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Intense battles in the Red Sea

Defense against Houthi missiles
rivals actions during World War II
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The destroyer USS Carney engages Houthi
missiles and drones in the Red Sea in 2023.

AARON LAU/U.S. Navy

COVER STORY

Navy fights off Houthi attacks in Red Sea

Nearly 400 drones, missiles launched against US ships

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The U.S. Navy has defended against nearly 400 attack drones and missiles in the Red Sea since Iranian-backed Houthi militants began their assault on commercial and military ships more than a year ago, a pace that has seen the service firing back at levels comparable to World War II battles.

Navy forces have fired more than 200 missiles against those attacks since the Houthis began their campaign in the strategic waterway in November 2023. Destroyers and cruisers also have fired more than 150 artillery rounds, said Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces.

Many of the munitions were fired in larger-scale battles, said McLane, speaking recently during a panel discussion at the Surface Navy Association conference in Arlington, Va.

“We’ve done the analysis with what we used to shoot in World War II, and we’re at about two rounds per incoming missile to shoot (Houthi strikes) down,” he said.

That matches the current rates of fire to those of the historic battles fought more than 80 years ago, he added.

In a recent attack, the destroyer USS Spruance was “in a fight where they shot down three anti-ship ballistic missiles, three anti-ship cruise missiles and seven one-way (aerial drones) that were coming towards” them, said McLane, who didn’t specify when Spruance was attacked.

On Nov. 11, Spruance and the destroyer USS Stockdale came under Houthi fire, fending off at least eight drones and eight missiles while transiting the Bab el Mandeb, a strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

Over the past 15 months, the Navy has fired 120 SM-2, 80 SM-6 and 20 Evolved Sea Sparrow and SM-3 missiles, as well as 160 rounds from its



AARON LAU/U.S. Navy

Sailors aboard the destroyer USS Carney stand watch in the ship's Combat Information Center during an operation to defeat a combination of Houthi missiles and drones, in October 2023.

5-inch guns. Those weapons defeated 380 Houthi attack drones and ballistic and cruise missiles, McLane said.

Those missile expenditures have cost the Navy hundreds of millions of dollars. SM-2 missiles are priced at about \$2.1 million apiece while the SM-6 missiles cost about \$3.9 million each. SM-3 missiles range from \$9.6 million to \$27.9 million, according to Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance data.

McLane acknowledged the expense, saying that modest threats increasingly were being addressed with lower-cost alternatives such as guns, electronic countermeasures and aircraft.

But commanders shouldn't be considering the cost of a weapon when responding to a threat, McLane said, speaking separately during a “status of the forces” address at the convention.

The Navy has sent 26 vessels into the Red Sea and nearby waters since November 2023, including the aircraft carriers USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS Harry S. Truman, to protect ships.

Since Nov. 19, 2023, there have been



ZACHARY ELMORE/U.S. Navy

USS Dwight D. Eisenhower conducts flights in the Red Sea on Jan. 12 in response to Houthi militant attacks.

at least 111 reported attacks, attempted attacks, hijackings and suspicious behavior incidents involving ships in the Red Sea.

Two vessels have been sunk, four mariners have been killed and two others were severely injured in attacks, according to Joint Maritime Information Center data. There have been no injuries or damage to Navy sailors or ships from Houthi actions.

But in an apparent “friendly fire” incident, the cruiser USS Gettysburg shot down an F/A-18 Super Hornet on Dec. 22 as the fighter jet was responding to a Houthi drone and missile

attack on U.S. forces in the Red Sea. Both aviators aboard were rescued, with one suffering minor injuries.

Houthi tactics have evolved from the use of inexpensive drones and cruise missiles shot in irregular intervals to a “marked escalation in the scale and complexity of enemy techniques and capabilities,” McLane said.

Those advanced techniques include the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles and roving, one-way aerial attack drones in preassigned three-dimensional target areas, also known as kill boxes, he said.

That weapons engagement zone has taught sailors valuable lessons in the use of drones and directed energy weapons, such as high-energy lasers, McLane said.

