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Crew of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz man the rails for arrival at Bremerton on Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., on Dec. 16.

U.S. Navy photos



Final return

USS Nimitz sails into Kitsap, retirement **Page 2**

COVER STORY

Rainy reunion as Nimitz returns for last time

Carrier's 82K-mile mission included strikes in Somalia

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

BREMERTON, Wash. — It was getting darker, colder and wetter by the minute as the USS Nimitz slowly edged its bow into Sinclair Inlet, made a tug-assisted pivot into a berth, and came to a stop at Naval Base Kitsap.

Yvonne Ramirez had driven 125 miles south from Mount Vernon to see her sailor boyfriend, skirting the floods in Snohomish and King counties that had been declared a disaster area by Gov. Bob Ferguson.

Standing under a shelter in front of the berth, she squinted through gray skies at the 1,000-foot-long carrier in hopes of seeing her boyfriend among the sailors manning the rails around the rim of the Nimitz flight deck on Dec. 16.

"I'd wait for you forever, but 270 Days was long enough. Welcome home, Kevin Scruggs," her sign said.

The nine-month trip across the Pacific and back was a final voyage for the 50-year-old Nimitz, the oldest aircraft carrier in the fleet, a veteran of the end of the Vietnam War; the Iranian Revolution; the Gulf of Sidra incident; two decades of the Cold War; Operation Desert Storm; 9/11; wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria; as well as lesser-known events around the globe.

On its final deployment, the carrier's 82,000-mile mission included launching its F/A-18 Hornet jets to hit ISIS targets in Somalia, as well as more sedate moments when the crew hosted VIPs in Malaysia and Bahrain.

The arrival in Bremerton was likely the last of the 30 homecomings from deployments that the Nimitz has made since joining the fleet in 1975. The carrier is scheduled to move its homeport from Naval Base Kitsap to Naval Station Norfolk, in Virginia, early next year, the beginning of a long process of decommissioning and deactivation.

Before arriving in Bremerton, several hundred carrier personnel had disembarked in earlier stops at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; and San Diego. The carrier's squadrons had flown off to



GARY WARNER/Stars and Stripes

Ashley Cortes of Bremerton, Wash., dressed as Winnie the Pooh, with two of her children (Rome, holding sign, and Zion as "Tigger"), waits to greet husband Chief Petty Officer Randy Cortes as crew disembark the Nimitz.

Naval Station Lemoore, Calif., Naval Air Station Whidby Island, Wash., and other wintertime warbird nests.

It took most of two hours to get the remaining 3,000 sailors off the ship in Bremerton — a steady stream of men and women in dress blue uniforms with white caps.

Once past the security gate, new Nimitz crew fathers met their sons and daughters born while deployed, couples clutched for first kisses after nine months apart and parents welcomed home sons and daughters.

Trae Zipperer, of Fort Myers, Fla., had served on the Nimitz from 1987 to 1991. He was in Bremerton to watch his old ship arrive with his relatively new son-in-law, Manny Munchnikoff.



FRANKLYN GUAGE/U.S. Navy

USS Nimitz Electrician's Mate 3 Kevin Scruggs proposes marriage to his girlfriend, Yvonne Ramirez of Mount Vernon, Wash., on the quay as the carrier arrives at Bremerton on Naval Base Kitsap, Wash., on Dec. 16. She said yes.

Zipperer's daughter, Maddy Muchnikoff, waited with him under a shelter that kept the pouring rain off their heads.

"She married into the Nimitz," Zipperer said. "I served aboard from 1987 to 1991, then she married a Nimitz sailor. It was a fantastic ship, and he's a fantastic guy."

Ashley Cortes was dressed as Winnie the Pooh to greet her husband, Chief Petty Officer Randy Cortes. She'd brought the couple's three children — Noah, Rome and Zion — with the younger two decked out in "Tigger" the tiger costumes.

"I'm just happy he's back for Christmas with the family," Ashley said. "It's been a long stretch."

Sam Perusquia struggled to keep his sopping wet sign together long enough for his sailor sister, Karina, to see the five smeared orange exclamation points.

"Always keep in mind that we love & miss you," the sign said.

