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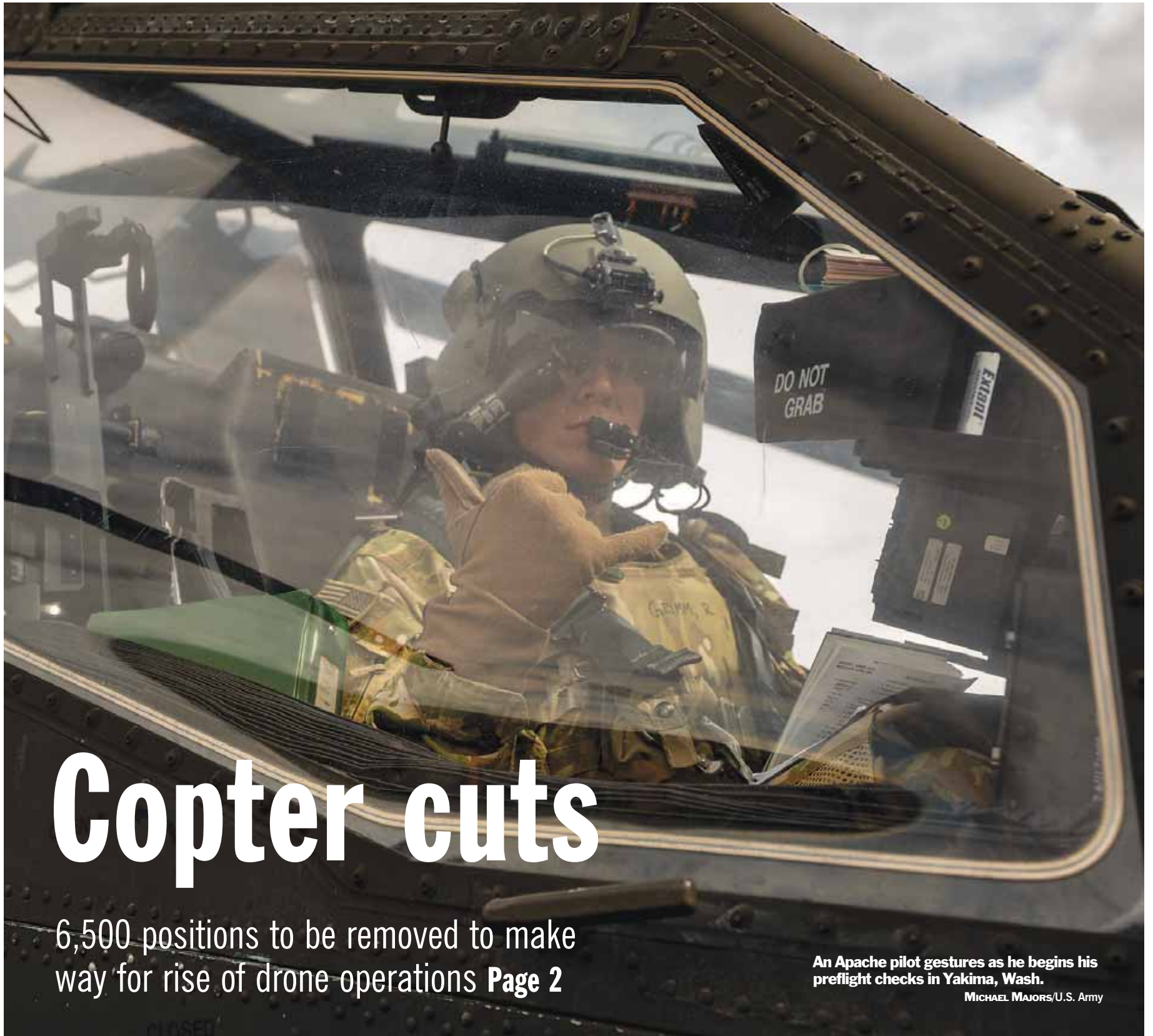
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Copter cuts

6,500 positions to be removed to make way for rise of drone operations **Page 2**

An Apache pilot gestures as he begins his preflight checks in Yakima, Wash.