“We’ve sped up our own learning and teaching so that our deploying ships are always prepared with the latest (tactics, techniques and procedures) before they go over the horizon,” he said.

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MILITARY

Guam move 'puts us going the wrong way'

Marine Corps commandant says island too far away to deter Chinese aggression

By BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

The commandant of the Marine Corps warned that a plan to move thousands of troops from Okinawa to Guam would position forces too far away to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, according to media reports.

Gen. Eric Smith, at a Defense Writers Group meeting recently in Washington, D.C., said the plan "puts us going the wrong way," according to reports from news websites military.com and Task & Purpose.

"Guam puts us on the other side of the International Date Line, but it puts us a long way from the crisis theater, from the priority theater," Smith said, according to the reports.

"Every time you give China a foot, they take a mile. They only understand one thing, which is a credible deterrent force. And that credible deterrent force

has to be present to win, which — to me — means being [in] the first island chain," he said, according to military.com.



Smith

The chain includes the Kuril Islands north of Hokkaido; Japan itself; the Ryukyu Islands, which include Okinawa; Taiwan; and the Philippines.

A full transcript of Smith's remarks was not available. However, U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters spokeswoman Capt. Brenda McCarthy confirmed the accuracy of Smith's comments in an email.

More than 4,000 Marines are expected to move from Okinawa under the Defense Policy Review Initiative, a 2012 agreement between the U.S. and Japan to reduce the military presence

on Okinawa, which hosts nearly 30,000 of the 55,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan.

About 100 logistics support troops from III Marine Expeditionary Force began moving from Okinawa to Guam last year, according to a Dec. 14 joint statement by the Marine Corps and Japan's Ministry of Defense.

Camp Blaz on Guam is expected to house 1,300 members of III MEF and another 3,700 Marines as a rotational force. The base is still under construction.

Smith told reporters that he is not sure the plan "is in the best strategic interest of America."

"We're committed to coming down to about 10,000 on Okinawa and getting ourselves to Guam," he said, according to military.com. "But Guam is a challenge. I mean, Apra Harbor [at Naval Base Guam] still has to be refurbished;

[it] has to be redone to allow for big decks to get in there."

The service "supports the tenets outlined in the DPRI agreement and the plan for the movement of units from Japan to Guam or Hawaii starting in 2024," McCarthy wrote in a separate email. "The Marine Corps will continue to explore options for the best location for the future force in the region."

The Pentagon identified China as an aggressive presence in the East and South China seas and a global "pacing challenge" in its 2022 National Defense Strategy.

The Marines' Force Design plan calls for the service to better defend the small islands east of Taiwan and to counter China.

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No beards: 'We're Marines, and we're different'

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Gen. Eric Smith, the Marine Corps commandant, said Marines are different, even when it comes to beards.

Smith told reporters that the service would not make any changes to its regulations that would allow Marines to grow beards.

"We're Marines, and we're different. We don't have beards," he said during a Defense Writers Group discussion. "The Marine Corps has a brand, and we're making our recruiting mission. We've always made our recruiting mission, and what we don't want to do is tinker with the ethos of the Marine Corps — you joined us, we didn't join you. You knew that coming in. You signed up. We don't have beards, and you knew that coming in."

Some Marines can grow a beard through a waiver process for pseudofolliculitis barbae, which causes painful razor bumps and disproportionately affects Black men.

"That's a medical waiver, not a fashion waiver," Smith said. "It's not a 'Well, I decided I wanted to.'"



NICHOLAS PILCH/Defense Logistics Agency

Marine Corps Cpl. Jeremy Rojas shaves before a howitzer live-fire event at Fort Barfoot, Va., in October.

All military services have faced growing legal and internal pressure to relax grooming standards as debates on social media and in various other forums highlight the struggle to balance tradition and uniformity with individual rights. Military officials have argued facial hair could prevent a perfect seal of a gas mask.

"When I retire, I'm going to grow one," Smith added. "I won't have to

deal with a ... mask."