Among those greeted with hugs and kisses was Capt. Joseph J. Furco, the Nimitz's commanding officer.

"The big picture is we were in the Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and

then participated in operations off the Middle East, including the twelve-day war with Iran, and in conjunction with Air Wing 17 operations in Africa, conducting strikes against ISIS," he said.

The ship also took part in joint operations with the navies of France and India.

Furco ticked off the carrier's port stops along the way: Guam, Malaysia, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Honolulu, San Diego and then back to Bremerton.

"I am deeply proud of this crew for proving, over nine months of sustained operations at sea, that they are well-trained, fit to fight and ready to win," Furco said.

Over by the awning where family members were waiting for the crew to disembark, Ramirez spotted Scruggs, away for 270 days.

The sailor strode to her side, got down on one knee, unlatched a small red box with a ring and asked Ramirez to marry him.

She'd been a girlfriend on the tough drive over from Mount Vernon, but would return a fiancée.

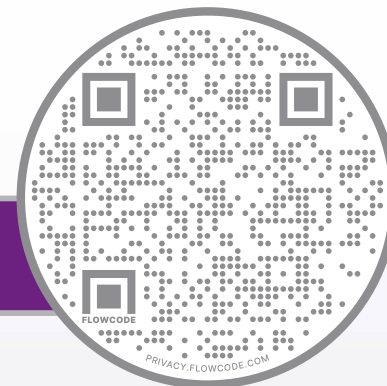


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MILITARY

A religious reboot

Hegseth tosses 'unacceptable and unserious' Army spiritual fitness guide

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered sweeping changes to the U.S. military's chaplain corps, with a plan to simplify a system that he said has become too focused on "new age" concepts.

"Our chaplains are chaplains, not emotional support officers, and we're going to treat them as such," Hegseth said in a video statement to the force on Dec. 17.

"Faith and virtue were traded for self-help and self-care," Hegseth said, adding that chaplains had been "mini-mized" and were "viewed by many as therapists, instead of ministers."

He took special aim at the Army, saying its current spiritual fitness guide is pushing secular humanism, and he ordered the service to cease

using the program immediately.

"It mentions God one time. That's it," Hegseth said. "It mentions feelings 11 times. It even mentions playfulness, whatever that is, nine times. ... In short, it's unacceptable and unserious. So we're tossing it."

Hegseth said the Pentagon is working on a new program, which could curtail what qualifies as a faith or belief recognized in the military.

"More reforms will be coming in the days and weeks ahead, he said. "There will be a top-down cultural shift putting spiritual well-being on the same footing as mental and physical health."

In 2017, the Defense Department updated what qualifies as a recognized religious denomination or belief system, with a list of 221 groups that ranged from the mainstream to ob-



MATTHEW GARNIER/U.S. Army

A U.S. Chaplain provides spiritual support during an exercise at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., on Feb. 18.

scure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

Hegseth blamed such changes on "political correctness" and an "ongoing war on warriors." The department will create a new list of religious affiliation codes, he said without specifying what religions or belief systems

are in and which ones are out

"We're going to streamline it ... so that our chaplains can actually use it to minister better to the flock," Hegseth said.

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IG: Army, Navy skirted law when bolstering ranks

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Both the Army and Navy incorrectly classified recruits who received low marks on military entry exams, a move that gave both services more underachieving enlistees than Congress allows, the Defense Department inspector general said.

To get around a legal cap, the Navy used off-the-books academic and physical fitness development programs to help underperforming sailors improve their Armed Forces Qualification Test scores, the inspector general said in a report released Dec. 11.

The qualification test score is primarily used to determine enlistment eligibility and is derived from four subtests of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, a standardized test that helps predict military success by measuring aptitude in assorted subjects.

According to federal law, the number of applicants whose Armed Forces Qualification Test scores fell between the 10th and 30th percentiles can't surpass 4% of the total enlistees in a given fiscal year. Such scores are des-

ignated as Category IV enlistments.

The Army also exceeded the 4% threshold, though the report did not contain further details.

