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Standards survey

Defense secretary orders each service to review policies on fitness, grooming

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Soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division encourage a teammate during the Army Combat Fitness Test in April.

JONATHAN REYES/U.S. Army

COVER STORY

Hegseth orders review of fitness standards

Physical fitness, body composition, grooming policies to be examined

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently ordered a “rapid” services-wide review of existing standards for physical fitness, body composition and grooming, according to a Pentagon news release.

In a memo, Hegseth directed the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness to gather the existing standards. Darin Selnick is performing those duties.

While described as “rapid,” the memo does not provide a timeline for the review.

“We must remain vigilant in maintaining the standards that enable the men and women of our military to protect the American people and our homeland as the world’s most lethal and effective fighting force,” Hegseth wrote in the release.

“This review will illuminate how the Department has maintained the level of standards required over the recent past and the trajectory of any change in those standards,” he said.

The review of grooming standards will also include the wearing of beards, according to the memo.

The Army, Air Force and Navy all offer shaving waivers to service members diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae that allow them to forgo shaving. The condition, which manifests in painful razor bumps, disproportionately affects Black men.

Hegseth has long been a critic of physical fitness standards in the armed forces, in particular saying that the inclusion of women in combat has led to lowered standards.

The ban on women serving in combat roles was lifted in 2013 by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, and women were fully integrated into those roles by 2016.

The review will look at how standards have changed since Jan. 1, 2015.



ANDREW ALVARADO/U.S. Air Force

Senior Airman Nelson Salguero works on his biceps at Dover Air Force Base, Del., in February.

“The review will also provide insight on why those standards changed and the impact of those changes,” the memo states.

Hegseth wrote in his most recent book, “The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free,” published last year, that women are not fit for combat because they “cannot physically meet the same standards as men.”

During a Feb. 7 town hall meeting at the Pentagon, Hegseth described soldiers as “standard bearers.”

“What are the standards?” he said. “I mean, and it starts with the basic stuff, right? It’s grooming standards and uniform standards and training stan-

dards, fitness standards.”

Hegseth compared lax standards to the broken windows theory of policing, in which unpunished small misdemeanors embolden greater lawbreaking.

“[I]f you violate the small stuff, and you allow it to happen, the big stuff, it creates a culture where big stuff you’re not held accountable for,” he said. “I think the same thing exists inside our services.”

In recent years, some services have loosened regulations around hairstyles and tattoos. The changes have come as troops pressed for grooming standards that match the current era.

Some service branches see the changes as essential to successful



JACOB HEARN/U.S. Army National Guard

First Lt. Jean Paul Stassi Jr. shaves in the field before training at Camp Shelby, Miss., in July.

recruiting for America’s all-volunteer armed forces.

Not all services see it that way.

In January, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith told a group of reporters that the service would not allow beards.

“We’re Marines, and we’re different,” he said. “We don’t have beards.”

The Marine Corps is meeting its recruiting goals, and “what we don’t want to do is tinker with the ethos” of the service, he said.

Services approach physical fitness in varying ways.

The Army in 2022 launched its Army Combat Fitness Test, which is designed to better prepare troops for what they would experience in combat as compared to the previous test.

The test focuses on measuring a wide range of physical capabilities — strength, agility, reaction time and endurance.

The Space Force is experimenting with doing away with fitness tests entirely.

Thousands of guardians have participated in a two-year study ending this year that tracks routine workouts in lieu of using fitness tests to gauge capability.

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MILITARY

Marines take tougher line on shaving

Those with medical exemption for painful skin disorders must have condition reexamined

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Marines with a medical exemption from shaving for painful skin disorders must have their condition reexamined within 90 days, according to a new administrative order that comes after the initiation of a broader Pentagon review on grooming standards.

The Marine directive, issued this month, also said troops diagnosed with the skin condition known as pseudofolliculitis barbae could be separated from the service if grooming exceptions are needed beyond one year.

