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## Higher goal

After improved results, Army aims to recruit more soldiers in the coming year

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Drill sergeant Sgt. 1st Class Gary Hauke welcomes a new class of infantry recruits to Fort Moore, Ga.

STEPHANIE SNYDER/U.S. Army

## COVER STORY

# Army aims for 61,000 recruits this year

After barely meeting recruiting goal last year, service sets ambitious objective

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — After barely meeting its recruiting goal last year, the Army announced the service is aiming to recruit 61,000 new soldiers in the upcoming year.

“This goal is ambitious, but we believe it is achievable,” Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said recently at the Association of the U.S. Army’s annual conference.

The service set a recruiting goal of 55,000 for fiscal year 2024, narrowly surpassing it Sept. 30 with 55,300 new active-duty soldiers.

The Army set a recruiting goal in 2023 of 65,000 and slashed it after coming up short by about 10,000 soldiers.

The turnaround follows a yearslong enlistment funk. Each military service employed various strategies, programs and enticements to overcome recruiting woes.

In recent years the problems were exacerbated by several issues, including in-person recruiting restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic, a low unemployment rate and stiff competition from the private sector.

Wormuth and Gen. Randy George, the Army chief of staff, unveiled plans last October to reorganize its recruiting force under a single three-star commander and create professional job classifications for enlisted soldiers and warrant officers who specialize in recruiting.

In August, the service sent 25 non-commissioned officers to work with civilian organizations for four months to learn innovations in recruiting to help improve the service’s new training and lay the groundwork for new strategies in attracting more recruits across the country. For years, the Army has involuntarily selected soldiers to work temporarily in recruiting as part of career development.

Five companies — Amazon, Deloitte,



AIDEN GRIFFITTS/U.S. Army Reserve

Army soldiers with the Wichita Recruiting Company host a recruitment booth at last year’s Kansas State Fairgrounds.

**“This goal is ambitious, but we believe it is achievable.”**

**Army Secretary Christine Wormuth**

Wells Fargo, the University of Louisville and Boot Camp Digital — will host the soldiers through December as part of a years-long process to overhaul how the Army finds and enlists new soldiers.

Along with the new recruiting goal, Wormuth said the Army’s Delayed

Entry Program goal for next year is 10,000, twice the number it was for fiscal 2024. The delayed entry program allows enlistees to sign up but leave for initial training later, often so that they can complete high school or college.

“Our exceptional Army recruiters secured over 11,000 commitments into the DEP, setting us up for another strong recruiting year in FY25,” Wormuth said.

The service has found success with its Future Soldier Prep Course, a program that gives lower-performing recruits fitness and academic instruction to help them meet military standards and go on to basic training. More than 28,000 young people have gradu-

ated from the course with a success rate of more than 90%, Brig. Gen. Jennifer Walkawicz, who leads operations for the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command, said in September.

This year, more than 13,000 recruits — nearly 24% of the 55,000 — came through the program that started two years ago.

“For young Americans who had the desire to join the Army but not the test scores, we created the Future Soldier Prep Course to give them a path to meet our standards. These efforts paid off,” Wormuth said.

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## MILITARY

# US general: Beijing on 'insidious' path

Remarks come after Chinese ships, aircraft swarm around Taiwan

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. Army Pacific's commander took the measure of China's military during a virtual fireside chat a day after Chinese ships and aircraft swarmed around Taiwan for a daylong military exercise.

China recently sent 153 warplanes, a one-day record, across the Taiwan Strait median, the unofficial dividing line between the island and mainland China, during exercise Joint Sword 2024B.

The aircraft carrier Liaoning and another two dozen ships joined the drills, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense said.

The training happened four days after Taiwan marked National Day, its founding holiday, and a speech by Taiwan President Lai Ching-te. China launched a similar, two-day exercise, Joint Sword 2024A, in May after Lai's inauguration.



Flynn



TAIWAN COAST GUARD/AP

Taiwan coast guard members track a Chinese coast guard boat as it passed near the coast of Matsu islands earlier this month.