"By incorrectly calculating the number of Category IV enlistments, the Army and the Navy circumvented the requirement to obtain Secretary of Defense approval to exceed the statutory limit of Category IV enlistments," the IG wrote on its website.

The law also requires that a service whose Category IV enlistments exceed 10% of its active-duty accessions establish a preparatory course, the report said.

The review looked at the Army's Future Soldier Preparatory Course and Navy's Future Sailor Preparatory Course. It took place between April 2024 and August 2025.

Statutorily mandated courses require congressional oversight and have stringent reporting requirements, the report said.

The Navy launched two congressionally unregulated courses, a Fitness Skills Development program in 2023 and Academic Skills Development



RAQUEL BIRK/U.S. Army

Recruits attend the Future Soldier Preparatory Course at Fort Jackson, S.C., in 2024.

program a year later to "address recruiting challenges and increase the number of potential applicants for naval service," the IG said.

The service then failed to report the original underperforming scores, according to the report. In fiscal 2025, the service had 11.3% Category IV enlistments, or 2,763 of 24,388, as of March 31, when counting the precourse qualification test scores.

Permission to go beyond the limits can be granted by the secretary of defense, who must inform the congressional armed services committees within 30 days.

The Pentagon pushed back against the findings, saying the law does not prohibit the improved scores from being used, William Fitzhugh, acting assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs, wrote in an undated rebuttal.

The Army and the Navy had been instructed to use the updated scores in memorandums in May 2024 and February 2025, the report said.

The IG recommended that the Defense Department issue clarifying guidance directing the services to use the updated scores only if the development programs have proper oversight and meet legal requirements.

The inspector general gave Fitzhugh 30 days to comment on the actions he plans to take toward meeting the recommendations.

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MILITARY

New artillery unit activated with eye on Europe's defense

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

A new U.S.-based artillery unit intended to bring more firepower to Europe is up and running, but plans for deploying troops and missiles to the Continent are undisclosed.

The 3rd Battalion, 12th Field Artillery Regiment, based out of Fort Drum, N.Y., is part of the Army's efforts to expand long-range strike capabilities in Europe, the 56th Multi-Domain Command (Europe) said in a statement Dec. 15.

But while the unit was activated in October, the Army has yet to announce when soldiers will be sent on missions to Europe.

"The activation is historically significant because it reintroduces a modern long-range precision fires battalion and contributes to the Army's evolving future force design," the statement said. "For the (European) theater, it means greater range, more flexible options and additional tools to deter or respond in a rapidly changing security environment."

The unit's formation is linked to a 2024 decision by former President Joe Biden's administration that called for rotating long-range fires assets to Germany in 2026 as a precursor to the permanent basing of those forces in Europe.

"When fully developed, these conventional long-range fires units will include SM-6 and Tomahawk (missiles) and developmental hypersonic weapons, which have significantly longer range than current land-based fires in Europe," the White House statement in July 2024 said.

While the new unit is aligned with the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, it falls under the operational control of the Germany-based 56th Multi-Domain Command's 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz told reporters during a news conference in Berlin on Dec. 11 that he was

still under the impression that the Army would move forward with the initiative, which as originally conceived called for bringing Tomahawk missiles to Germany next year.

Still, adding long-range fires capabilities in Europe could conflict with current Pentagon strategy, which aims to have Europe shoulder a larger share of the conventional security burden so more capabilities can be shifted to the Pacific.

The Defense Department's top policy chief, Elbridge Colby, before taking up his Pentagon post earlier this year, voiced concerns about the idea of sending more long-range artillery to Europe.

After the Biden administration's 2024 decision was announced, Colby, a longtime China hawk, said the concept indicated that Biden was "unwisely prioritizing Europe over the Asia-Pacific."

"That's clear as day now," Colby said in a statement at the time. "So let's argue now about where we should prioritize our scarce resources."

In Europe, a new U.S. national security strategy that prioritizes security in the Americas and the Pacific has fueled concerns that the Defense Department could be planning to move assets out of Europe.

A Pentagon decision in October to end the rotation of an Army brigade to Romania was viewed by some NATO observers as a sign of more cuts to come.

In a separate talk with German officials on Dec. 13, Merz said Europe must prepare for a new era in which the United States can't be counted on to ensure stability on the Continent.