In December 2022, a federal appeals court ruled three Sikh men should be allowed to go through Marine Corps recruit training with their turbans and beards intact. The panel ruled the Marine Corps had not proved that allowing the recruits to keep their beards and turbans for religious reasons would threaten cohesion and uniformity.

Currently, airmen are not required to shave only if they have a religious exemption or a medical waiver for conditions such as pseudofolliculitis barbae.

In the latest National Defense Authorization Act, the annual bill that sets policy and spending priorities, Congress wants the Air Force to examine the pros and cons of allowing airmen to grow beards, with a prospective April 1 deadline for service leaders to deliver findings to lawmakers.

The House Armed Services Committee in May approved an amendment requiring the Navy to brief committee members on a 2023 study by the Naval Health Research Center on the effect of beards on gas mask seals, with the briefing due by March 1.

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

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MILITARY



JOAQUIN CARLOS DELA TORRE/U.S. Marine Corps

Service members at Fort Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., rehearse Jan. 10 for the presidential inauguration. The Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation found that troops are paid better than most of their civilian counterparts.

Report: Military pay in line with private sector

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

U.S. service members earn more in money and benefits than most civilians in similar demographics, the Defense Department said this month following the release of a military pay review done every four years.

No major changes to the military's compensation system were called for in the report, officially titled the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation.

"Our retention is really high, so I'm thinking that the longer members serve, the more fully they understand the value of the total compensation package," a defense official said recently.

The assessment considered salaries and benefits such as housing and subsistence allowances.

Junior enlisted troops fared especially well when compared with Americans of similar career experience and education levels, ranking in the 93rd percentile. Most officers, meanwhile, were in the 75th percentile for financial compensation, the study found.

The study didn't account for a salary bump passed by Congress in December that will give junior enlisted troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other service members a 4.5% increase in 2025.

Although DOD compensation is competitive with the civilian labor market, there are some areas for improvement, another senior defense official told re-

porters this month.

"This may ultimately require us to consider policy and programmatic changes to compensation as well as non-monetary programs to ensure successful recruitment, retention and readiness of the force moving forward," the official said.

The report looked at the effect of dual-income households on military retention and how issues such as permanent change of station moves and child care access factored into the life decisions of armed forces personnel.

For military spouses, frequent moves pose challenges to finding employment and advancing their own careers. The circumstances can be a cause for service members to end their military careers.

Offering greater access to child care was one of the improvements the report suggested that the Pentagon make.

The report also recommended that DOD reconsider its current target of paying service members at the 70th percentile of comparable civilian jobs and boost the figure to the 75th percentile.

The military needs to do a better job communicating with service members and recruits about compensation packages and benefits that often get overlooked, such as free dental and health care, the report said.

Defense officials said they would begin implementing the report's various recommendations.

Austin found at fault for diagnosis failures

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is responsible for the Pentagon neglecting to tell Congress and the White House that the retired Army general was incapacitated last year while on the job due to treatment for prostate cancer as his office is required to do, the agency's watchdog concluded in a report released this month.

Austin came under scrutiny last year for failing to disclose his cancer and complications that led to an extended hospital stay. A report issued by the Defense Department's inspector general faults Austin for communication failures in which his hospitalization was kept secret for days, including from President Joe Biden.



Austin

"I wish [Secretary Austin] were a normal person, but he's the [defense secretary]. We have a big institutional responsibility. He can't just go totally dark on his staff. ... Please pass to him that we can't keep his hospitalization a secret forever. It's kind of big deal for him to be in the [surgical intensive care unit]. And I'm worried sick," then-chief of staff Kelly Magsamen wrote in texts to Austin's junior military assistant.

Austin was first diagnosed with cancer in December 2023, with his hospital stay stretching into January. By February, the defense secretary took responsibility for secrecy about his illness.

"I want to be crystal clear; we did not handle this right. I did not handle this right," Austin told reporters at the Pentagon in February. "I should have told the president about my cancer diagnosis. I should have told my team and the American people, and I take full responsibility."