MICHAEL MAJORS/U.S. Army

COVER STORY

Army aviation to shed 6,500 positions

Cuts will make way for drones, other autonomous systems

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

Thousands of Army aviation jobs will be eliminated in line with the service's ongoing switch to a force that brings lots of savvy with drones and other autonomous systems to the battlefield.

The Army will cut 6,500 active-duty positions in 2026 and 2027, more than 20% of the approximately 30,000 maintainers, flight crews and pilots in the aviation ranks, Army spokesman Maj. Montrell Russell said this week.

"We won't see a time where there will be no crewed systems," Russell said. "A lot of people say, 'Oh, we don't need pilots.' That is not the takeaway from the policy right now."

The growing dependence on offensive and defensive drone technology emerged from the Russia-Ukraine war and has since been integrated into U.S. Army doctrine through modernization initiatives dubbed Transforming in Contact and Project Flytrap.

The 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Vilseck, Germany, and 173rd Airborne Brigade units in Germany and Italy have been at the forefront of the service's European testing and development of the concepts.

As part of the restructuring, the Army plans to convene "talent panels" starting in October to decide which soldiers will remain or transfer to other specialties, Army Human Resources Command said in an administrative message Wednesday.

The first panels — consisting of a brigadier general, senior warrant officers and a former brigade commander — will review junior warrant officers, lieutenants and captains assigned to Black Hawk and Apache units, according to the message.

Soldiers will be identified for cross-rating by their "potential for future service" and not for a specific transition path, the Army message said.

Russell said tracked warrant officers, or those certified on a particular airframe with a vast amount of experience, are not eligible for transition.



KAMAR WILLIAMS/U.S. Army

Helicopters assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division take flight in formation June 10 at Fort Bragg, N.C., for a celebration of the Army's 250th birthday. The service plans to cut thousands of active-duty aviation jobs, including Black Hawk and Apache pilots and aircrews.

The panels seek to identify and retain warrant officers with the strongest potential for continued aviation service, according to the Army administrative message, and Russell added that the service will also consider similar panels for enlisted soldiers.

"It's just really an opportunity to leverage an existing technology to better employ our crewed aircraft," he said.

The move is part of service Secretary Dan Driscoll's Army Transformation Initiative, which was announced in May. The plan called for consolidation and restructuring, with a focus on warfighting, organizational composition and elimination of waste or obsolete programs.

"The Army aims to retain as many qualified personnel as possible, focusing on solutions that help personnel transition into new roles," Russell said.

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BRIANNA BADDER/U.S. Army 101st Combat Aviation Brigade

A 101st Airborne Division UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter flies over northern Iraq on May 26. The Army plans to cut thousands of active-duty aviation jobs, with Black Hawk and Apache units being the subjects of the first review panels.

MILITARY

MRE revamp boosts caffeine options

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

The pork sausage patty is out and buffalo chicken is in, as the Pentagon is set to dish up revamped field rations with more protein-filled snacks and caffeine starting next year.

Unpopular prepackaged items in Meals, Ready to Eat will be axed in 2026, the Defense Department said in a statement Monday. That includes beef taco filling and a second meat patty, the jalapeno pepper jack.

Replacing those three things will be buffalo chicken, Cuban-style beef picadillo with vegetables and a Thai-style red curry with chicken and rice, the statement said.

More snack fare packed with protein is also on the way in the form of new s'mores recovery bars and freeze-dried chocolate peanut butter bites.

Developers in the Army's Combat Feeding Division in Natick, Mass., worked to reduce weight and volume

while maintaining the same number of calories and nutritional value.

The updated MREs will include new caffeinated options like beverages, gum and jelly beans, as well as energy chews and gels.

"What we've noticed is caffeine is one of the least consumed items in the MRE," Julie Edwards, a senior technologist in the Combat Feeding Division, said in the statement. "Previous generations were big coffee drinkers, but the newer generation of soldiers are not."