"The decades of the Pax Americana are largely over for us in Europe," Merz said, according to German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

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KEITH ANDERSON/U.S. Army

Lithuanian soldiers take part in an exercise with NATO troops at Pabrade training area in eastern Lithuania. The Baltic country announced on Dec. 15 that it plans to build a new training area near the Suwalki Gap.

Lithuania plans key military training area

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Lithuania plans to build a new military training area near the Suwalki Gap, a strip of land separating Russia's Kaliningrad exclave from Kremlin ally Belarus that's widely regarded as one of the most strategically sensitive places in Europe.

In addition to the new site near the town of Kapciamiestis, the country will also double the size of the Taurage training area in western Lithuania, national public broadcaster LRT reported Dec. 15.

U.S. land forces have conducted rotational deployments in Lithuania since spring 2014 as part of NATO deterrence efforts, and sustained rotations of U.S. heavy battalions have been in place since 2019.

As of last month, more than 1,000 rotational American troops were deployed to Lithuania, where they operate, train and take part in joint NATO exercises, according to the Army.

Western military officials have long assessed that in a conflict, Moscow could attempt to link Kaliningrad with Belarus, severing the Baltic states from NATO's main forces.

"Lithuania is strengthening its national defense with plans for new and expanded military training ranges, boosting NATO's rapid response capabilities and securing the strategically

crucial Suwalki Corridor," the Lithuanian defense ministry said in a statement Dec. 15 on X.

The roughly 40-mile stretch of territory along Lithuania's border with Poland is the only overland route connecting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the rest of the alliance.

Amid heightened tensions between NATO and Russia over the war in Ukraine, Deividas Matulionis, chief national security adviser to Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, said the Suwalki Gap is receiving "special attention" from the alliance.

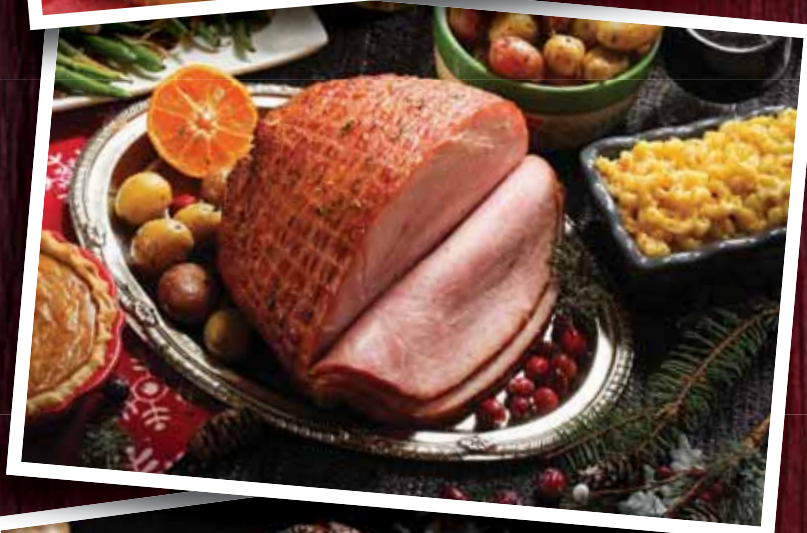
"The chosen site is the most suitable from both a military and national security perspective," Matulionis said of the Kapciamiestis location, as reported by LRT. "These training areas are vital for ensuring conditions for the largest possible presence of allied forces in Lithuania."

The new training area will be large enough to support brigade-level training involving several thousand troops, LRT said.

Lithuania has yet to announce when development work at Kapciamiestis will begin or is expected to finish. Initial estimates put the construction time at four years, the Baltic Times reported in September.

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MILITARY

Navy to invest in AI to boost shipbuilding

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is investing \$448 million in artificial intelligence and autonomy to speed up use of the technologies across the shipbuilding industry as part of efforts to revitalize it and encourage innovation, the service announced this month.

The investment in the Navy's Shipbuilding Operating System will use software from American technology giant Palantir to offer shipbuilders, shipyards and suppliers the resources needed to modernize their operations, Secretary of the Navy John Phelan said in a statement.