The inspector general's yearlong investigation found Austin's strong desire for privacy likely influenced his staff in deciding not to prod further into his condition. To date, no one on Austin's staff has been singled out as responsible for the failure.

The IG report points to Austin for not informing Congress or the White House

of his initial treatment in December 2023 for prostate cancer and not telling his staff or the White House of his worsening complications on Jan. 1, 2024, which led him to be taken by ambulance to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

The report states when Austin went for the initial medical procedure in December 2023, he kept information private from Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks; Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and nearly all his staff.

When Austin had to be transported by ambulance to Walter Reed on New Year's Day, the report states the evidence based on contemporaneous statements and actions of those involved indicates Austin requested the ambulance not use lights and sirens and told his personal security officer, "We're not notifying anybody."

On Jan. 2, Austin transferred some of his more pressing responsibilities to Hicks.

The report states neither Austin nor Hicks "met the requirement to immediately notify the comptroller general and Congress of the vacancy" of the secretary's office from Jan. 2 to Jan. 5.

At the time, Austin said he was experiencing fever, chills and shallow breathing on that day, and doctors decided to move him to the intensive care unit for several days of close monitoring.

Yet Biden did not learn of Austin's prostate cancer until Jan. 9. That same day, the White House ordered all Cabinet members and secretaries must immediately notify the administration if at any time they cannot perform their duties.

The inspector general's investigation into Austin's handling of his illness and hospitalization took a year to complete and was released just days before Austin was set to leave office.

Two senior defense officials, who spoke to reporters on the condition of anonymity, made a point to emphasize there was no cover-up by anyone in the department, and the IG report states there was no break in command at any time and the secretary was not incapacitated and unable to carry out his duties.

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MILITARY

Overhaul of military moves draws skepticism

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department's effort to streamline its global system of shipping service members' household goods is meeting resistance from the moving industry and a federal lawsuit challenging the bidding process for a multibillion-dollar contract.

The system overhaul would consolidate oversight and management to a single contractor that oversees and manages all domestic and international relocations for the military, Coast Guard and federal employees.

Single oversight is intended to increase customer satisfaction and tamp down costs, but many in the moving industry have balked. They compare the contract terms unfavorably to the current system.

In November 2021, U.S. Transportation Command awarded a \$20 billion contract to Houston-based HomeSafe Alliance LLC to handle the work being done by more than 900 commercial entities for roughly 300,000 moves a year.

More than three years later, the rollout of the so-called Global Household Goods Contract has made little headway, with growing resistance by much of the industry.

As of Jan. 13, HomeSafe had completed a meager 607 household goods deliveries, according to an email from the U.S. Transportation Command in response to a written query.

"Initially, I think industry was kind of split on whether GHC was going to be a good thing or a bad thing," Katie McMichael, executive director of Movers for America, a coalition pushing back on GHC's implementation, said in a phone interview Jan. 8.

"But I think what we've seen with the rollout of GHC is there have been a lot of areas that really were not well thought out," she said.

'Damaged goods'

The effort to streamline moves was sparked by a spate of complaints in 2018 by service members over late arrival of shipments, damaged goods and a lack of clarity on whom to blame for the failures.

Problems arising under the GHC model would rest on the shoulders of the sole entity overseeing relocations: HomeSafe Alliance.



DANIEL MAYBERRY/U.S. Navy

Household goods inspector Faata Leafa watches a mover with Aloha International pack up a home in Honolulu on May 5, 2020.

Under GHC, HomeSafe, a joint venture between Tier One Relocation and KBR, will eventually replace the roughly 900 forwarding agents who have until now handled military moves.

Forwarding agents — sometimes called transportation service providers — orchestrate domestic and international moves by hiring movers, truckers, ocean shippers and warehousing. In some cases, forwarding agents own subsidiaries to do that work.

"They're creating something that's never existed," said Anthony Shipp, president and CEO of Hawaii-based M. Dyer Global, which is among those 900 forwarding companies.

If such an all-encompassing agent could have made a go of it, "it would already exist," Shipp, who opposes GHC, said during a Jan. 7 phone interview.