These exercises result from Beijing's decadelong effort to modernize and reorganize its military, which bodes ill for the Indo-Pacific, according to Gen. Charles Flynn, commander of U.S. Army Pacific.

"The incremental path that they've been on, the insidious nature of that path, in other words, the lawfare, corruption, the behavior and some of the ways forces are operating out there — that is concerning," he said during a talk for the Center for a New American

Security, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

After the drill, a spokesman for China's Office of Taiwan Affairs reiterated that force remains an option for bringing Taiwan into a union with the mainland. It regards Taiwan as a breakaway province that must be returned to the fold.

"We are willing to strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with the utmost sincerity and endeavor," spokesman Chen Binhua told Reuters.

"But we will never commit ourselves to renouncing the use of force."

The exercise was punishment for Taiwan because Lai had colluded with foreign powers, damaged Taiwan-China relations, threatened stability in the region and "stubbornly adhered to the position of Taiwan independence," China's Taiwan affairs office said in a statement.

As it strengthens, China has also taken increasingly aggressive actions against neighboring countries, including territorial disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea and frequent drills around Taiwan.

Broadening his remarks, Flynn said Chinese intimidation "in many ways is helping us" as the U.S. builds a "security architecture" in the region.

"I do think that U.S. leadership in that area carries a great weight," he said. "There is a — in the neighborhood there — an economic relationship of necessity that goes on with China. It's undeniable."

But the U.S. is the "security partner of choice" among those same countries, Flynn said. "We need to continue to invest and work on that every single day because it's vitally important to the region."

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## General: Russian chaos raises risk of an escalation

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Army's top general in Europe warned recently that Russian operatives making mischief in NATO territory have ratcheted up the risk of military escalation with Moscow.

"The miscalculation piece is as high as it's ever been," U.S. Army Europe and Africa's Gen. Darryl Williams said.

Williams, speaking at the Association of the U.S. Army's annual conference in Washington, said he couldn't go into much detail about the situation. However, he described the operatives as non-traditional and not "classically trained."

Since Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine, U.S. military officials have raised concerns about the lack of systems in

place during the Cold War that helped Washington and Moscow read each other's signals and avoid nuclear conflict.



Williams

Williams' assertion suggests Russian operatives lack the grasp of allied red lines that their Soviet predecessors had.

"We could tumble into this thing because of the people that are currently snooping around Europe and causing mischief in all of our backyards," Williams said.

Williams said allies need to prepare for the long-term when it comes to countering the threat posed by Russia, which despite heavy losses in Ukraine

continues to reconstitute its forces, ramp up defense spending and crank out munitions with an industrial base on a wartime footing.

Beyond Ukraine's borders, there are growing concerns about Russian activity rippling into NATO member nations.

German officials highlighted a previously undisclosed incident that occurred in July in the eastern city of Leipzig, where a package caught fire at a DHL logistics center before being loaded onto a cargo plane. The Germans said the action was suspected Russian sabotage.

There have been other causes for alarm.

"We are seeing sabotage across Europe," said Jack Watling, a ground warfare expert with the Royal United

Services Institute in London, who joined Williams on a panel discussion about NATO security matters.

Numerous acts of arson, the attempted assassination of an industrial leader in Europe and various information operations aimed at destabilizing allied political systems are among the recent actions carried out by Russia on NATO turf, he said.

"And we have had Russian weapons fly through NATO airspace on their route to Ukraine multiple times," Watling said, without elaborating. "So, this is very real, and it could escalate ... which means that we need to be ready to fight tonight."

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## MILITARY

# Volunteers teaching N. Korean defectors

## Free English classes a project founded by senior at Humphreys

By DAVID CHOI  
Stars and Stripes

PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — A group of North Korean defectors were puzzled by rows of blue squares projected onto a screen during a recent English class in this city 40 miles south of Seoul.

“What is this?” one of the eight defector-students asked of the “Jeopardy”-style game designed to quiz them on their vocabulary.

Their American instructor, Jenna Reynolds, 17, of nearby Camp Humphreys, took a few minutes to explain the rules to her befuddled students, who’d never heard of the classic American gameshow.