Under such a scenario, a Marine “may be considered for administrative

separation due to incompatibility with Service,” the order stated.

A Marine directive issued in 2012 allowed commanding officers to separate Marines with long-term conditions that did not respond to treatment if it affected “good order and discipline.” That directive did not include the one-year timeline.

The new order was described as interim guidance and comes after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s recent announcement of a rapid review across the military of standards for physical fitness, body composition and grooming.

The review also will examine policies regarding beards. All services

grant shaving waivers to members diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae, also known as razor bumps. The condition disproportionately affects Black men, studies have found.

Marines already diagnosed with it need to be reevaluated to assess their treatment protocol and determine the need for further treatment, the new guidance says.

Over the years, military branches have carried out various studies on the beard issue to determine whether regulations could be loosened for the rank and file. But so far, no branch has taken the step beyond special exceptions.

In the Army, clean shaves became a

requirement just before World War I, when chemical weapons were deemed a serious threat. The Navy and the Coast Guard were the last branches to ban beards, doing so in 1985 and 1986, respectively.

The Marine Corps has always taken a hard line on the issue.

“We’re Marines, and we’re different. We don’t have beards,” Gen. Eric Smith, the Marine Corps commandant, told reporters in January.

When it comes to pseudofolliculitis barbae, “that’s a medical waiver, not a fashion waiver,” Smith said.

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Navy moves to acquire more high-flying Triton drones

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy signed a \$267 million deal to acquire two more Triton drones as it moves toward purchasing dozens of the long-range surveillance aircraft.

The project awarded to Northrop Grumman includes an operating base and logistics package for the drones, according to a Pentagon statement.

The MQ-4C Triton is designed to work with P-8 Poseidon patrol planes by aiding their intelligence gathering and supporting search and rescue operations. The Triton also can serve as a communications relay.

In March 2024, the Navy’s unmanned patrol squadron, VUP-19, celebrated the deployment of a detachment and opening of a Triton hangar at Naval Air Station Sigonella on the Italian island of Sicily.

There also is a detachment in Guam, with plans for at least one more in a yet-to-be announced location, potentially at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington state or a base in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

VUP-19 is homeported at Naval Air Station Jacksonville and Naval Air Station Mayport in Florida.

Spare parts for Australia, which



ALEX DELGADO/U.S. Navy

An MQ-4C Triton comes in for a landing at Naval Air Station Sigonella, Italy, in July 2024. The Navy recently awarded a \$267 million contract to Northrop Grumman for two Tritons, part of the service’s plan to acquire 27 of the drones.

received its first Triton drone in July, also are included in the new contract, according to the statement.

As of September 2023, the Navy had five Tritons, which reached initial operating capacity that same month. The achievement cleared the way for the drone to ease into operations in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

In its 2024 budget, the service reduced the number of Tritons it planned to purchase from 70 to 27 because of a reassessment by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council, according to

budget documents. The Pentagon council assesses joint military strength and identifies any gaps in capability.

The Triton can fly for more than 24 hours at altitudes above 50,000 feet with a range of 7,400 miles. It has flown more than 5,000 operational hours, according to Northrop Grumman.

The Triton’s crew consists of five members per ground station: a pilot, a tactical coordinator, two mission payload operators and a foreign signals intelligence coordinator, according to

the Navy.

The drone recently demonstrated its ability to carry out missions in the Arctic, flying within 100 miles of the North Pole in September, the defense contractor said in a statement the same month.

“Arctic regions are an increasingly important theater of operations,” Capt. Josh Guerre, the Triton program manager, said in the September statement.

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MILITARY

Destroyer deploys to southern border

USS Gravelly to help deter illegal crossings and drug trafficking

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy destroyer has deployed to the Gulf of America on a mission usually reserved for the U.S. Coast Guard to help deter illegal crossings and drug trafficking as part the military's efforts to bolster security along the southern border.