"To this day, there's no player in the market that would do something like that," he said.

GHC will put his company's forwarding operations, which account for about 25% of its revenue, "completely out of business," Shipp said.

"So that's one reason why we're opposed," he said.

The GHC contract for the use of his company's trucks and warehouse space comes with fixed rates "not fav-

orable to us" and "an enormous amount of liability that doesn't exist in the current program," Shipp said.

"So, when you kind of put all that together, it just doesn't make business sense for us to do it," he said. "No mover really wants to sign up for that."

'Proprietary' rate info

The Movers for America alliance primarily objects to the payment rates offered under the GHC contract and to complications arising from the federal Service Contract Act that could force moving companies to treat independent truckers as employees.

U.S. Transportation Command is leaving the issue of compensation to HomeSafe.

"Regarding rates, as the prime contractor for GHC, HomeSafe is responsible for building a sub-contractor network to fulfill contract terms to include sub-contractor compensation," the command wrote in its email.

"It is important to note, specific information on rates is contract proprietary between HomeSafe and the providers in their network," the email states.

As to the issue of independent contractors and truckers, little wiggle room exists because GHC is a Federal Acquisition Regulation-based contract, according to the command's email.

To comply with that regulation, HomeSafe and its subcontractors must pay at least minimum wage and furnish fringe benefits to workers, the email said.

McMichael said the industry has received "no guidance" from the Transportation Command, the Department of Labor or HomeSafe on how this impacts workers.

The bottom line for the alliance is that the entire GHC overhaul is ultimately unnecessary because the current system is working smoothly.

"The current program is seeing record high satisfaction rates," she said. "So, at this point, we really don't support GHC moving forward because it's over budget and behind in the timeline. It seems like a massive waste of taxpayers' money."

Target missed

In a November 2022 news release, the Transportation Command had projected that by the peak 2024 moving season "all domestic and international household goods and unaccompanied baggage shipments" would move under GHC.

After almost entirely missing that target, the command's current projections are modest and "subject to change."

"The DOD is planning to activate all installations in the continental U.S. by spring 2025," the command wrote in its email. "International shipments under GHC are expected to begin no earlier than September 2025."

A federal lawsuit filed by several moving companies late last year could further slow or even derail GHC.

The Suddath Cos., a major player in military relocations based in Jacksonville, Fla., filed suit Nov. 22 in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims alleging that Transportation Command violated the bidding process for GHC by changing terms after it was awarded.

Two additional companies joined the suit.

The lawsuit alleges that HomeSafe has been given almost four times as long to implement the program as was set out in the bid solicitation and provided an additional \$60 million to fund implementation.

MILITARY

DOD ends ban on horizontal flag display

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

American service members can once again display the U.S. flag horizontally at sporting events and other official ceremonies, the Pentagon said in a memo that reverses restrictions enacted two years ago.

Defense Department personnel may now show the flag, “regardless of its size or position, at eligible public sporting and other community events, provided that such displays are done in a respectful manner,” a recently issued DOD memo said.

The updated guidelines follow changes to the U.S. Flag Code under the latest National Defense Authorization Act. The purpose of the code is to provide guidance on properly displaying the flag, including details regarding size, placement and handling.

Under the old rules outlined on Feb. 10, 2023, uniformed service members were barred from participating directly in the “unfurling, holding, and/or carrying of giant horizontal U.S. flags.”

Military jump teams also were formerly prevented from incorporating the U.S. flag in their demonstrations if it couldn’t “be caught reliably and handled respectfully by ground personnel.”

It remains against DOD rules for flags to land on the ground during parachute demonstrations in which



RYAN CRANE/U.S. Air Force

Airmen present a giant American flag at Busch Stadium in St. Louis. Service members can once again unfurl the U.S. flag horizontally at sporting events and ceremonies, undoing its ban from nearly two years earlier.

they are attached to the jumper, according to the memo, signed by Chris Meagher, assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs.

The rules must be followed by DOD personnel handling the flag at events in the U.S. and abroad. Service members traditionally unfurl the flag at the Super Bowl and other major American sporting events.