“Just choose a square,” she told the North Koreans, some of whom were still confused about the rules.

Known as Preparing Refugees in English Project, the free English classes for North Korean defectors were established last year by Reynolds, a senior at Humphreys High School and the daughter of a retired soldier living on base.

Volunteers from Camp Humphreys teach the two- to three-hour classes once per week to up to 15 defectors at the YMCA in Pyeongtaek. Many of the students cite their lackluster proficiency in English as a barrier in school or finding work, Reynolds said.

“Some of the students want to learn how to have basic conversations,” she told Stars and Stripes at the center last month. Others want to learn about the United States because they were forcibly taught in North Korea to view Americans as “the enemy.”

Around 34,100 North Koreans have defected to the South since 1998, the South’s Ministry of Unification reported in June. More than 100 North Koreans have crossed the inter-Korean border so far this year, 90% of them women, the report said.

Pyeongtaek’s YMCA, also known as the Y, provides after-school programs and social services to roughly 1,200 defectors and their children living in and around the city that also hosts America’s largest overseas military



Jenna Reynolds, 17, of Camp Humphreys, teaches English to North Korean defectors at the YMCA in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, last month.

PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

**“I’m learning a lot here. My speech and accent are getting better, but I’m even more comfortable listening and understanding words in English now.”**

Sung

North Korea defector who has been living in the South for a decade

base, branch supervisor Heoh Yong-rim said last month in an interview at the center.

The Y is a “safe space for North Korean defectors,” and those attending the English classes also learn about American culture, Heoh said.

Reynolds teamed with the Y to organize a trip for defectors to tour Humphreys and join Fourth of July festivities inside the base this year.

Defectors interviewed for this report asked to be identified only by their surname due to safety concerns for themselves and family members still in North Korea.

Park, 27, defected in 2020 and has



A North Korean defector completes a worksheet during an English class.

been taking the English classes for two months in preparation for college.

“It’s been somewhat difficult living in South Korea because people use a lot of English here,” Park, who plans to study business administration next year, said at the Y. “The conversations haven’t always been smooth.”

North Korean defectors are given housing, counseling, employment and monetary support by the South Korean government. The majority, 79.3%, said they were satisfied with living in the South, according to a survey of 2,500 defectors in 2023 by the Korea Hana Foundation, a nonprofit founded by the Ministry of Unification.

But many defectors say they have difficulty adjusting to their new life. According to a yearlong survey released in December by the Seoul Institute, 69.4% of defectors living in Seoul said they have struggled to provide for

themselves.

Nearly 60% reported they could only afford monthly expenses of less than \$730, and 37% say they still receive some sort of government financial aid.

On Oct. 1, a North Korean defector living in Seoul stole a bus and attempted to cross into North Korea at a bridge border crossing. Apprehended by border guards and questioned by police, he said he had difficulty making a living in the South.

“I think it’s hard for them to get accustomed to South Korean culture,” Heoh said. “A lot of North Koreans do not want to portray themselves as North Koreans, but the accent and terminology sometimes comes out while speaking.”

Sung, a 57-year-old apartment management administrator who has been living in the South for a decade, said he attends the Y classes because “learning English is fun.”

He hopes to use his newfound knowledge to converse with foreigners in Pyeongtaek and visit the United States or Canada someday, he said at the Y.

“I’m learning a lot here,” he said. “My speech and accent are getting better, but I’m even more comfortable listening and understanding words in English now.”

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## MILITARY

# Report: Army cut fleet as need surged

## Watercraft unit had shrunk to 70 vessels

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Army trimmed its watercraft fleet by half over the past six years, even as demand for those vessels increased, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, according to a federal watchdog agency's recent report.

As of May, the Army's watercraft fleet had shrunk to 70 vessels from 134 in 2018, according to the report released by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

The Army's fleet moves supplies, equipment and personnel in deep ocean, shallow coastal waters, inland waterways and rivers.

The watercraft gap has left the Army far short of its mission-capability goal of 90% of equipment being ready and available to perform missions, according to the report. The fully mission capable rate for watercraft has steadily declined from 75% in 2020 to less than 40% this year.