The USS Gravelly, a guided-missile destroyer, left from Naval Weapons Station Yorktown in Virginia on March 15 as part of the Defense Department's response to President Donald Trump's executive order calling for a secure southern border. The deployment will support an operation being developed by U.S. Northern Command, a Navy official said.

"We are currently building that [consolidated plan] now in coordination with NORTHCOM," Adm. Daryl Caudle, commander of U.S. Fleet Forces, told reporters. "The Navy is contributing substantially to that — greatly — really this being our first dedicated deployment for that."

The Gravelly's deployment marks the latest example of the Trump administration using the U.S. military to fend off what Trump has described as an "invasion" at the border.

The Gravelly will cruise the gulf predominantly under NORTHCOM's control, though the destroyer could venture into the U.S. Southern Command region, Caudle said. NORTHCOM's area of responsibility includes the continental U.S., Canada, Mexico, and surrounding waters out to approximately 500 nautical miles. SOUTHCOM's region encompasses Latin America south of Mexico, adjacent waters and the Caribbean Sea.

The Gravelly's exact tasking, Caudle said, might be intelligence gathering initially but could expand. The ship will have a Coast Guard law enforcement team onboard.

"Those missions could blend a bit as we are focused on stopping transnational criminal trafficking activities and working with the Coast Guard to



RYAN WILLIAMS/U.S. Navy

Sailors man the rails aboard the USS Gravelly on March 15 near Yorktown, Va.

support them fully for homeland defense," Caudle said.

Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, who oversees U.S. Northern Command, said in a statement that the Gravelly will improve U.S. abilities "to protect the United States' territorial integrity, sovereignty and security." Defense officials added in the same statement that the deployment will contribute to "a coordinated and robust response to combating maritime related terrorism, weapons proliferation, transnational crime, piracy, environmental destruction and illegal seaborne immigration."

Navy ships — most often littoral combat ships — have deployed with a Coast Guard law enforcement crew. Typically, the ship is sent to the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility. Coast Guard detachments assigned to Navy ships often lead in interdiction operations to board suspected vessels, seize illegal drugs and apprehend suspects, a defense official for SOUTHCOM said.

Destroyers — or submarines — are usually deployed in the NORTHCOM area of responsibility to monitor the operations of enemies such as Russia

and China, not for border security, Caudle said.

The Gravelly, which is more than 509 feet long, is larger than vessels in the Coast Guard fleet and carries dozens of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which are long-range missiles designed to strike land-based targets.

In July, the destroyer completed a nine-month deployment that the Navy called "unprecedented." The assignment was extended twice, as the Gravelly escorted the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and shot down missiles and drones launched by Houthi militants in Yemen aimed at commercial and military ships in the Red Sea.

"It is a bit unique to deploy a capability of this level for this mission set, but I think it goes to the commitment the Navy has to the president and the secretary of defense to support the southern border operations," Caudle said.

The Gravelly's deployment will enable the Navy to learn what other ways that it could support the southern border operations. The sea service's involvement could grow to include de-

ploying Navy Seabees and explosive ordnance teams to help with the construction of the border wall, as well as intelligence analysts to help Customs and Border Protection track drug cartel movements, Caudle said.

Navy crews have already supported the operations by flying reconnaissance planes to monitor the southern border. Those efforts have shifted to supporting Coast Guard operations in the gulf, Caudle said. The two P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance squadrons tasked with border surveillance are multimission aircraft that conduct anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and humanitarian response.

"This is putting our toe in the water a bit to understand it, to make sure that we know how to employ this force. Is a return on investment from this level of capability going to return good, fruitful utilization of it?" Caudle said. "This first round will educate us on that to see if further and continued global utilization of these forces is required."

The Washington Post contributed to this report.
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MILITARY

Higher pay urged for shipyard workers

Experts testify that low compensation has led to struggles with building ships

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The resurrection of military shipbuilding in the U.S. will hinge on improving wages and benefits for workers at shipyards, Navy officials and experts said recently as lawmakers raised fears of cuts to shipyard workforces.