They have also been used in flag displays at National Football League and Major League Baseball games in foreign countries.

The Flag Code is referenced in DOD regulations. According to the code, the Stars and Stripes should never touch anything beneath it, including the ground, floor, water or merchandise.

An exception is made for caskets draped in the flag during funeral honors so long as it isn’t lowered into the grave or allowed to touch the ground.

While the revisions maintain that the flag usually should not be carried flat, they allow for exceptions that “may be necessary in limited circumstances.” That stipulation was absent



MICHAEL SCHWENK/U.S. Army National Guard

The U.S. Navy parachute demonstration team descends into MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., in 2022.

in the 2023 DOD guidance.

Pentagon officials have been concerned with flag protocol in recent years and addressed troops on the issue in earlier memos.

In 2020, DOD issued a policy that banned the display of unauthorized flags on military installations, buildings and vehicles. It effectively prohibited Confederate flags and other controversial banners without spelling out which flags were off-limits.

In the wake of the 2023 memo that was overturned this month, Meagher encouraged bases “to work with sponsors of community events to develop other ways to showcase the patriotism and capabilities of our military.”

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DOD expands Guardsmen’s flex spending eligibility

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

National Guard troops on full-time active duty are now eligible to enroll in a tax-advantaged, health care flexible spending account, according to a spokesperson for the Department of Defense.

Guard members on Title 32 duty became eligible for the health care accounts on Nov. 24 for the 2025 plan, spokesperson Joshua Wick wrote in an email this month to Stars and Stripes.

“A Health Care Flexible Spending Account is an optional benefit that enables service members to set aside up to \$3,300 in pre-tax earnings to pay for health expenses such as co-pays and cost shares, vision, dental, and

drug store items,” he said.

Title 32 orders are issued by the states, typically in the event of natural disasters, such as the approximately 2,500 California National Guard members called up this month to help fight wildfires in the Los Angeles area. Title 10 orders are federal orders calling Guard troops to duty for national defense.

The recent update also includes all active-duty members of the U.S. Coast Guard, Coast Guard reservists on active duty for more than 180 days and Reserve component managers, Coast Guard Headquarters spokesperson Lt. Krystal Wolfe told Stars and Stripes by email Jan. 9.

“U.S. Coast Guard Reserve Mem-

bers not on active-duty orders for more than 180 days are not eligible,” Wolfe said.

Active-duty service members along with Guard and Reserve members on Title 10 orders are also eligible to participate in the Health Care Flexible Spending Account and Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account programs, according to fsafeds.gov website.

“Reserve members not performing [Active Guard Reserve] duty are not eligible for either program,” Wick said.

The fsafeds.gov website has been updated to include the recent changes of eligibility for Title 32 and Coast Guard members for the 2025 enrollment season.

A Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account is also a pre-tax benefit account used to pay for eligible dependent care services, such as preschool, summer day camp, before or after school programs and child or adult day care, according to fsafeds.gov website.

Uniformed service members may enroll in the health care flexible spending account during a special period March 3 to 31.

Afterward, first-year service members may enroll during the normal Federal Benefits Open Season that occurs mid-November to mid-December, Wick said.

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MILITARY

Del Toro names 19 future Navy ships

New carriers to be named for Clinton, George W. Bush

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro in recent days has named more than a dozen future ships, including aircraft carriers and submarines, to culminate his time leading the sea service.

A total of 19 Navy ships have been named by Del Toro in his last two weeks in office. The ships span two aircraft carriers, four submarines, five destroyers, two fleet replenishment oilers, a frigate, an amphibious ship, an expeditionary medical ship, two ocean surveillance ships and a first-in-class amphibious ship.

The Navy's next two Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers will honor former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The future USS William J. Clinton honors the 42nd president who served two terms from 1993 to 2001. The future USS George W. Bush honors the 43rd president who also served two terms, from 2001 to 2009. The names follow the Navy tradition of naming aircraft carriers after U.S. presidents.

Then-President Joe Biden announced the naming of the ships Jan. 13.

