

STARS AND STRIPES®

Volume 18 Edition 11

©SS 2026

U.S. EDITION

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

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2026



Drone school

Army opens class to help leaders use new tech in combat
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Army 2nd Lt. Dallas McAllister shows a first-person-view attack drone to students of the service's new Robotic Autonomous Systems Leader Tactics course at Fort Benning, Ga.

COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Army opens Fort Benning drone, robot class

RASLT course helps unit leaders utilize combat technology

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT BENNING, Ga. — An instructor moved a tiny drone upside down then rapidly back and forth by hand as Army Sgt. 1st Class William Benz peered through his goggles to see what the drone could see.

“It makes me nauseous,” the 16-year cavalry scout and veteran of the Afghanistan War said Feb. 10, grinning as he passed the goggles to the next student in a new class at Fort Benning, Ga., designed to provide Army combat unit leaders with a better understanding of the latest drone and robotics capabilities available to them.

Benz is one of 12 students participating in the first edition of the Robotic Autonomous Systems Leader Tactics course, or RASLT, at Fort Benning’s Maneuver Center of Excellence. The new class began Feb. 9.

Capt. Allison Darby, an armor officer who is directing the new program, said RASLT is meant to provide Army leaders — the class is open to sergeants first class and higher-ranked soldiers — a familiarity with the ground robots, aerial drones and the autonomous capabilities the service is building into its key combat formations through its Transformation in Contact initiative. The three-week class is not designed to make them expert operators, but it should give them the confidence to build well-planned operations incorporating these latest pieces of technology, she said.

Most of the students are recently promoted captains who have finished the Maneuver Captain’s Career Course at Fort Benning and will go on to command infantry, armor or cavalry companies, Darby said.

“They have to understand the capabilities, [and] they have to understand the limitations to be able to plan for it,” Darby said Feb. 10 as her students entered their second day of the course. “Ultimately, the inner workings of these systems is on the operator ... but these are very hard to operate. So, we want [the students] ... to be cognizant



PHOTOS BY COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Army Sgt. 1st Class William Benz looks at a first-person-view one-way attack drone during the second day of the service’s new Robotic Autonomous Systems Leader Tactics on Feb. 10, at the Maneuver Innovation Lab on Fort Benning, Ga.



Students and cadre watch a small aerial drone controlled by a phone fly inside the Maneuver Innovation Lab.

of that, so they can be a lot more understanding that when you’re tasking your soldiers and those crews to do something ... you’re not going to task them with something that’s not a capability.”

The class should help “bridge the gap” between mid-career and later soldiers who have not learned about drones and autonomous robotics since Day 1 in the Army with the newest soldiers who have been trained on such

capabilities since shortly after joining, she said.

Students spend the first week on the basics of robotics and autonomous systems, during the second week they learn to prepare a defensive operation using those capabilities and in the third week they will plan an offensive attack with them, Darby said. They will also learn about the ethics involved in using autonomous systems on the battlefield and human-robot teambuilding, Darby said.

Benz, who will serve as a scout leader course instructor at Fort Benning after completing RASLT, said he was a longtime skeptic of the integration of drones and robots into the Army’s small combat units. But he now wishes those capabilities were available to him when he first deployed to Afghanistan as a scout in 2010 with the 4th Infantry Division.

“This would have made life a lot easier,” Benz said. “The little drones ... going over the little dunes and mountains and stuff to catch all the bad guys in the rat trails. That would have been awesome.”

He took the class to get a better understanding of how to train other cavalry scouts to use them for their primary mission — finding the enemy on the battlefield.



Students take turns operating an Army unmanned ground vehicle inside the Maneuver Innovation Lab on Feb. 10.

“I’m looking at this through that recon lens,” he said. “Drone, [first-person view] drones, all that is a huge, huge, huge advantage for us.”

But they are only tools, Benz said. They cannot replace humans entirely, even in the reconnaissance world.

“Nothing will ever replace a guy on an [observation point] with a little optic and a radio,” Benz said. “This will enable us and multiply our capability, but we can’t ever forget the analog skills, (and the) human aspect — war is terrible. It’s meant to be terrible. But having these tools to minimize risk to the force is huge. It’s just kind of a balancing act.”