Troops will also receive a larger, more resilient towelette, the statement said.

The Pentagon annually assesses and changes the lineup of MREs, which are handed out to troops in the field. The changes were the result of service member feedback.

The process of changing a meal item takes about four years, said Edwards, who is also a registered dietitian. Be-

fore hitting the field for evaluation, all new items must still be edible after six months at 100 degrees Fahrenheit and three years at 80 degrees.

Researchers meet with service members to find out what they like, and then focus groups led by behavioral psychologists follow up on the initial feedback. Decisions are then made by service leaders on the Joint Services Operational Rations Forum.

The Feeding Division is already working on offerings for 2027. Plant-based animal crackers, a new recovery bar, a protein bar and fruit-flavored cereal are among the possibilities, the statement said.

Also in 2027, plant-based entrees will also replace the four vegetarian meals currently available.

"Any new item that we get that can help bring variety and increase acceptability is important," Edwards said. "We know that eating an MRE isn't everyone's No. 1 thing. But we want to



TYLER BOLKEN/U.S. Air Force

Buffalo chicken, Cuban-style beef picadillo with vegetables and a Thai-style red curry with chicken and rice are some of the introductions coming to the Meal, Ready to Eat field rations for 2026.

make it safe to eat — that's our No. 1 priority — and then to make it taste good as well."

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MILITARY

Pentagon weighs discipline for Kirk critics

Officials warn troops, employees about appropriate conduct

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The military could invoke broadly written laws to punish service members who criticize slain political activist Charlie Kirk on social media, though it remains unclear whether such cases would hold up at court-martial.

Social media posts celebrating Kirk's death or denouncing him for his views have prompted Defense Department officials to warn service members and DOD employees about appropriate conduct.

On Sept. 14, Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell wrote on X that "those who celebrate or mock the assassination" of Kirk are committing a "violation of the oath" they took.

Parnell wrote that the department will not tolerate such behavior, using all-caps for part of the message.

The right to free speech is limited for service members, said Matt Kent, a retired Marine Corps colonel and former circuit military judge.

"The military can restrict speech to maintain discipline, morale and mission effectiveness, sometimes banning commentary or actions that would be legal in civilian life," Kent said.

Service members can be restricted in their expression in matters involving obscenity, political speech, threats or defamation, among other things, according to a publication by the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces titled "First Principles: Constitutional Matters: First Amendment."

The Uniform Code of Military Justice includes a law that bars conduct unbecoming an officer and another that criminalizes action deemed to bring discredit upon the service.

"There are numerous punitive articles that allow the military to ... criminally prosecute speech that's either considered prejudicial to good order and discipline or service discrediting," said Rachel VanLandingham, a law professor at Southwestern University and retired Air Force judge advocate.

While a military judge or jury ulti-



iStock

The Pentagon's power is being tested after posts about conservative political activist Charlie Kirk's death from service members and DOD employees has led to officials warning about appropriate conduct.

"There are numerous punitive articles that allow the military to ... criminally prosecute speech that's either considered prejudicial to good order and discipline or service discrediting."

Rachel VanLandingham
law professor at Southwestern University

mately determines whether the prosecution meets the burden of proof, service members sometimes opt for non-judicial punishment to avoid the risk of a felony conviction.

However, there are judicial safeguards for troops who speak out in a "personal capacity on ideological grounds," VanLandingham said.

Such safeguards have been "established by statute and by judicial precedent that tries to balance service members' constitutional freedoms," VanLandingham said.

She described the recent efforts to punish service members as a "witch hunt."

Kirk, who co-founded the Turning Point USA political organization, was shot and killed on Sept. 10 during an event at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah.

His killing and his political stances drew strong reactions on social media, including from some service members.

Following the post, the account was disabled and the recruiting office's website now lists his position as "TBD."

"We became aware of a social media post (Sept. 10) that does not align with our core values," the Marine Corps said in a statement.