The Army's watercraft fleet is a "key enabler" of the joint force, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, the Defense Department's priority theater," the report states.

"Within this region, China is recognized as the only country that poses a military, technological, and economic challenge to the United States and its regional partners and allies," the report states. "China has set a timeline for its military to be capable of taking Taiwan by 2027 and, according to DOD, recent



DANNY GONZALEZ/U.S. Marine Corps

**A container is loaded onto a U.S. Army landing craft at Camp Agnew, Casiguran, Philippines, in April 2023.**

events in the Taiwan Strait have some questioning the prospects of a near-term invasion."

Army watercraft vessels are stationed at two U.S. locations, Virginia and Hawaii, and two locations in Japan, Yokohama and Naha, Okinawa, the report states.

In the Pacific, the watercraft participate in exercises such as Talisman Saber in Australia and Balikatan in the Philippines.

Eight of the Army's vessels were involved in construction of a temporary pier off the coast of Gaza in support of humanitarian aid.

The challenges facing the Army's current watercraft fleet are wide-ranging, but central to the difficulty are the

repercussions of the Army's decision a few years ago to divest itself of watercraft.

In 2018, the commander of the Army Materiel Command recommended to Secretary of the Army Mark Esper that the service could save more than \$140 million each year by transferring its watercraft capabilities to other service branches or outside entities.

In May 2019, the Army moved to partially divest and inactivate part of the fleet, resulting in the sale of 64 vessels and the termination of funding for all Army Reserve Component vessels, the report states. Among the vessels purged from the fleet were 27 landing craft mechanized, 16 large and small tugs and

17 landing craft utility.

Some lawmakers objected to the draw down, and language in the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act prohibited further inactivation of Army watercraft until the Defense Department completed a review on the Army's ability to meet the requirements of the combatant commands.

The Army is working on a revised watercraft modernization strategy, expected to be completed early next year, which looks at watercraft needs from 2030 to 2040, but "it remains unclear whether it will include any mitigation plans to address the current challenges, risks, and gaps affecting the watercraft fleet," the report states.

This winter, the Army established the Watercraft Enterprise Governance Board to provide oversight and coordination of the service's world-wide watercraft activities.

The Army's 70 watercraft are evenly divided between U.S. Army Pacific and U.S. Army Forces Command, but most missions are in the Pacific.

Despite the vessel shortfall, the Army plans to increase the number of missions for watercraft from 37 in fiscal year 2023 to 46 in the fiscal year that began on Oct. 1. U.S. Army Pacific will conduct about 61% of the missions this year, the report states.

The GAO recommended that the Army, in consultation with the commanders of Indo-Pacific Command and Army Pacific, develop a plan to reduce risks due to gaps in watercraft capability and capacity in the near term.

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# Navy announces site for new museum, to open by 2030

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A new national museum for the U.S. Navy is planned for outside the historic Washington Navy Yard to give the public unfettered access to the sea service's history.

The museum will be built at Tingey Street and M Street near the Washington Nationals baseball stadium, the Navy announced in a recent ceremony at the new site.

The museum is meant to replace the

existing Navy National Museum located on base at the Navy Yard, which is largely off limits to the general public.

The Navy evaluated 18 cities and 42 sites as candidates for a new location of the national museum, according to Kristina Higgins, spokeswoman for the Naval History and Heritage Command. The Washington site beat out locations in San Diego, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and Norfolk, Va. Each city was evaluated for attendance, market diversity, operating gap, cost per visitor, fun-

draising potential and capital costs.

Estimates indicate the new National Museum of the U.S. Navy campus could attract more than 1.5 million visitors annually, Higgins said.

In May, the Navy signed a land-exchange agreement that paved the way for the location. The facility is planned to expand beyond a traditional museum to a campus layout that combines the museum, a high-tech conference center and retail space with dining options. The museum is intended to be a self-funded

tourist destination that aims to intrigue, inform and inspire generations of visitors, according to the Naval History and Heritage Command.