Experts testifying before a House Armed Services Committee subpanel cited labor shortages due to poor pay as the main reason for the Navy's yearslong struggle to build ships on time and on budget.

Cost overruns for 46 ships that the Navy has under construction grew from \$3.4 billion to \$10.4 billion in the past budget year while delays for certain naval vessels have stretched up to three years.

"Nothing is more important than addressing the critical labor shortages that afflict all of the shipbuilding and public maintenance yards," said Eric Labs, a senior analyst for naval forces and weapons at the Congressional Budget Office.

The assessment comes as President Donald Trump's administration seeks to revitalize commercial and military shipbuilding to compete with China while also substantially reducing the Defense Department's civilian workforce.

Democratic lawmakers have expressed concerns in recent weeks that the pending cuts will result in the loss of shipyard employees who are already hard to keep in the job. Retention of critical tradesmen such as welders, shipfitters and pipefitters is especially difficult, Labs said.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said Tuesday that she voted against advancing Trump's nominee for Navy secretary, John Phelan, because workers at the Navy's Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Maine have not been exempted from "ill-considered layoffs."

The naval yard largely works on the



KELSEY DORNFIELD/U.S. Marine Corps

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith and Sgt. Major of the Marine Corps Carlos Ruiz tour the Bougainville, a landing helicopter assault ship, at Ingalls Shipyard in Pascagoula, Miss., in November.

overhaul, repair and modernization of submarines and must hire about 550 workers annually to keep pace with national security goals, according to Shaheen.



Labs

Recruitment at shipyards has been difficult for years, Labs said. Few workers are willing to toil in hot, cold, dirty and unpleasant conditions for \$20 to \$21 per hour when Subway offers

\$18 per hour with benefits, he said.

"The differential between retail or even other manufacturing sectors in the areas that surround the shipyard has got to be much, much greater than it currently is," Labs said, adding better benefits, more affordable housing and tax benefits can also help attract talent.

Brett Seidle, the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, said labor issues are the No. 1 problem facing shipbuilding and raising wages by three or four times would motivate people to apply.

"It's a very purpose-driven life, supporting the Navy," he said. "They'd be all about it."

The Trump administration is expected to issue an executive order soon aimed at bolstering shipbuilding, including by reportedly raising wages for

nuclear shipyard workers. Trump recently also announced he would create a new Office of Shipbuilding in the White House.

"We used to make so many ships. We don't make them anymore very much, but we're going to make them very fast, very soon. It will have a huge impact," he told lawmakers in a speech to Congress.

Lawmakers from both parties say they are encouraged by the Trump administration's focus on reinvigorating the shipbuilding industry. But reversing decades of manufacturing loss will be a steep hill to climb, said Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn.

Less than 15% of the American workforce is in manufacturing compared with 35% at the end of the Cold War, he said.

"When you look back at how we built 5,000 ships in World War II and were able to turn on the industrial base so quickly — I mean you actually had a workforce that was primed, whether it was commercial shipbuilding or auto manufacturing, to basically shift into that type of production," Courtney said.

The U.S. today is severely lagging behind China in shipbuilding capacity and the size of its naval fleet.

China is on pace to surpass 400 warships this year while the U.S. Navy, with 296 battle-force ships, essentially

has "no more ships today than we did back in 2003," said Shelby Oakley, director of contracting and national security acquisitions at the Govern-

ment Accountability Office.



Oakley

"That's a serious problem," she told lawmakers. "Especially at a time when our near-peer adversaries are rapidly expanding their fleets and fielding advanced tech-

nologies that could shift the balance of power away from the United States."

If the Navy continues "with business as usual," it could have a shrinking, less-capable fleet that ultimately is unable to "project the superior force the Navy has at its disposal today," Oakley warned.

She said the Navy needs to overhaul its budget and acquisition processes, which often result in ship construction beginning before a steady design is in place, and be more realistic with its business planning.