"The Marine in question has been relieved of his recruiting duties and the matter is currently under investigation," the statement added.

Williamson could not be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, Army Col. Scott Stephens has been suspended and will be investigated after reportedly posting comments on his Facebook account about Kirk, according to a Fox News article last week that cited an Army spokesperson.

While screenshots of the purported comments have been widely shared, Stephens' account did not appear in a Facebook search.

"The death of Charlie Kirk in Utah was tragic," one of Stephens' comments read. "However, we can take comfort in the fact that Charlie was doing what he loved best — spreading hate, racism, homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia on college campuses."

Service members are prohibited from engaging in partisan political activity while in uniform or in an official command role, according to a 2008 DOD directive.

The DOD directive does allow armed forces personnel to express personal opinions in a private capacity while they aren't in uniform. However, participating in anti-war rallies either in or out of uniform is a violation.

A different standard applies to DOD civilians, said Debra D'Agostino, an attorney who specializes in employment law.

Public sector workers retain their full First Amendment rights, she said, adding that they also have the right to due process.

"It's going to be up to a deciding official at the agency to decide whether to remove (an) employee or not," D'Agostino said. "I have to imagine that they would then appeal to the (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board), which would be their right."

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MILITARY

Pentagon changes policies on shaving

Troops requiring shaving waiver for more than 1 year to be separated from military

By LORETTO MORRIS

Stars and Stripes

The new face of the military will be one without facial hair, even if that means enduring painful razor bumps.

Service members who require a medical shaving waiver for more than one year must be separated from the military, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered in a memo dated Aug. 20 and released publicly Sept. 15.

"The grooming standard set by the U.S. military is to be clean shaven and neat in presentation for a proper military appearance," the memo states.

The memo follows Hegseth's March 12 directive calling for a rapid, force-wide review of military standards. That earlier guidance tasked senior leaders with reviewing policies on physical fitness, body composition and grooming, including facial hair.

Since then, some individual branch-

es have updated their standards. The Marine Corps tightened its rules on medical shaving waivers in March, and the Army followed in July.

Military medical officers were previously the final authority on medical shaving waivers. Under the new policy, they will now provide a written recommendation to unit commanders, who will make the final decision, according to the memo.

If a waiver is approved, the service member will be exempt from shaving requirements and begin a medical treatment plan. If a medical officer determines that the waiver is still necessary after one year of treatment, the commander must initiate the member's separation from service.

A common reason for medical waivers is pseudofolliculitis barbae, or razor bumps, a condition caused by curly hairs growing back into the skin.



COLVILLE McFEE/U.S. Air Force

An airman has his neck and face inspected during a shaving waiver course at Beale Air Force Base, Calif.

It disproportionately affects Black men and is associated with frequent shaving, which is mandated by military grooming standards, according to a study by the Society of Federal Health

Professionals.

"Mild-to-moderate PFB may be treated with conservative grooming practices, topical therapy and temporary profiles," the study states. "But those with more severe disease may ultimately require laser therapy or prolonged profiles."

Medical conditions are not the only reason service members are granted shaving waivers.

The Army began offering permanent waivers to Sikh soldiers in 2017 as a religious accommodation. The Air Force followed with case-by-case approvals for airmen practicing Norse paganism in 2019.

The memo does not say whether religious waivers will be affected by the policy change.

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Army to retain 9 ROTC programs it had planned to close

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

The Army will keep nine college officer training programs open for enrollment after announcing in June plans to downsize and cut operations because of the loss of civilian employees supporting the programs.

U.S. Army Cadet Command confirmed it will retain the universities where the service expected to close its Reserve Officer Training Program at the end of this school year. Schools expected to close will continue the program as an extension unit, meaning ROTC will operate with a different host institution that is located on a different campus.

"The decision follows a comprehensive review and consideration of feedback from community leaders and key stakeholders," Lt. Col. James Delongchamp, spokesman for the cadet command, said. "There will be no closures of eligible Senior ROTC programs, and current cadets will not be required to transfer to other schools."

