendering of the Fort Irwin Apartments, a barracks for more than 500 soldiers assigned to Fort Irwin, Calif., that is scheduled to open in 2028.**

\$164 million.

The three-story buildings will include 276 apartments featuring two bedrooms, two bathrooms and shared kitchen, living and dining spaces.

The Army said this project has the potential to reshape barracks across the service.

The Army has struggled to keep pace with maintenance and modernization of its barracks, and soldiers have complained of mold, broken appliances and plumbing and difficulty getting repairs made — an issue that has gotten worse after the federal government offered its civilian workforce buyouts and early retirement.

Privatization for barracks has been under consideration since the military

took a similar route to clean up family housing nearly 30 years ago.

The public-private partnerships were initially successful but have been under increased scrutiny over the past decade. The services conceded that leaders relaxed oversight, and many landlords were not providing appropriate housing or maintaining homes properly.

David H. Dentino, deputy assistant secretary of the Army for installations, housing and partnerships, said the Fort Irwin Apartments will be a bellwether for the Army.

Soldiers assigned to Fort Irwin participate in demanding training rotations, which required the "restorative" living space, the Army said in a news

release about the new barracks.

It is also one of the Army's more isolated U.S. bases, located in the Mojave Desert more than 30 miles from the nearest town of Barstow.

"Fort Irwin's remoteness provides a training environment with unparalleled capabilities, but likewise, its austere nature creates challenges for quality of life for our soldiers and families," Chadwick said.

Some of the amenities include a clubhouse with TVs and a kitchenette, a covered patio with seating, swimming pool, lounge areas and landscaped green spaces.

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## Air Force changes its boot rules

*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force is rescinding part of a recent uniform update that included a minimum boot height of 8 inches, according to an Instagram post made this month from the account of the branch's top enlisted leader.

The requirement drew immediate criticism, particularly from female airmen, who noted that smaller boot sizes often fall short of the threshold even in regulation-compliant designs.

The official policy is being revised to

reflect a new minimum height of 6 inches, Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force David Flosi said in the post. He added that airmen will have 12 months to comply with the change, with their annual clothing allowance helping to cover any replacement costs.

The original update, announced in July as part of Air Force Instruction 36-2903, "Dress and Personal Appearance," aimed to eliminate sneaker-like boots by introducing the new 8-inch standard.



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