But rectifying workforce challenges should be the top priority, experts said.

"Without fully addressing the challenge of labor, all other efforts will be marginal," Labs said.

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EUROPE

Soldiers sharpen recon skills in Baltics

US soldiers confront realities of defending vulnerable Estonia

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

CAMP REEDO, Estonia — Staff Sgt. Abel Silva trudged through the morning snow with a large rip down the left leg of his pants. He was tired, hungry and only about 20 miles from the Russian border.

Silva and a dozen or so other U.S. soldiers from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division arrived in southeastern Estonia by helicopter the night before, rushing into a forest under a full moon to begin reconnaissance work.

Wind created by the helicopter rotor whirled up snow on the ground, creating a disorienting whiteout. In the forest, snowfall hid uneven terrain, and the depths of ditches were difficult to detect, the soldiers said.

"It was exhausting, and it was challenging, but that comes with every mission that we do," Silva said. "If it's not difficult, then we're doing something wrong."

In the latest in a series of training exercises, Silva and his fellow soldiers are confronting the realities of defending one of NATO's most vulnerable members, whose capital of Tallinn is a short distance by sea and land from Russia.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have strongly supported Ukraine since the 2022 Russian invasion, spurred by fears that a Russian victory could embolden Moscow elsewhere. The Baltic nations all were annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II and gained independence in 1991.

If Russia were to target the Baltics, those nations would rely on NATO's collective defense agreement.

President Donald Trump and others in his administration have often criticized the NATO alliance and particularly members who spend relatively little on defense. But the Baltic nations are well above the alliance's spending benchmark and have vowed to increase their shares to at least 5% of gross domestic product, as Trump has called for.

Last month, Trump told reporters



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers with the 7th Cavalry Regiment wait under a full moon for the arrival of fellow squadron members by helicopter at a landing site near Camp Reedo, Estonia, on March 14.

the U.S. is "going to be very committed" to the Baltics.

The ongoing U.S. exercises in Estonia are being executed by the 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, the Army's most modernized reconnaissance squadron.

U.S. troop rotations to Estonia have taken place for more than a decade. But deployments to the country's southeast date only to late 2022 as a direct response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, amid concerns of hostilities spreading into NATO member territory.

It's been a little over a month since 5th Squadron assumed authority as the Army's rotational force in southern Estonia. Its arrival marks the first time an armored brigade has deployed on rotation to the country, the service says.

The 5th Squadron serves as the eyes and ears for a brigade focused on high-intensity warfare, mechanized operations and large-scale ground combat. They gather intelligence on enemy positions and movements, threats and terrain, before the rest of the unit fights.

The best time to do that is often after sunset.

The emergency deployment exercise that began this month played out in the dense forest adjacent to the recently constructed Camp Reedo, where most of 5th Squadron operates.

The troops brought in by helicopter are from the smaller contingent of 5th Squadron soldiers based in Lithuania, near the border with Belarus.

They had 18 hours to study maps, pack their equipment and make all other preparations. The moment they got out, it became clear that planning is no substitute for experience.

"We had a lot of slips and falls with the terrain," Staff Sgt. Santiago Cueto said. "Obviously, there were some issues with the execution that we'll work on, but I'm glad they were highlighted and brought to our attention."

The learning curve in Estonia hasn't been limited to the scouts in the field that night.

The soldiers at Camp Reedo discovered upon arriving here that keeping military vehicles ready for combat is very different in below-freezing temperatures than it is at their Fort Stewart, Ga., headquarters.

They had to order winterized parts and run the vehicles more often, among other precautions.

They are also learning the intricacies of the updated M2A4 Bradley Fighting Vehicle. A unit of the division's 2nd Armored Brigade was the first in the Army to field the upgraded Bradley, and 5th Squadron is the first to bring them overseas.

"It's had its ups and downs, but overall it's a great platform," said Sgt. 1st Class Brody Gay, a cavalry scout pla-

toon sergeant.