One school previously announced for closure, St. Augustine University in

"There will be no closures of eligible Senior ROTC programs, and current cadets will not be required to transfer to other schools."

Lt. Col. James Delongchamp
U.S. Army Cadet Command

North Carolina, will still lose its ROTC program but that is because of accreditation issues. The campus has struggled to maintain its accreditation status and uphold university agreements and obligations with the Army over the past several years, which led to its ineligibility, Delongchamp said.

"Due to these reasons, the Army decided not to retain an ROTC presence at St. Augustine University. All other eligible universities will maintain a ROTC presence," he said in a state-



SARAH WINDMUELLER/U.S. Army

Army ROTC cadets from the University of Northern Iowa march in 2023 at Grandd Bluff in La Crosse, Wis.

ment Sept. 16.

Nearly 300 students were expected to feel the effects from the reductions announced in June, which involved modifications at more than 70 other universities. This included mergers of administrative and logistical support staff and reclassification that would send students to a campus outside of where they are enrolled.

"Merging some host units will allow the Army to retain an ROTC faculty

presence, scholarship resources and mutually beneficial relationships with current institutions," Delongchamp said. "[Cadet Command] remains committed to optimizing its structure while preserving access for cadets and other students wanting to participate at campuses the programs are currently offered."

ROTC is offered at roughly 900 campuses nationwide and commissions about 70% of the Army's officers each year.

The nine universities no longer leaving Army ROTC:

- California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo.
- University of Northern Iowa.
- Western Illinois University.
- Truman State University, Mo.
- Elizabeth City State University, N.C.
- Clarkson University, N.Y.
- John Carroll University, Ohio.
- University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.
- West Virginia State University.

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MILITARY

New armor-piercing weapon headed to field

XM204 will provide 'decisive edge' against vehicles

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers in Germany will be the first to field a new lightweight munition designed to blow up enemy vehicles, the Army said.

The Vilseck-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment is first in line to receive the XM204 "top-attack" weapon, which recently passed a testing milestone.

The weapon, developed in partnership with Textron Systems, is highly portable and enables soldiers to quickly arrange and rearrange mines to counter enemy ground maneuvers, an Army statement said.

Soldiers in the regiment, which is part of U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria, will receive the new weapon this fall, according to the statement.

"For units on the front lines of deterrence in Europe, having access to ... the XM204 strengthens our ability to influence key terrain, slow adversary movement and protect our forces," Maj. Gen. John Reim, a top commander for armaments and ammunition development, said in the statement.

The munition features a dispenser launcher module that autonomously



U.S. Army photos

The XM204 anti-vehicle munition will be delivered in the fall to the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, based in Vilseck, Germany. It will be the first unit to field the XM204.

deploys submunitions and has onboard sensors to detect enemy vehicles. The technology also uses an "explosively formed penetrator" to defeat threats, the Army said.

Armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators were put to widespread use against U.S. forces during the war in Iraq and were a source of fear for

American troops on patrol there.

The weapon's ability to blast through armor forced the Pentagon to develop new heavy vehicles with special designs to defend against the threat.

With safety features that make it resistant to tampering, the XM204 is aligned with U.S. policy on anti-personnel landmines and reducing post-con-



The XM204 anti-vehicle munition is shown in action during a test run.

flict risks to civilians, the Army said.

"This system gives our warfighters a decisive edge as we train and operate alongside NATO allies," Reim said.

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MACALAH HONABLE/U.S. Air Force

Air Force 2nd Lt. Brody Adams, 374th Operations Support Squadron weather environmental officer, performs the deadlift portion of the Warrior Fitness Test at Yokota Air Base, Japan, in April.

USAF initiative boosts fitness, healthier dining

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force and Space Force are working to implement 24-hour access to all fitness facilities and provide healthier dining options to service members, the Air Force announced.