The construction of the museum is estimated to cost \$250 million. The museum was first announced in 2020. The groundbreaking is planned for October 2025 coinciding with the Navy's 250th birthday. It is projected to open by 2030.

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## MILITARY

# Army to roll out Master Combat Badge

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer also announced a redesigned PT uniform

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Soldiers will soon be able to show that they served in combat and excel in their job field by wearing a single badge on their uniform.

A new Master Combat Badge is being rolled out for combat veterans who also have earned skills-related honors, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer said.

The service currently awards Combat Infantryman Badges to infantry soldiers and Special Forces troops who served in active ground combat, and Expert Infantryman Badges to those who pass the rigorous test.

Equivalent badges are awarded to

experts in medical and non-infantry career fields.



Weimer

However, soldiers aren't allowed to wear their expert and combat badges together.

Speaking at the Association of the U.S. Army's annual conference in Washington, D.C., recently, Weimer announced that the

Army Senior Enlisted Council had voted unanimously to approve a more inclusive badge, AUSA said in a statement.

Further details weren't provided. However, the news website Task and

Purpose reported that the Army will introduce three versions: the Master Combat Infantryman Badge, the Master Combat Medical Badge and the Master Combat Action Badge.

They will look like existing combat badges, except the wreath depicted on them will be gold rather than silver, Task and Purpose reported.

A new badge for Army mariners and a mountain badge for Army Mountain Warfare School graduates have also been approved, according to AUSA.

Weimer also announced that the Army is redesigning its physical training uniform, as the present design "doesn't represent who we are as war-fighters."

The current outfit, which is all black with gold lettering, was introduced in 2017.

Weimer didn't provide many clues as to what the new uniform might look like.

"It's going to look a little different than what we've done in the past," Weimer was quoted by AUSA as saying. "We're not going to get locked into the same T-shirt."

Further testing needs to be carried out before the design is finalized, Weimer said, adding that the new uniform should be ready sometime next year.

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## USS Oscar Austin arrives in Spain, giving boost to missile defense in Europe

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The first of two additional destroyers planned for a Navy base in Spain arrived recently, heralding a long-anticipated expansion of NATO firepower in Europe.

USS Oscar Austin arrived at Naval Station Rota, joining four other destroyers already homeported there, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet said in a statement.

The ship's homeport switch follows a May 2023 pact with Spain to increase the U.S. destroyer presence in the country from four to six.

Oscar Austin joins USS Roosevelt, USS Arleigh Burke, USS Bulkeley and USS Paul Ignatius as part of Destroyer Squadron 60. The sixth destroyer, which hasn't been publicly identified, is anticipated to join the squadron in 2026.

The ship's arrival provides allies "an added layer of security and assurance," Vice Adm. Jeffrey Anderson, commander of 6th Fleet and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO, said in the statement.

The increased naval presence comes

as U.S. military commanders in Europe warn that Russian spies and saboteurs are escalating the risk of wider conflict on the Continent.

"The miscalculation piece is as high as it's ever been," U.S. Army Europe and Africa's Gen. Darryl Williams said recently in Washington, describing the Russian operatives as "nontraditional" and lacking the training of their predecessors.

The war in Ukraine, Russian threats in the Baltic Sea and the effects of the Israel-Hamas war in the eastern Mediterranean have brought greater focus on the European theater than at any time since the Cold War.

More U.S. ships, aircraft and tens of thousands of additional personnel have arrived in the region over the last two years.

For example, the Navy has kept an aircraft carrier strike group or amphibious assault group presence in the NAVFUR-AF/6th Fleet area of responsibility on a near-continuous basis since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group, including the destroyers USS



DRACE WILSON/U.S. Navy

**Petty Officer 2nd Class David Gaddis, assigned to the destroyer USS Oscar Austin, greets his family during the ship's homeport shift to Naval Station Rota, Spain, from Naval Station Norfolk, Va.**

Stout and USS Jason Dunham and the cruiser USS Gettysburg, recently arrived in the North Sea.

The destroyers work in conjunction with land-based Aegis ballistic missile defense sites to protect Europe.