Darby said the pilot program will run three classes in fiscal year 2026. She hopes to expand the classes to 18 students next year.

“We’re going to take the feedback and continue to learn, and the next course will be even better. And then (by) taking the feedback from the second one, the third course will be even better,” Darby said. “We’re able to transform here as doctrine transforms, and we’re going to constantly evolve to try to keep on that forward edge so that this course will stay relevant for as long as it needs to.”

MILITARY

CNO touts 'tailored' strategic approach

Caudle: Flexibility, risk will help crisis response strategy

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

SAN DIEGO — The Navy's top admiral wants the service to take more calculated risks when responding to events around the globe.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle laid out his "U.S. Navy Fighting Instructions" at the keynote address to more than 1,000 service members, defense industry executives and strategic analysts recently during the West 2026 conference at the San Diego Convention Center.



Caudle

"It will ensure we are ready," Caudle said. "Not for the last war, but for the one that is coming."

Caudle said he believed that, over time, American military options had too often fallen to the Navy's carrier strike forces.

The rollout of Caudle's strategy comes amid the Trump administration's positioning of aircraft carriers and other ships around hot spots.

The USS Gerald R. Ford carrier and strike group was sent late last year to the Caribbean Sea and ultimately supported last month's operation to capture then-Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Two weeks ago, the USS Abraham Lincoln, which was pulled from the South China Sea, arrived in the Middle East amid a rise in tensions with Iran.

In an interview with The Associated Press prior to the strategy rollout, Caudle said he sees the Navy's future mission in the Caribbean focused on interdictions and watching merchant shipping. The U.S. military has seized multiple suspicious and falsely flagged tankers connected with Venezuela that were part of a global shadow fleet of merchant vessels that help governments evade sanctions.

"That doesn't really require a carrier strike group to do that," Caudle told the



ROBERT TAYLOR/AP

The USS Gravelly destroyer prepares to dock for military exercises in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, in October.

AP, adding that he believes the mission could be done with some smaller littoral combat ships, Navy helicopters and close coordination with the Coast Guard.

At the center of the new instructions is a "hedge strategy" to respond to global events with a mix of ships, aircraft and personnel that Caudle said would be "tailored" to each situation.

"Building a fleet to cover every pressing scenario is not only cost- and risk-prohibitive, but a disservice to the taxpayer and, quite frankly, less effective operationally," Caudle said in San Diego. "What a hedge strategy avoids is a brittle, single-purpose force that is either overbuilt for the high-end fight and underused day to day or optimized for low-end crises and overmatched."

Warfare has also changed, according to Caudle. He said that, in the past, the Navy could count on simply overmatching an opponent with "impunity and winning by mass dominance alone."

But relatively inexpensive drones —

flying, surface and underwater — show that combatants have an "ever lowering cost of entry" to challenging great power forces, including the United States.

Caudle said that smaller forces sent to emerging hot spots more rapidly can accomplish the goal of projecting American sea power, compared with larger forces that take more time to assemble and deploy.

"We find ourselves operating in an era with other great powers," he said. "An era in which speed and decision ruthlessly punish delay."

Caudle said the approach accepts a certain level of risk.

"In the next conflict, that system will be tested under pressure, at speed and under fire," Caudle said. "Communications will be disrupted. Space and cyber operations will be under attack. The enemy will try to fracture our kill chains, slow our decisions and isolate our forces. In that kind of fight, we can't afford a Navy that waits for per-

mission."

America's changing fiscal, industrial and military strategy depends on the ability to field "effective, scalable, risk-worthy mass with the most advanced multi-mission platforms we can build and sustain," Caudle said.

Caudle said most of the Navy fleet is involved in deterrence.

"It's a concept that to work must live continuously in the minds of our adversaries, and in turn, allow us to shape their behavior," Caudle said.

While uncrewed vessels and aircraft will play a growing role in the mix of Navy forces, Caudle said the service members aboard ship and on shore are the Navy's top asset.