The service launched a program called the Culture of Fitness initiative to "reinvigorate a holistic culture of well-being" after conducting a review of Air Force programs. The Air Force has been making changes after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in March ordered a review and enhancement of physical fitness standards.

"Having a Culture of Fitness for the

Department of the Air Force is more than just physical training," Air Force Secretary Troy Meink said in a statement. "It is about making sure we enable airmen and guardians to be wholly resilient, healthy and ready to defend our nation."

The secretary wrote that the department found the traditional approach "has fallen short of fostering" the well-being of service members.

Undersecretary of the Air Force Matthew Lohmeier will lead the department through this reform by overseeing the Air Force and Space Force efforts. He will provide regular updates to Meink every 30 days, according to the memo.

"This initiative will ensure our Air

Force and Space Force remain capable and lethal," Lohmeier said. "I am honored to champion this effort, but its success depends upon proper attention from our command teams across the department. You have my commitment that I will provide you with the resources and guidance necessary for you to succeed."

Lohmeier, the service's No. 2 civilian leader, is a former Space Force officer who was relieved of command in 2021 over remarks stemming from a book he wrote on Marxist thinking within the U.S. military.

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MILITARY

IG finds oversight of landlord lacking

Military failed to keep watch over housing company

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The military failed to keep watch of a family housing landlord, resulting in an overpayment of performance bonuses and possibly putting families at risk of living in homes with life, health and safety hazards, a Pentagon watchdog report found.

The Defense Department inspector general released the 72-page report with redactions this month outlining its review of Hunt Military Communities, a private company responsible for housing 165,000 residents in roughly 52,000 homes on Army, Navy and Air Force bases across the country.

The IG's review looked at information at seven bases from April 2024 through June 2025 — well after congressional mandates to improve oversight of military housing following increased scrutiny that families were living in substandard conditions.

Hunt is one of two military housing landlords to reach an agreement with the Justice Department over fraud without admitting fault. In 2022, Hunt agreed to pay \$500,000 for falsifying bonus documents at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

The following year a federal court ordered Hunt to pay more than \$91,000 to a Texas-based Army family because the company did not resolve mold and structural issues at the home they leased at Joint Base San Antonio.

In response to the IG's findings, Carolyn Baker, Hunt



ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

At Joint Base San Antonio, Fort Sam Houston had two employees responsible for overseeing 925 housing units managed by Hunt Military Communities, according to the Defense Department inspector general.

spokesperson, said the company is committed to providing safe, quality and affordable housing for military families through “rigorous, multi-layered government oversight.”

“Incentive fee plans and payments are approved by the military departments, and if we are informed by the Army that a miscalculation has occurred, we are committed to working collaboratively to reconcile the quarter in question consistent with business agreements and to address any ambiguities that may have led to the error,” she said. “Hunt is committed to working with its partners to strengthen oversight and transparency in response to the OIG’s recommendations.”

Military officials responded to the IG in agreement, vowing to work on nearly all 19 recommendations included in the report, such as:

“Creating uniform life, health and safety hazard and work order priority definitions and uniform work order response and completion times; providing guidance on the change of occupancy checklist; establishing a control to verify that Military Housing Offices are providing the required level of oversight; completing a workforce study; requiring the appropriate equipment to complete oversight requirements; and reviewing performance incentive fee plans and calculations.”

Of those recommendations, 17 were considered resolved, and two remain open.

The Air Force and Navy each need to agree to reevaluate staffing requirements, according to the report.

Letters from military officials included with the report outlined timelines to complete the recommendations.

Many stretched through this year and into the next.

When it came to performance incentives for Hunt, the Army and Navy created and used inappropriate plans that did not align with the required framework.

This led to each improperly incentivizing Hunt.

However, details about the misalignment were redacted from the report, as were details about how the companies earn bonus payouts.

At Fort Sam Houston, the Army overpaid one award by more than \$11,000. Failure to correct this could lead the Army to continue overpaying, which would cost about \$1.4 million at one base over the remainder of Hunt’s 30-year contract, according to the report.