The U.S. began keeping destroyers in Spain in 2014, beginning with USS Ross and USS Cook.

The vessels are armed with vertical

launch anti-submarine rockets, Tomahawk missiles and MK-46 torpedoes. They are designed for anti-air, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, and the most recent versions can simultaneously defend against aircraft and missiles, according to the Navy.

Stars and Stripes reporter John Vandiver contributed to this report.

## MILITARY

# Army to increase some deployment pay

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Soldiers sent on extended operational deployments lasting more than 60 days will soon get a pay bump, the Army's top civilian said recently.

The new special duty pay adds up to \$240 per month for all soldiers, regardless of rank, Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth said.

"All soldiers of all ranks are sharing the rigors of deployment the same and they are all away from their families, so we felt like a flat rate made sense to us," Wormuth told reporters at the annual Association of the U.S. Army meeting in Washington.

The benefit, applied retroactively to Oct. 1, is in recognition of the hardship of "being away from families, but also the rigors of deployment," she said. It wasn't clear when the pay would begin showing up in paychecks.

Wormuth said she expected the stipend to remain in place for the long-term.

The stipend is tied to operational deployments that last for more than 60 days. Missions such as those carried out by rotational Army units sent to Europe to counter potential Russian aggression on NATO's eastern flank are among the deployments eligible for the extra pay.

Wormuth said time spent on trips to

Army training centers, where units often go to prepare for upcoming deployments, don't qualify for the special pay.

The Army has reduced the number of troops it has based overseas, especially in Europe, since the end of the Cold War. However, it has stepped up its presence on the Continent over the past decade with rotational brigades and battalions moving in and out of countries such as Poland, Germany and Romania on a regular basis.

The heavy reliance on such units to carry out deployments ranging from six to nine months has raised questions about whether the rotational model

puts too heavy a strain on soldiers.

A March study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported that there are indications that troops on accompanied tours have higher morale than their rotational counterparts enduring long family separations.

"Rotational deployments also lead to more discipline issues and increased divorce rates," according to the report, which cited lower reenlistment rates for units involved in rotational missions.

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## Navy mulls changes to attract civilian mariners

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy is considering improved pay and working conditions for civilian mariners among the fixes it hopes will address the manpower shortage crippling its logistics fleet.

The more holistic approach would use Navy-wide resources to address the lack of qualified civilian mariners working for the Military Sealift Command instead of sidelining ships to ease crewing demands.

"We're looking at (the issue) comprehensively, considering the full scope of challenges and thus looking at all the tools that can be employed to address it," a Navy official told Stars and Stripes. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the issue publicly by name.

Besides potentially offering wages and benefits more competitive with those in the private sector, and ensuring mariners at sea accrue adequate time off, the Navy also wants to step up recruitment efforts, the official said.

That could include working directly with the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and six maritime academies nationwide to recruit mariners for Military Sealift. Officials are also evaluating ways to add more civilians nationwide and military members who are

leaving the services, the official said.

Military Sealift operates about 125 civilian-crewed ships responsible for a range of tasks, such as replenishing Navy ships, pre-positioning combat cargo at sea and conducting specialized missions. But the command is having trouble attracting and keeping workers.

About 5,500 civilians fill about 4,500 billets across Military Sealift. But about 10,000 mariners are needed, experts have said.

The grueling schedule has taken a toll on civilian mariners, many of whom have opted to leave the service, Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy who has served ashore and at sea for Military Sealift Command, said in an August post to his X account.

"This has resulted in @MSCSealift churning through personnel," Mercogliano said.

Experts have likened the shortage of merchant mariners to a national disaster threatening America's ability to maintain sea power. The issue affects both the military and commercial shipping.

To help correct the problem, Military Sealift recently proposed putting 17 ships — two replenishment vessels, an oiler, two expeditionary sea bases and 12 expeditionary fast transports — into an extended maintenance period



HENDRICK DICKSON/USN Military Sealift Command

**A mariner aboard the fast combat support ship USNS Supply raises the national ensign as the ship moors in Naval Station Norfolk, Va., in July after an eight-month deployment.**

for a yet-to-be defined amount of time.