"At the center of this vision will always be the United States Navy sailor," he said. "They are our most enduring strategic advantage, our primary weapon system, and the heartbeat of our world-class Navy."

warnergary@stripes.com

MILITARY

Army opens its first private dining facility

Excitement, a little confusion at new Fort Hood eatery

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

FORT HOOD, Texas — Excitement and a little confusion filled the main atrium of Fort Hood's new privately run dining facility as soldiers got their first look — and taste — at the future of Army dining.

With four stations lining the walls and a self-serve, pay-by-the-weight salad bar down the center, diners can choose from burgers and grilled chicken sandwiches, deli sandwiches and wraps, pizza and pasta, or smoothies and blended bowls. A rotating station featured chicken or beef tacos with rice and beans out of gleaming, blue Le Creuset cookware.

About a dozen employees from Fort Hood's 42 Bistro and its parent company Compass Group greeted soldiers on Feb. 12 with wide smiles as they described the somewhat tricky ordering process: Order on one of five computer touchscreens and keep the receipt it spits out. Whichever station the person ordered from will call out the corresponding number on the receipt when the food is ready. This is scanned by the cashier where barracks soldiers are asked how they want to use their meal entitlements. Everyone else can pay with cash, credit card or tap-to-pay technology.

"The food quality is higher," said Spc. Mitchell Wilcox, who was eating at 42 Bistro for the second day in a row. "They've got things I didn't even know about. You can get tofu on the salad bar."

His tray held a salad piled high with toppings — such as eggs, sliced peppers and cucumbers — a grilled chicken sandwich with bacon and cheese, and a protein smoothie. It cost \$23, which is higher than the \$15.86 available through the meal entitlement he's afforded for living in the barracks. But he was able to put some of his breakfast and dinner money toward the larger lunch meal. Each day, barracks soldiers' meal entitlements allow them to access up to \$39 in food broken



PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Mitchell Wilcox weighs his salad while paying at 42 Bistro, the Army's first privately run dining facility, at Fort Hood, Texas, on Thursday.



Soldiers select their taco toppings out of gleaming, blue Le Creuset cookware at 42 Bistro.

down over three meals.

After a soldier pays, a receipt shows how much of the entitlement, referred to as "freedom dollars," was spent and how much remains. This can also be spent in a traditional dining facility so long as they have not already dipped into funds allocated for that meal.

"It's way better than the other [dining facility]," Wilcox said.

The official opening of 42 Bistro was slated for earlier this week, but Compass Group began a soft opening to iron out the wrinkles of its first dining facility on an Army installation. Its other contracts include feeding people in airport lounges, university athletic departments, schools and health care facilities.



Soldiers leave 42 Bistro, the Army's first privately run dining facility.

After the grand opening, diners were able to order ahead at the restaurant's website, 42bistro.com.

The Army only provided the building for Compass and will pay the company only for reimbursement of meal card entitlements redeemed at 42 Bistro, its food truck and coffee shop, according to the contract.

Roughly 6,000 soldiers have meal entitlements at Fort Hood, according to the base. So while the facility is geared toward barracks soldiers, it also aims to draw in others on post, including families looking for a more affordable dining-out option.

"I think by providing great food, great hospitality and great service, then you create a destination where you gather, belong and dine all across the garrison," said Donna Turner, vice president of government engagement and sales for Compass Group.

Soon Compass Group will open a facility at Fort Carson, Colo.; then at Fort Bragg, N.C.; Fort Stewart, Ga.; and Fort Drum, N.Y. The Army plans to seek contracts in the future at other posts and perhaps expand operations at the original five locations.

At each base, the senior commander can grant permission for Compass to sell beer and wine in the dining facilities and place parameters on when. So far, Lt. Gen. Kevin Admiral, commander of III Corps and Fort Hood, has not made that decision, the base said.

Though 42 Bistro did replace one traditional dining facility at Fort Hood, Army cooks are still offering everything previously available at other locations — order-ahead meal prep, a food truck and grab-and-go kiosks with hot and cold meal options, said Sgt. Maj. Kresassidy McKinney, III Corps chief culinary manager at the central Texas Army base.