He said 5th Squadron was proving that cavalry reconnaissance units remain essential for modern warfare, especially as the U.S. focuses on maintaining its edge against large powers such as Russia and China.

Drone warfare is fast becoming a big part of ground combat, as seen in Ukraine. But heavily wooded terrain can create blind spots for reconnaissance drones.

"We still need to put physical human beings on the ground," Gay said.

Other units in the squadron are working with the new Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle, an upgrade from the Vietnam War-era M113 Armored Personnel Carrier, used for command, medical, logistics and indirect fire support.

Some 5th Squadron troops in Lithuania have also been given the latest Abrams main battle tank, the M1A2 SEPv3, to break in.

Squadron commander Lt. Col. Michael Hefti said that in addition to gathering reconnaissance, the unit provides security to the main body of the brigade at times, such as when they are on the move.

Estonia was proving to be an excellent location for his unit to test its modernized vehicles.

"This is the actual terrain that we might have to fight on," Hefti said. "You're getting a chance to practice and rehearse in case someone ever did invade and in case we ever did have to fight here."

About 700 American service members are typically deployed to Estonia. That includes the 5th Squadron soldiers and Task Force Voit, which trains Estonians on the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System.

Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur in an interview this month described his country as a bulwark that prevents Russia from expanding further westward, with help from its allies.

"It has always been one of the top priorities to have U.S. forces here in Estonia because we all understand that troops on the ground is something which Russia takes very seriously," Pevkur said.

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EUROPE

Allies at forefront in drill at US base

Decision coincides with Pentagon push for greater role for European forces

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — Lithuanian and British troops helped lead the fight at the U.S. Army's Bavarian training grounds this month, practicing how they would counter drone and helicopter attacks in battle.

During this year's annual Allied Spirit exercise, the decision to put allies in front coincides with a Pentagon push to have European countries play a larger security role on the Continent.

The Army's Joint Multinational Training Center in Hohenfels is hosting the exercise, which runs through March 24, bringing together nearly 3,000 service members from the U.S. and 12 NATO and partner nations.

The exercise has featured drones, attack helicopters, simulated artillery, medical and psychological operations and civil affairs units, all competing against the training area's resident opposition force, the black-uniformed 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment.

Lithuania, a Baltic country considered a front-line state in the defense of NATO's eastern flank, is leading this year's Allied Spirit, which is focused on preparing a multinational brigade to deter Russian aggression.

On Wednesday, Senior Pvt. Kestas Dziugas, a drone operator from the Lithuanian army's Motorized Infantry Griffin Brigade, launched a small, off-the-shelf model for reconnaissance from atop a hill near the unit's mobile headquarters.

Maj. Avoldis Juskevateus, who works in operations, watched from outside an infantry fighting vehicle.

Juskevateus has been working with American counterparts from the 28th Infantry Division, 173rd Airborne Brigade and 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

"We feel safe with the U.S.A. guy standing next to us, so I believe every-



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

A Lithuanian soldier sits in the turret of an M577 armored personnel carrier during exercise Allied Spirit in Hohenfels, Germany, on March 12.



A soldier from the United Kingdom's 88th Gun Battery sits with her squad during the exercise.

thing is all right," Juskevateus said. We "tested our procedures, improved our understanding of each other. A lot of lessons that we learned in this."

U.S. forces "provide a lot of assets that we don't have," he said, citing the aviation brigade's capabilities as an example.

Nearby, the British 88th Gun Battery hid artillery pieces under trees and

camouflage netting. Gunner (Pvt.) Keelan Horton said they had successfully dodged both helicopters and drones trying to find them.

"We're winning so far," added Gunner (Pvt.) Travis Gaskin, who said European-led training is important under the current circumstances.

"If it comes to a real-time situation, then we've got a better idea of what



A soldier from the United Kingdom's 88th Gun Battery posts security outside his unit's command and control center.

we're doing instead of just going in blind," he said.