The latest slew of ships to be named included the future USS McClung, the first ship in the new McClung-class of medium landing ships. The Navy's Medium Landing Ship program, previously called the Light Amphibious Warship program, seeks to purchase and build 18 to 35 new amphibious ships to support Marine Corps operations. The ships are meant to transport troops and equipment from ship to shore. The first-in-class ship honors Maj. Megan McClung, a Marine Corps public affairs officer who was killed in action while serving in Iraq. This will be the first Navy vessel to bear her name.

"[The ship] will be an asset to the Marine Corps' amphibious capabilities, designed to greatly enhance operational flexibility and combat readi-



EJ HERSOM/Defense.gov

Sailors practice a commissioning ceremony for the Arleigh Burke-class Flight III guided-missile destroyer USS Jack H. Lucas in Tampa, Fla., in 2023.

ness," Del Toro said.

Also announced Jan. 16 were the future USNS Joshua L. Goldberg and USNS Thomas D. Parham Jr. — two future John Lewis-class fleet replenishment oilers. The oilers will supply fuel and dry cargo to deployed warships while at sea.

The day before Del Toro announced the names of three Flight III Arleigh Burke-class, guided-missile destroyers and one Constellation-class, guided-missile frigate. Those warships are future destroyers USS Ray Mabus, USS Kyle Carpenter, and USS Robert R. Ingram and future frigate USS Everett Alvarez Jr.

The three destroyers honor former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, and Medal of Honor recipients Lance Cpl. Kyle Carpenter and Navy Corpsman Robert Ingram.

The destroyers join two others named earlier in the month — the future USS Robert Kerrey and USS Intrepid. Arleigh Burke-class destroyers incorporate stealth techniques, allowing these ships to conduct a variety of operations with a wide range of air, surface and underwater warfighting abilities.

Future frigate USS Everett Alvarez Jr. pays tribute to the first American aviator shot down over Vietnam and

the longest-held prisoner of war in North Vietnam, according to the Navy History and Heritage Command. The constellation-class, guided-missile frigate represents the Navy's next-generation small surface combat vessel. This ship class is designed to be a multi-mission warship capable of operations in deep water or near shore.

"Everywhere that these ships sail it will represent the legacies of these four leaders and heroes who placed country over self and service above all else," Del Toro said Jan. 15 at the Naval Surface Force National Symposium in Arlington, Va.

Also on Jan. 13, the names of four future submarines were announced in a video message to the Navy's submarine community.

"Today's submarine force is the most capable force in the world and in the history of U.S. Navy," Del Toro said. "It is my honor and privilege to announce the names of the future submarines which will protect us from deep below the ocean's waves."

The next Columbia-class submarine will be the USS Groton, named for the Connecticut town considered to be the submarine capital of the world because it is where Navy submarines are built. The Columbia-class submarine is a new class of nuclear subs designed to

replace the Navy's Ohio-class submarines. They serve as a launch platform for ballistic missiles. The Groton will be the third Columbia submarine.

Additionally, three Virginia-class submarines were named the future USS Potomac, USS Norfolk and USS Brooklyn. Virginia-class submarines are attack warships designed to seek and destroy enemy submarines and surface ships, conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and engage in mine warfare. The ships are armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles and carry special operation forces that can deploy from the submarine.

Also this month, Del Toro named a future San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock USS Travis Manion, along with two T-AGOS — the first two ships in the newly named Explorer class of ocean surveillance ships — the future USNS Don Walsh and the future USNS Victor Vescovo. Operated by the Military Sea Lift Command, the Explorer-class ships are designed to play a role in the Navy's anti-submarine warfare operations.

The amphibious ship, which embarks Marines and their equipment, honors a Marine who was ambushed while searching a suspected insurgent house in Iraq's Anbar province. As he led a counterattack, Manion was fatally wounded by a sniper while aiding his fellow Marines. He deliberately exposed himself to heavy enemy fire to draw fire away from other wounded Marines. For his actions, he received the Silver Star and the Bronze Star with valor.