In recent years, the Army has cut the number of cooks it enlists, stretching the resources of culinary units to feed soldiers in garrison and meet warfighting requirements. With one less dining facility to manage, she said the cooks assigned to Fort Hood can now focus more on their tactical training.

"Being that we do operate off of several different rotational rations, this allows them to now tap into more of the [field rations] that requires that tactical equipment," McKinney said.

Though she and her culinary team are not directly involved in 42 Bistro, McKinney said she will still see the feedback provided through the Army's standard complaint channels as well as feedback made directly to Compass.

So far the company has hired about 60 employees for 42 Bistro and is continuing to recruit, Turner said. Starting pay for food service workers was advertised in Compass Group job listings at \$17.75 an hour.

Compass Group has had issues in the past with some of its contacts regarding hidden credit card fees on vending machines and overcharging public school lunches. Turner said there are accounting checks in place with the Army Morale, Welfare and Recreation contract office to mitigate those issues at its Army facilities.

MILITARY

Military has strong ties with USA Bobsled

3 of 16 athletes on Olympic squad are service members

BY MATT WAGNER
Stars and Stripes

USA Bobsled/Skeleton scours the American collegiate track and field scene every year, seeking potential athletes to fill its ranks.

Even something as small as strength-and-conditioning numbers can catch the organization's attention, as Air Force Senior Airman Jasmine Jones learned while competing for Eastern Michigan University.

Yet another pipeline has become just as important to USA Bobsled: the United States military.

Just look at the roster for the 2026 Milan Cortina Winter Olympics: Three of the 16 athletes are service members — Jones, Army Sgt. Frank Del Duca and Army Spc. Azaria Hill. Army Cpl. Hakeem Abdul-Saboor is one of the team's alternates.

It started on Monday with the two-man bobsled and runs through Sunday, with military athletes hitting the ice at the Cortina Sliding Centre in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy.

Even the coaching staff has a military flair. The team's head coach is Lt. Col. Christopher Fogt, and assisting him are Lt. Col. Garrett Hines and Sgt. 1st Class Shauna Rohbock.

USA Bobsled has become a feeder into the Army and Air Force's World Class Athlete Programs, as current members hail the stability the programs give them while in pursuit of their Olympic dreams.

"It seems like a pretty natural fit," Del Duca said. "Just some of the skills you learn as an athlete and in the Army or in the Air Force, they complement each other. Oftentimes, getting experience with both, they help each other."

The connection between the two groups isn't a recent phenomenon.

The second uniform isn't lost on any of the USA Bobsled military athletes.

"I feel like when I get out there on that line, I'm not only representing myself and my family, but I'm representing my country, I'm representing my teammates, I'm representing a lot of



PHOTOS BY VIESTURS LACIS/IBSF

Air Force Senior Airman Jasmine Jones, back, and teammate Kaillie Humphries compete during a race earlier in the 2025-2026 season.

people," Hill said.

The trio and their teammates were hoping to add to the Americans' long history of silverware in bobsled, and they can turn to the three in their ranks who have done it before.

Fogt, Hines and Rohbock each won silver medals in their athletic careers prior to entering the coaching arena. The organization also can bank on the experience of Tuffy Latour, a retired WCAP member who has played numerous roles as coach and administrator.

They created another avenue that strengthens the bobsled-military connection.

"I aspire to be like them," Abdul-Saboor said. "It would be amazing if I could step into that role."

Del Duca, who missed out on a medal with a fourth-place finish on Tuesday, is a driver at heart.

The 34-year-old from Bethel, Maine, was a high school state champion skier, has competed in some autocross and recently got into go-kart racing.

He just can't get enough of the feeling from being in the saddle.

Perhaps that explains how in his 11th season of bobsledding, the former University of Maine sprinter enters his second Olympic Games as the Amer-

Naturally, the comparisons to her parents and aunt started the moment she stepped on the track. But she made her own way in the sport of bobsled, making her first Olympic appearance.

"There is that little bit of pressure that you do feel when you are doing sports, especially if it is sports that one of the parents has done before," Hill said. "So, being able to pursue this sport of bobsled and kind of create my own path but still forge the legacy that I have with my family has been something that's been kind of nice to have."