Brig. Gen. Steven Carpenter, head of the 7th Army Training Command, surveyed the action alongside Lithuanian land forces commander Brig. Gen. Arturas Radvilas.

Carpenter took questions during a press conference that delved into uncertainties over NATO's future, as the White House and the Pentagon review the U.S. global force posture.

"What's not uncertain is the fact that the United States believes that a strong (American) presence, a strong NATO presence is not just a deterrent in Europe, it's a deterrent globally, because all of these conflicts are interconnected," he said.

Earlier, an alliance spokesman said that all 32 allies, including the U.S., are continuing to plan and execute exercises together, following a Swedish newspaper report saying that U.S. would no longer take part in them.

Radvilas said that Allied Spirit was proceeding as it normally would.

"We don't know maybe what we can expect in the future," he said. "Up to now, we don't see any changes at all."

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PACIFIC

Iwo Jima vet recalls 'terrible, terrible' battle

Innumerable graves engraved on sailor's mind 80 years later

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The vast number of graves he saw on Iwo Jima remains a lasting memory for Robert Bergen, a former Navy corpsman and one of the few remaining survivors of the battle fought there 80 years ago.

Troops dug three massive cemeteries for American and Japanese forces killed in the fighting on the island — now called Iwo To — in February and March 1945.

Bergen, 99, served aboard the USS Cecil, a Bayfield-class attack transport that landed troops, vehicles and cargo, and evacuated casualties during the battle.



Bergen

His 10 days at Iwo Jima were a "terrible, terrible experience with dead people everywhere," he told Stars and Stripes in a recent phone interview ahead of this month's 80th Reunion of Honor on the island.

The annual event is scheduled for March 29, Lt. Col. Joseph Lee, the U.S. Marine Corps attache to Japan, said by email Wednesday.

"It is a bilateral ceremony attended by the U.S. and Japan commemorating the Battle of Iwo Jima," he said.



U.S. Marine Corps

Marine amphibious tractors burn after being hit by Japanese mortar shells during the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945.



U.S. Marine Corps

A Marine calls out instructions after spotting a Japanese machine gun nest during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

In years past, Japanese and U.S. veterans and their families, along with

service members from both nations, have attended the event.

During the war, Bergen was working at a San Diego aircraft factory building B-29 Superfortress bombers when he was "kidnapped" by the Navy at age 17, he recalled.

"A recruiter asked me to sit in the back of his car," he said. "He drove me to a naval training center where they cut my hair and gave me a box of clothes."

In February 1945, Bergen watched from the deck as battleships bombarded Japanese defenders on Iwo Jima.

"I had never seen a battleship," he said. "When they fire their guns, the whole ship rolls, but the guns stay right on the target."

Marines launched their amphibious



Operation Meatball

Robert Bergen attends a 2017 reunion for Battle of Iwo Jima veterans in San Diego. The event was hosted by Operation Meatball, a nonprofit dedicated to honoring veterans and connecting them with young people.

assault on Feb. 19, 1945. The Japanese had dug a vast defensive network of tunnels into the island's volcanic rock. Of the 70,000 Marines who fought there, more than 6,800 were killed and 19,000 were wounded.

Bergen returned to Iwo Jima for the 10th and 15th anniversaries of the battle and explored caves and tunnels where Japanese defenders had sheltered.

About 18,000 Japanese troops died in the battle, with only 216 taken prisoner. The island was declared secure on March 26, 1945.

The flag-raising atop Mount Suribachi, captured by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal, became an iconic symbol of American sacrifice and courage.

The remains of U.S. service members who died on Iwo Jima were repatriated after the war, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

These days, Bergen uses a wheelchair to get around and doesn't plan to return for this month's Reunion of Honor.

"I'm very proud of the United States Marine Corps," he said.

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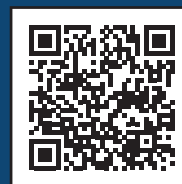
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