Del Toro also named a future Bethesda-class expeditionary medical ship USNS Portsmouth during a ship naming ceremony at the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Va. Bethesda-class expeditionary medical ships are designed to optimize hospital-level medical care in support of maritime operations.

Del Toro was sworn in as the Navy's top civilian leader in 2021 under Biden's administration.

President Donald Trump has tapped businessman and mega donor John Phelan as his pick for the next Navy secretary.

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MILITARY

Soldiers' nicotine pouch use higher than US average

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Soldiers at the largest military base in the U.S. were found to be eight times likelier to use nicotine pouches than the average American adult, according to a new survey.

University of Virginia researchers polled roughly 2,000 soldiers at Fort Liberty, N.C., and released a statement on the findings last week.

Nearly 24% of the Fort Liberty soldiers surveyed said they had used nicotine pouches in the previous 30 days, compared with about 3% of all American adults who reported ever using the pouches in a 2022 University of Nebraska survey.

"We are currently working on addressing these high rates of nicotine pouches by developing tailored interventions for military personnel,"

Melissa Little, director of the Center for Nicotine and Tobacco Research at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, said in the statement.

"Given everything that military personnel sacrifice to serve our country, providing them with the tools to lead the healthiest lives possible is the best way we can give back."

The addictive microfiber sachets filled with flavored nicotine powder are billed by manufacturers as a safer alternative to cigarettes and vaping, as they aren't inhaled into the lungs.

However, they have been linked by medical experts at the University of Virginia and other institutions to a range of ailments, including cardiovascular risks, lung and stomach problems and narrowing arteries, which can lead to heart attacks.

The study analyzed anonymous



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

A soldier buys Zyn nicotine pouches at an Army and Air Force Exchange Service store this month in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

responses from 1,957 soldiers surveyed in 2022 and 2023. Nicotine pouch use grew in popularity during the survey period, with 24.7% of soldiers queried in 2023 reported having used them, compared with 20.2% in 2022.

Zyn, the most popular brand of nicotine pouches in the U.S., was introduced in 2014 but experienced a sales boom in 2023. Some 350 million tubs of the product were sold that year, an increase of 62% from the previous year, CNN reported.

In the Fort Liberty survey, 27% of those between the ages of 17 to 24 used the pouches, according to researchers.

About 15% of soldiers age 30 and above used them.

"Military personnel historically use tobacco and nicotine products at much higher rates than their civilian counterparts," Little said.

With approximately 200,000 American service members leaving the military each year, more research is needed to develop ways to reduce nicotine and tobacco consumption as they return to civilian life, the study authors said.

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Marine Corps seeks guidance on efforts to curb suicide

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is seeking feedback from active-duty troops about its programs to remove or secure the

objects that facilitate suicide.

The service released a survey on Jan. 13 seeking Marines' comments on currently available "lethal means safety" programs and "preferences for

safety devices and storage locations," according to a Marine Corps administration message issued that day.

Suicide remains a stubborn issue for the U.S. military. Last year, 62 Marines were among 363 active-duty service members who took their own lives, according to the Defense Suicide Prevention Office.

The Pentagon in November reported an active-duty suicide rate in 2023 of 28 suicide deaths for every 100,000 service members. That was a 12% increase over the previous year.

"Lethal means safety" refers to programs designed to remove access to objects that can be used to inflict self-harm, such as firearms, sharp objects, other weapons or medication, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Suicide Prevention Office.

The voluntary survey is open to all

active-duty Marines and Marines on active-duty operational support orders, U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters' Manpower and Reserve Affairs spokesperson Maj. Melissa Spencer told Stars and Stripes by email.

The survey, which closes Jan. 31, is part of a larger effort by the Suicide Prevention Office to assess the effectiveness of its outreach and education on suicide prevention and lethal means safety, Spencer said.

"Results from this study will inform policies, programs, and practices to improve lethal means safety practices for Marines and inform prevention efforts," Spencer said.

The survey should take less than 15 minutes and is anonymous, according to the announcement.

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