The 27-year-old is competing in the two-woman bobsled with longtime friend and former UNLV track and field teammate Kaysha Love.

Jones enjoys being the team's comic relief who can keep the stress down in camp.

One of her favorite pranks came the last time she and her bobsled teammates competed in Cortina prior to these Olympic Games. The 29-year-old snuck behind a pillar on a balcony and scared Hill, whose scream was so loud it caught the attention of others.

Still, when it comes to competition, Jones flips a switch.

"I am that goofy and silly person, but I have a knack for knowing when to turn that off and commit to my job," Jones said. "Most people don't know I can be serious. It's like a secret weapon of mine where they think it's all fun and games, but I still down in my business."

Jones and her teammate Kaillie Humphries couldn't be any different in terms of their Olympic journeys. The airman is in her first Olympic Games, and Humphries has won four medals, including three golds, in her illustrious career.

Even though Abdul-Saboor sits in an alternate spot, he has become an asset for the team's first-time Olympians.

Abdul-Saboor competed in the 2018 Pyeongchang and 2022 Beijing Games. The 38-year-old's best finish was 13th place in both the two-man and four-man bobsled disciplines.

Because of his experience, his teammates have turned to him for guidance, he said.

In the meantime, Abdul-Saboor will be preparing to fill in should he be called.

"God forbid something happens to any one of them, it would be an honor to compete at the Games as well."



Army Sgt. Frank Del Duca prepares to compete during a competition in the 2025-2026 World Cup season.

icans' top driver.

"For me, the act of driving is quite euphoric and calming, despite it being a violent, fast situation," Del Duca said.

Del Duca started his Olympic competition with the two-man bobsled Monday.

Hill and her sibling never faced any pressure from their family to join athletics. Her mother, Denean, is a three-time medalist in the 4x400-meter relay, including a gold medal in 1984 with Hill's aunt, Sherri Howard. And Hill's father, Virgil, brought home silver in Olympic boxing's middleweight division.

MILITARY

Troops train with remote control weaponry

Troops test CROWS system near border with North Korea

By YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

Recent live-fire training near the North Korean border helped familiarize soldiers with a system that lets them fire their weapons from inside armored vehicles using controls and sensors, according to Eighth Army.

Troops from 84th Ordnance Company, 498th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command trained Jan. 28-29 on CROWS — the Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station — said Eighth Army spokesman James Choi.

The training took place at Story Live Fire Complex, where soldiers fired M249 squad automatic weapons and M240B machine guns while learning to assemble, prepare and operate CROWS, Choi said. The complex is about three miles from the border.

CROWS increases crew protection by reducing exposure to enemy fire,



TAE SUNG KIM/U.S. Army

Soldiers familiarize themselves with the CROWS system, firing M249 squad automatic weapons and M240B machine guns from their vehicles last month at Story Live Fire Complex, South Korea.

Choi said.

During the exercise, troops practiced shooting targets during the day and at night, said Choi, who could not disclose the number of soldiers involved.

Choi described the event as small-

scale and part of routine training aimed at enhancing readiness. The exercise followed similar CROWS familiarization conducted about three months earlier, he said.

The first CROWS — more than 560 units — were delivered to the Army in



JACK ZIERCHER/U.S. Army

CROWS stands for Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station.

Iraq under an urgent 2004 contract with Recon Optical, according to Defense Update, a defense information website.

In 2008, Norwegian arms manufacturer Kongsberg acquired the contract and by 2017 had supplied the Army with more than 12,000 CROWS units, according to a company news release in December that year.

The CROWS contracts are worth tens of millions annually. Kongsberg in 2023 announced a fourth five-year contract to supply the Army at a cost of \$94 million.

lee.yoojin@stripes.com
@YoojinLee00

Navy seeks drones with fewer launchpad limitations

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The hot item on the Navy's drone wish list these days is unmanned aircraft that sailors can launch from smaller ships or austere locations to carry out long-range attacks.

Instead of aircraft carriers, the launchpad for such a drone would be smaller vessels such as destroyers, littoral combat ships and frigates, according to a Defense Innovation Unit solicitation.