"By enabling industry to adopt AI and autonomy tools at scale, we're helping the shipbuilding industry improve schedules, increase capacity, and reduce costs," Phelan said. He added that the initiative was about "doing business smarter and building the industrial capability our Navy and nation require."

The initiative will aggregate data from planning systems and databases, among other sources, to eliminate bottlenecks, streamline workflows and mitigate risk, allowing for quicker, more informed decisions, the Navy said.



SHELBY WEST/U.S. Navy

The Virginia-class attack submarine USS New Hampshire arrives at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Virginia, on Sept. 3, for a depot modernization period. The Navy is investing \$448 million in artificial intelligence to accelerate shipbuilding.

For example, using AI helped one shipbuilder reduce submarine schedule planning from 160 manual hours to under 10 minutes while another was able to cut material review times from weeks to under one hour, according to the statement.

The initial effort will focus on submarine shipbuilders, shipyards and suppliers with expansion to surface ship programs as the Navy validates and refines the approach, according to the statement.

Phelan has promised to reshape how

the Navy builds and fields ships with a focus on cutting costs and getting vessels to sea faster.

In November, he announced that the Navy was canceling the bulk of the \$22 billion Constellation-class frigate program that had been beset with delays and cost overruns. Just two of the ships, already under construction, will be completed.

The move would free up money and shipyard space for other projects, Phelan said in a video posted to X on Nov. 25.

A little more than a week later, in another video, Phelan said the Navy had selected the design for its medium landing ships, calling the choice a second step in overhauling the service's shipbuilding efforts.

The roughly 4,000-ton vessels, designed by Dutch shipbuilder Damen, can carry cargo and Marines more than 3,400 miles, offering "the right balance of capability, affordability and speed to field," Phelan said in the Dec. 5 post to his X account.

Its crane, berthing, helicopter and cargo capacities make "it an excellent choice for the Marine Corps requirement of no less than 35 medium landing ships to support naval expeditionary forces," Gen. Eric Smith, Marine Corps commandant, said in the video.

The ship offers Marines the agility and flexibility needed in austere environments where there are no ports, Smith added.

Under a Trump administration working plan dubbed "The Golden Fleet," the Navy could grow from its current 287 ships to as many as 300 crewed vessels.

Stars and Stripes report Gary Warner in Washington state contributed to this report. bath.alison@stripes.com @alisonbath_

Women soon to wear Marine boat cloak

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

An eye-catching Marine Corps uniform accessory that was long reserved for male officers and senior enlisted leaders at the service's birthday ball and formal evening dinners is no longer exclusively menswear.

The boat cloak, a niche evening dress accessory, is now authorized for eligible female Marines following a recent update to the service's uniform regulations.

An administrative message announced the results of a uniform board process that began nearly two years ago.

The change was originally proposed in an early 2024 survey, which explored expanding authorization of the men's boat cloak to female officers and senior enlisted Marines.

The special-order item, which can

cost upward of \$1,000, differs from the current women's evening dress cape, which is also reserved for formal evening events.

The difference in format was a vestige of the fashion of the mid-20th century, military historian Charles W. McFarlane told Business Insider last month.

Shorter evening capes designed to show off the wearer's gown were popular among civilian women at the time, and the military based the design of its dress capes on that model, McFarlane said. He noted that the Army and Navy have had some version of the boat cloak in their history as well.

The flamboyance of the garment has also proved alluring on social media. For example, a Marine master gunnery sergeant with the TikTok handle POG_ACTUAL_1169 has at least two videos highlighting the accessory.

The boat cloak was not the only Marine uniform item proposed for change in the initial survey.

An alternative pair of dress pumps with black smooth or synthetic leather for formal events also was authorized for women, according to the message. Previously, black suede and cloth were their only options, a limitation that didn't apply to male Marines.

The survey had also recommended standardizing the women's neck tab color for all khaki uniforms to match how men use only a single tie, but that proposal was not addressed and no changes were made.

In addition, all Marines will see a change regarding the gray tanker jacket, a cold-weather overgarment authorized with certain service and dress uniforms.