The move would free up 700 people to work on other ships, filling gaps and allowing fellow mariners to take more leave.

Several Navy departments and the service's top officer, Adm. Lisa Franchetti, have reviewed the Military Sealift proposal, now under consideration by Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro.

It isn't clear precisely what would be included in the evolving plan or if

some Navy ships still would face an indefinite hiatus. It's also unknown when the final plan would be ready.

"The Navy's review of its options (has been) very deliberate," the official said. "We understand that the health of the Military Sealift Command ... is critical to enabling U.S. naval forces to be where it matters, when it matters."

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MILITARY

# Gold Star spouses' health care cap assailed

## Limitation on medical benefits could be lifted under new bill

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A limitation on how long spouses of fallen service members can receive cheaper health care benefits could be lifted under a new bill introduced in the House.

The legislation seeks to remove a cap that allows surviving spouses to retain health care coverage through Tricare, the military's health care program, as an "active-duty family member" for only three years.

Spouses then transition into a family member of a retiree status and are forced to pay higher fees and out-of-pocket costs. Lawmakers say they want spouses to remain in the first category without a time limit.

"Gold Star spouses of service mem-



KAYLEE DUBOIS/U.S. Air Force

**The Bronze Cross Statue Memorial Wreath Laying Ceremony at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., pays tribute to Gold Star families.**

bers who sacrificed their lives overseas defending the United States' interests should still be treated as active-duty dependents in regard to their health care," said Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb.

"This is a small step forward in honoring their sacrifice and caring for their families."

Bacon, the bill's co-sponsor, said thousands of surviving spouses are

paying the retiree rate for health care due to the current law. After three years in the "active-duty family member" category, spouses incur additional costs to either retain their coverage or switch to a plan with more out-of-pocket costs.

The proposed legislation would apply to spouses who meet the criteria for the Gold Star lapel button, an official decoration issued to widows, widowers, parents and next of kin of service members who die in a conflict.

Democrat Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, the new bill's other sponsor, said lawmakers owe it to fallen service members to take care of their spouses long after their deaths.

"I encourage each of my colleagues to support the Gold Star Spouses Healthcare Enhancement Act as one small way we can honor the debt they and their spouses are owed by our grateful nation," she said.

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# Vets' discharges upgraded in 'don't ask, don't tell' review

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — More than 800 LGBTQ+ veterans kicked out of the military for their sexuality under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy will have their honor restored, the Pentagon announced recently.

The announcement comes one year after the Defense Department began

proactively reviewing 851 records of former service members discharged during "don't ask, don't tell" who were believed to be eligible for a change of status but had not yet applied. Of those, 96.8% — 824 veterans across the Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps — will receive an honorable discharge.

"We will continue to honor the service and the sacrifice of all our troops

— including the brave Americans who raised their hands to serve but were turned away because of whom they love," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement.

"Don't ask, don't tell" was signed into law in 1993 by President Bill Clinton to allow gay men and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they did not make their sexual orientation public. Those who chose to disclose were discharged.

But the policy was repealed 13 years ago by Congress after forcing about 13,500 service members out of the military during the 17 years that it was in place from 1994 to 2011. While the majority were honorably separated, nearly 2,000 were separated with less than fully honorable conditions, according to Christa A. Specht, legal policy director at the Pentagon's Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

Those troops were given other-than-honorable discharges, making them ineligible for many Department of Veterans Affairs benefits, including health care, disability compensation,

home loans and burial benefits unless they sought corrective action through a character of service review for benefits eligibility.

Determinations are made by the Discharge Review Board or Board for Correction of Military Records for each veteran's branch of service.

Since the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" in 2012, the Military Department Review Boards have overwhelmingly granted relief to former service members separated under the policy who requested it — over 85% of applications historically were at least partially granted, the Pentagon said.

Today, 96% of those who were administratively separated under "don't ask, don't tell," and served long enough to receive a merit-based characterization of service, have an honorable discharge following the Defense Department's efforts over the past year, combined with the previous effort of the Military Department Review Boards.

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