The Navy wants the aircraft to have a range of at least 1,400 miles and the ability to deliver 1,000-pound munitions typically used by fighter jets like the F/A-18 Super Hornet and F-35 Lightning II.

The drones should also be able to operate in rough seas and with minimal personnel and infrastructure, the solicitation said. Responses are due by Feb. 27.

"Naval surface combatants are constrained in their ability to support long-range strikes over extended combat operations due to reliance on single-use missile systems, with limited magazine depth and limited at-sea munition replenishment capability," the Defense Innovation Unit wrote.

The agency is responsible for fielding and developing technology for the military.

The publication of the announcement came as the Navy's top uniformed officer, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle, outlined warfighting instructions for the service during a speech Feb. 10 in San Diego.

Detailing the future of Navy operations, Caudle said he thinks the service relies too much on its carriers and called on commanders to use smaller, newer ships and other assets for missions.

As part of his plan for a "Golden



ZACHARY STEWARD/U.S. Navy

A destroyer travels through the Atlantic Ocean.

Fleet," President Donald Trump last year proposed a revival of the Navy's heavily armed class of warship known as battleships.

An analysis from the Congressional Research Service sent to lawmakers last month said the ships would be armed with a "combination of missiles, guns, lasers" and other weapons that

would be greater as a whole than what is currently used on the Navy's cruisers and destroyers.

Navy aircraft carriers have been moved around the globe in recent months to address developing crises. The movements have disrupted deployment plans and put additional strain on vessels and equipment.

The Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group was on a routine deployment to the U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa area of command when the Pentagon ordered it to the Caribbean Sea in October to support U.S. operations. It reportedly has now been ordered back to the Mideast.

And the USS Abraham Lincoln recently left the South China Sea to travel to the Middle East as tensions rise with Iran.

korte.lara@stripes.com
@lara_korte

MILITARY

Decision on new ICBM prototype looms

Replacement for Minuteman III would anchor land-based portion of nuke triad

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The new LGM-35A Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile being developed for the U.S. Air Force is on track with initial capability tests to allow for a decision by the end of the year on whether to build a prototype, the Air Force said.

The program plans to “achieve a Milestone B decision by the end of 2026, while delivering an initial capability targeted for the early 2030s,” the Air Force said in a statement Feb. 17.

Defense weapons programs begin with the initial concept. Milestone B is when a project moves toward a prototype, and the performance, schedule and funding plans are set.

“This progress paves the way for the program’s next major operational milestone: the first missile pad launch, planned for 2027,” the Air Force said.

The booster will be integrated with the missile’s forward section to create the first fully assembled ground-test Sentinel missile.

“This pathfinder test missile is essential for verifying the weapon system’s design and preparing for the first Sentinel flight test, ensuring the future of our nation’s strategic deterrence,” the Air Force said.

Milestone C is the production of the weapon.

The advancements “also solidified the early 2030s as the firm target for delivering initial capability,” the statement said.

The missile, which the Pentagon plans to take the place of the current LGM-30G Minuteman III ICBMs, would anchor the land-based portion of the triad for attacking enemy targets with nuclear weapons. The triad also includes sea-launched ICBMs from Ohio- and future Columbia-class submarines, and manned bombers.

Northrop Grumman has said the Sentinel is designed to carry W87-0 and W87-1 thermonuclear warheads



JIM MASIE/Northrop Grumman

An illustration of LGM-35A Sentinel, which would replace the Minuteman III.

with a yield of between 300 kilotons and 475 kilotons of TNT more than 3,500 miles or more. The program will modernize the nuclear missile system that currently has over 450 silos. The Air Force said it was building 600 facilities across 40,000 square miles of U.S. territory, the contractor said.

The Air Force late last year announced that its plans to concentrate the manned bomber force on the new B-21 Raider bomber now under development, while maintaining the B-52 Stratofortress in a role as a standoff weapon delivery system. The B-1 Lancer and B-2 Spirit bombers will be phased out as the new B-21s enter service.

The Sentinel will replace the Minuteman III with hundreds of new silos spread across the north-central tier of the United States.