It is now an optional seabag item that will be issued upon entry, so members



TIA DUFOUR/U.S. Marine Corps

A Marine staff sergeant wears a boat cloak.

of the service won't have to pay for it out of pocket.

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MILITARY

USAF long-term medical shaving waivers ending

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Airmen and guardians who've been allowed to keep a beard for more than nine months for nonreligious reasons may want to add a new razor to their wish list.

All medical shaving waivers issued prior to March 1 will expire at the end of next month, the Air Force Surgeon General's office said in a statement Dec. 15.

To stay in regulation, Air Force and Space Force members on a long-term shaving profile will have to make an appointment with a military health care provider by Jan. 31 for further evaluation, the statement said, citing a memo signed by Lt. Gen. John DeGoes, the Air Force surgeon general.

Going forward, no single profile can exceed six months, and airmen and guardians accruing more than 12 months of profiles within a two-year period will be referred to their commander, the memo states.

As a result, some members of either service may need preventive education on proper shaving hygiene or even be recommended for laser hair removal, says the new guidance, which revises a January predecessor.

Ultimately, it will be up to unit commanders rather than a military health professional whether to approve a shaving profile for medical reasons, according to the new guidance.

The directive does not apply to religious accommodation shaving waivers, DeGoes said.

The previous guidance noted that extended-duration shaving profiles were generally reserved for severe cases of pseudofolliculitis barbae, or razor bumps, a skin condition caused by ingrown hairs that can make shaving painful and lead to scarring if skin is not given a chance to heal.

The condition, caused by curly hairs growing back into the skin, disproportionately affects Black men and is associated with frequent shaving, according to a study by the Society of Federal Health Professionals.

The previous guidance was intended to differentiate razor bumps from "shaving irritation," according to the surgeon general's statement.

But in September, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth directed the Pentagon "to revert to pre-2020 standards" and do away with permanent shaving profiles for medical conditions, such as razor bumps.

It's not clear, however, whether permanent conditions will result in automatic administrative separation.

Primary care managers are to evaluate service members for medical conditions, recommend profiles and submit their recommendations to a medical profile officer.

Beginning Feb. 1, 2026, airmen and guardians who accumulate more than 12 months of a shaving profile within a 24-month period will be referred to their commander.

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ANGELO MEJIA/U.S. Army

A 25th Infantry Division soldier receives a COVID-19 vaccination at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, in 2021. The Defense Department plans to review the records of thousands of service members who were discharged solely for refusing to take the vaccine and could upgrade their discharge status.

Discharge upgrades possible for COVID vaccine refusal cases

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon plans to review the records of thousands of service members who were forced out of the military solely for refusing to take the COVID-19 vaccine, and it could facilitate discharge upgrades as it sees appropriate.

Approximately 8,700 service members were involuntarily separated for not complying with the now-rescinded vaccine mandate, and more than 3,000 of them did not receive honorable discharges, the Defense Department said in a statement Dec. 15.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is directing the military services to proactively review those cases and consider potential upgrades.

The statement refers to guidance issued by the Pentagon on Dec. 10. Within 30 days, service secretaries will create and validate lists of individuals who are eligible for review. The former service members do not need to do anything to have their cases reviewed, DOD said.

The military services will then refer eligible cases to discharge review boards, which will issue decisions to every individual within one calendar year of the memorandum.

In a memo earlier this month to senior leadership outlining the policy,

Hegseth called the separations unconscionable and said those former service members were holding true to their personal and religious convictions.

"While many have applied for and received relief from our Military Department review boards, I believe the onus is on us to make this right," Hegseth said in the Dec. 6 memo. He was referring to the 3,000-plus former service members who received a general (under honorable conditions) discharge, which is a step down from an honorable discharge.

Former service members who were given a general discharge still have access to veterans benefits.

The military's COVID-19 vaccination mandate for active-duty service members began in August 2021 and was later extended to members of the National Guard and reservists. Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ended the mandate in 2023 but did not change the status of service members who were separated for refusing the vaccine.

Under President Donald Trump, the Pentagon recently announced that discharged service members can pursue reinstatement up to April 2026.

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