Among other findings, the IG found that military housing offices lacked enough staff and equipment to provide ade-

quate oversight, such as inspections between tenants and evaluation of completed maintenance.

The IG also found that military housing offices at the seven bases reviewed lack enough staff and equipment to provide adequate oversight, such as inspections between tenants and evaluation of completed maintenance.

At Joint Base San Antonio, Fort Sam Houston had two employees responsible for overseeing 925 housing units managed by Hunt. Meanwhile, Randolph Air Force Base had five staff members for 344 housing units.

Just completing inspections and logging the information at Fort Sam Houston could consume most of the work weeks, according to the report. This left little room for additional work, such as following up on work order completion.

During 2023, Fort Sam Houston residents submitted 14,343 work orders, and housing staff contacted less than 2% of residents with a completed work order and did not meet with all of the dissatisfied residents.

According to the report, the Army has a requirement to check on 5% of work orders.

Even with more workers, Randolph employees said they could not physically review all 1,345 work orders completed in 2024, as required. Instead, they sent emails to gauge satisfaction, according to the report.

It also found that families received disparate levels of service because Pentagon housing standards lacked clear definitions that were interpreted differently by each service branch.

The IG said it will continue to monitor the military services’ progress to implement each recommendation.

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MILITARY

Engineers getting creative in concrete

Marines build by using 3D printing

By RYAN M. BREEDEN
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HANSEN, Okinawa — Marines are applying advances in 3D-printed concrete to military uses ranging from ramps to makeshift railheads, according to the operations chief of the 9th Engineer Support Battalion.

First conceived in the 1930s, 3D concrete printing gained momentum in the 1980s with improvements in technology and materials that allow small teams to build homes, bridges and other structures quickly and at lower costs.

“Over the last two decades, 3D concrete printing has established itself as a leading digital fabrication technology in the concrete industry,” said a December 2023 paper published in Science Direct.

For the Marine Corps, the technology could mean rapidly constructed barracks, barriers or emergency housing after a natural disaster.

“You can tailor-make components for a solution, and it can be specific to the location you’re operating in,” Master Gunnery Sgt. Ty Ryan, operations chief for the Camp Hansen engineer battalion, said during a Sept. 11 tour of the unit’s 3D printing operation.

“You can also augment control points for things like military or civilian ports, print concrete ramps, and



PHOTOS BY RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

Members of the 9th Engineer Support Battalion, 3rd Marine Logistics Group use 3D concrete printing technology to create structures at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on Sept. 15.

build makeshift railheads,” he said.

The first 3D-printed concrete home was built in 2004 in the Netherlands, according to Data Center Dynamics, an industry website. The market for 3D concrete construction grew to \$3.5 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach \$523.3 billion within four years.

In the military, the technology can be applied to a “full spectrum” of scenarios, from contested areas to humanitarian operations and training across the Indo-Pacific, Ryan said.

“We’re able to build barriers and structures like some currently utilized for the ongoing exercise Resolute Dragon,” he said. “We’ve been working with the leadership and our partners to learn and advance our process when applying this technology.”

Other service branches are also exploring 3D concrete printing. The Automated Construction of Expeditionary Structures enables the Army to produce custom-designed buildings and materials, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ website.

In February, the service unveiled its first 3D-printed barracks at Fort Bliss, Texas. Each spans more than 5,700 square feet and can house up to 56 soldiers, according to a news release that month from the Army Engineer Research and Development Center.

In April, the Air Force’s 175th Civil Engineer Squadron at Martin State Air National Guard Base, Md., trained airmen to use similar equipment, the



Concrete printing technology created these structures at Camp Hansen.

service said in a news release that month.

“Our team was trained to use the 3D Concrete Printer in just four days — a remarkably fast timeline for such a revolutionary technology,” Maj. Brian Vickers, project manager for the Expeditionary 3D Concrete Printer, said in the release. “By building with concrete, occupants of these buildings are far more protected from blasts, fragmentation, and small-arms fire.”

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