“Sentinel is a comprehensive, once-in-a-generation modernization of the entire land-based leg of the nuclear triad, a key component of the nation’s integrated deterrence posture,” the Air Force said. “It is a full-scale replacement of the missile, launch systems

and command-and-control infrastructure with a new architecture designed with built-in adaptability for the digital era.”

The Air Force said the decision to build new missile silos “avoids the unpredictable costs and safety hazards of excavating and retrofitting 450 unique structures built over 50 years ago.”

The Air Force said it is actively preparing missile wings for the operational transition to Sentinel. That preparation “reached a visible milestone” last fall when the Air Force took a Minuteman III silo offline — “a carefully sequenced step in planning and executing the transition from Minuteman III to Sentinel.” The location of the silo and other details were not provided.

The effort is managed by Site Activation Task Force (SATAF) detachments established at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo.; Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont.; Minot AFB, N.D.; and Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif.

“The turnover of the first Minute-

man III silo is a clear signal: we are making real, tangible progress in accelerating the Sentinel program and fielding significantly improved long-range strike capabilities,” said Gen. S.L. Davis, commander of Air Force Global Strike Command.

This month, Air Force-led teams will break ground on a prototype launch silo at Northrop Grumman’s site in Promontory, Utah.

“This crucial effort will allow engineers to test and refine modern construction techniques, validating the new silo design before work begins in the missile fields,” the Air Force said.

The Air Force said construction on permanent Sentinel launch facilities has already started. The first of three new Wing Command Centers is being set up at F.E. Warren, and critical test facilities are being erected at Vandenberg to support the future flight test campaign.

The Air Force said it and contractor Northrop Grumman successfully completed a full-scale qualification test of Sentinel’s Stage-2 solid rocket motor in July 2025. A successful Stage-1 qualification was achieved in March 2025.

The Air Force credited the pace of developments to the creation of Direct Reporting Portfolio Managers (DRPM) for Critical Major Weapon Systems last August.

The DRPM role places programs, including the Sentinel, under a single leader given authority to make decisions without additional approvals.

The Air Force Global Strike Command said in January 2025 that it expected about a 15-year minimum overlap between the first Sentinel silo going online and the last Minuteman III silo decommissioned.

“I think 15 years is probably an ambitious estimate,” Maj. Gen. Stacy Jo Huser, commander of the 20th Air Force in the Air Force Global Strike Command, said at the Los Alamos Study Group Exchange Monitor Annual Nuclear Deterrence Summit. “So, one thing that a lot of people don’t realize and our own air units don’t realize is the Sentinel is not just the missile. And this probably offends people in the room, but the missile is easy. The rest of it is the infrastructure.”

MILITARY

Military zone created, another expanded

6 defense areas set in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The military is expanding and establishing defense zones in Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border where anyone crossing the border is subject to charges of trespassing on military property as well as border crossing violations.

The Air Force will establish the Del Rio-Falcon National Defense Area, about a 150-mile stretch of the border from Falcon Dam, Texas, to Del Rio, Texas, a service official confirmed Feb. 10.

The South Texas National Defense Area, a 250-mile stretch of the Rio Grande River in Cameron and Hidalgo counties, will expand an additional 40 miles to reach Roma, Texas.

The new zone will mean the military will have six defense areas in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Creating these military areas allows troops to conduct certain law enforcement activities, including temporary



ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

The bridge linking the South Texas town of Roma with Miguel Aleman, Mexico.

detention, searches and crowd-control operations.

When President Donald Trump returned to office last year, he ordered active-duty forces to the mission as part of his goal of making border security a top priority for the military.

Trump ordered the creation of the military border zones to sidestep laws that prohibit the military from con-

ducting civilian law enforcement.

Officials with the Joint Task Force Southern Border have said troops continue to allow Customs and Border Protection agents to take the lead as often as possible.

Roughly 8,500 troops are deployed under the task force, working primarily to detect possible illegal activity along the border. It is unclear if addi-

tional troops are needed in Texas.

“We’ve gone nine months with zero crossings at our Southern Border,” Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said during a speech Feb. 9 at General Dynamics Bath Iron Works shipyard in Maine.

adams.matthew@stripes.com
@MatthewAdams60

Ex-DOD logistics worker accused in Nigerian scheme

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

A former Defense Department civilian employee from Pennsylvania is under indictment in connection with a

scheme to funnel stolen money to scammers in Nigeria, according to federal prosecutors.

Samuel D. Marcus, 33, is charged with one count each of money launder-

ing and conspiracy to commit money laundering as well as six counts of illegal monetary transactions, the Justice Department said.

Marcus worked as a logistics specialist for the Defense Logistics Agency. His LinkedIn profile says he started working for the agency in Philadelphia in 2019, the same year he graduated from Temple University.

The crimes he is accused of committing took place between July 2023 until December 2025, the statement said.

He was among a group of “money mules” who prosecutors say helped move funds stolen from U.S. victims through romance scams, tax fraud and other schemes.

Marcus kept in regular contact with the Nigerian scammers, who instructed him to convert victims’ money deposited into his accounts into cryptocurrency and then transfer it into

foreign accounts, according to the indictment.

The scammers operated under aliases like “Rachel Jude” and “Ned McMurray,” the indictment said.

Marcus was “fully aware” that the people behind those names were fraudsters, the statement said.

In some cases, he is said to have sent fake invoices to banks and lied to financial institutions and authorities to hide the illegal transfers.

FBI agents had warned him that the money was stolen and that his transfers appeared to be part of a laundering scheme, but he took part in it anyway, according to authorities.

If convicted on all charges, Marcus faces up to 100 years in prison, the indictment states.

wellman.phillip@stripes.com
@pwwellman

Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher
Erik Slavin, Editor in Chief
Brian Bowers, U.S. Edition Editor
Scott Foley, Revenue Director

CONTACT US

633 3rd Street NW, Suite 116, Washington, D.C. 20001

Editorial: (202) 886-0005

Advertising: (202) 886-0014

Additional contact information: stripes.com

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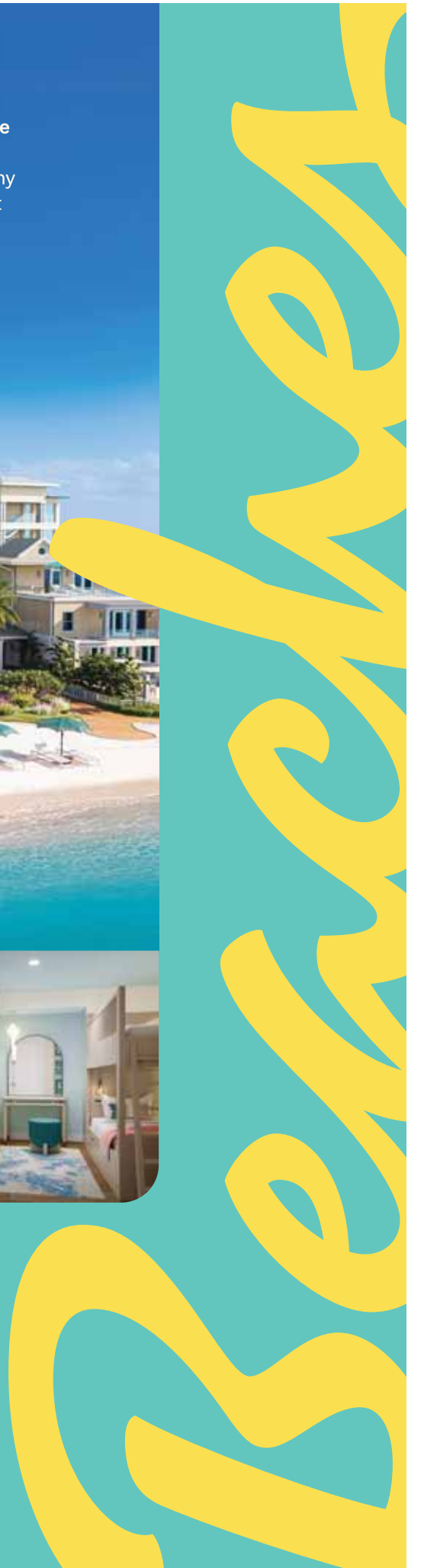
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