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‘A lot of lethality really fast’

US potency on display during exercise in Hungary **Page 2**



Army Sgt. David Cook, a combat medic with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Vilseck, Germany, talks about his Stryker vehicle with Hungarian Cpl. Peter Walsch during exercise Saber Guardian in Hungary, on June 16.

MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Allies train to deliver power with speed

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

VESZPREM, Hungary — Hungarian army Cpl. Peter Walsch waited for the ordnance to stop falling to poke his head into an American Stryker vehicle for a chat with a group of U.S. Army medical personnel.

A drone pilot assigned to Hungary's noncommissioned officer academy in Szentendre, Walsch wanted to know about U.S. Army battlefield triage techniques.

The conversation with combat medic Sgt. David Cook of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment seamlessly switched to food, travel, family and why each man chose to serve. Both said they wanted to be a part of something bigger and care for their young families.

"We have a lot in common," Walsch said. "(The U.S. soldiers) are professionals so they know what they're doing. It's always a good exchange of experiences, how they do their drills and how they react."

He and Cook exchanged contact information and vowed to meet someday for Hungarian goulash.

"Just exchanging that information brings the nations together," Cook said. "Understanding commonality between each other is always a good foundation to have."

Walsch and Cook were among the approximately 2,650 soldiers from Hungary, the U.S. and Spain at the Zero Point Firing and Training Range in Veszprem on June 16 as part of the biennial Saber Guardian exercise.

About 400 U.S. soldiers from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment and the Ansbach-based 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade traveled overnight in 116 vehicles through the Czech Republic and Slovakia to be there. They were ready to fight within eight hours of arrival.

The training in Veszprem included urban warfare and the coordinated assault by helicopter gunships, tanks, fighting vehicles, artillery and mortars.

The drills started with the identification of simulated enemy forces using a combination of aircraft and reconnaissance. The targets, including enemy air defenses, were softened with an array of mortar and artillery strikes.

Then, over a dozen Hungarian Lynx infantry fighting vehicles, Leopard 2A7 battle tanks, U.S. Strykers, Spanish Centauro combat and reconnaissance



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Army Spc. Michael Blackshire of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment shows off a mortar round outside his Stryker vehicle during Saber Guardian in Veszprem, Hungary.



A Spanish Centauro cavalry and reconnaissance vehicle traverses the Zero Point Firing and Training Range during Saber Guardian.

vehicles, and lighter ground surveillance vehicles moved forward methodically, providing covering fire for one another as they destroyed vehicle targets downrange.

In one final flurry, the Strykers launched several TOW anti-tank missiles. The action left fires burning in the hulks of smoldering vehicles long afterward.

Lt. Col. James Anderson, commander of 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment and commander of ground forces for the exercise, was pleased. The exercise sends a distinct message, he said.

"The biggest takeaway from this is the U.S. Army's ability to travel over incredibly long distances very rapidly and deliver a lot of lethality really fast," he said. "If you're an adversary, you don't want us to show up."

The range at Veszprem is in western Hungary about 275 miles from the

country's border with Ukraine, where war continues to rage more than three years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

The threat posed by Russia cast an ever-present shadow that loomed over the exercise, Lt. Gen. Charles Costanza, commander of the Army's V Corps, said after the maneuvers concluded.

"I think the biggest thing is that for (the Hungarians), the threat from Russia is real," Costanza said. "We have to learn how to fight together."

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said last month that Russia could reconstitute its armed forces and be prepared to attack the alliance within five years.

Saber Guardian included training in Germany, Hungary and Romania, an Army statement said. Approximately 10,000 troops will participate in convoys, river crossings, aerial operations and live-fire events.

Relations between the U.S. and Hun-



Spanish soldier Jorge Elvira shows off a British Accuracy International bolt-action sniper rifle.



Maj. Andrew Hayden, aide-de-camp to V Corps commander Lt. Gen. Charles Costanza, gets a tour of the Hungarian Leopard 2A7 main battle tank.

gary, both NATO allies, have markedly improved recently, Hungarian defense chief Gen. Gabor Borondi said.

President Donald Trump is known to have a positive relationship with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Trump called Orban a "great man" during a conservative conference in May.

Tensions dating to a 2015 migrant crisis and other factors had strained the relationship, Borondi recalled.

Hungary has a strong commitment to NATO and bilateral ties with the U.S., Borondi said, adding that the Hungarians communicate in English during training and use the same tactics, techniques and procedures as the Americans do.

"We are one team," he said.

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MILITARY

Army testing life-saving piloting system

In-flight system can detect when pilot is incapacitated, get aircraft back home

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

An Army in-flight system that can detect when a pilot is incapacitated and get the aircraft back to base has passed a key test, giving the service a boost in its quest to develop autonomous technology.

The May test flight at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., paired a medical monitoring device similar to an EKG with an autopilot system in a UH-60 Black Hawk, an Army statement said.

A team from the service's Combat Capabilities Development Command Aviation and Missile Center used an armband to pick up medical distress from a pilot and safely return the Black Hawk to Felker Army Airfield, test pilot Lt. Col. Greg Sievers said in an interview earlier this month.

On May 1, the Black Hawk took off with Sievers, center test pilot Carl Ott and flight engineer James Carr for the 90-minute flight, according to the statement.

The medical device simulated incapacitation, and the autonomous system checked with the pilots for a response, Ott said. When no response was provided, the aircraft successfully returned to base without human assistance.

The Black Hawk was equipped with autonomous software that receives data from lidar sensors that can detect obstacles and scan landing areas, Ott said.

He added that pairing medical monitoring devices with aircraft controls for supervised autonomy is a requirement of the Army's next-generation long-range assault aircraft program, which began in 2019 to find a tiltrotor replacement for the Black Hawk.

The Army intends for the system to be available across all aviation platforms, Ott said.

For the test, which Sievers said was repeated twice with the same result, the autonomous flight system was



PHOTOS BY CRISTA MARY MACK/U.S. Air Force

Army test pilots, aircrew and safety officers are briefed prior to an experimental autonomous flight at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., in May.



A UH-60 Black Hawk successfully used an autonomous flight system to return to Joint Base Langley-Eustis, after receiving medical distress signals simulating pilot incapacitation.

switched on manually.

The service still needs to figure out when to have the autopilot mode automatically kick in on its own after recognizing that the human operator is unresponsive, Sievers said.

The project began late last year, when the Army Aeromedical Research Lab approached Florida-based Tiger Tech Solutions, a company that makes human performance and health mon-

itoring wearables.

Tiger Tech's armband sets a baseline of biomarkers for its wearer, from oxygen levels to temperature and heart rate, CEO Harrison Whittels said. It then can send a signal using Bluetooth to the aircraft indicating drastic changes or pilot distress.

"This has never been done in the history of aviation," Whittels said. "This is the next frontier."



Tiger Tech Solutions CEO Harrison Whittels fits a monitoring armband on Army Development Command test pilot Lt. Col. Greg Sievers before a flight at Joint Base Langley-Eustis.

"This has never been done in the history of aviation. This is the next frontier."

Harrison Whittels
Tiger Tech Solutions

Once the armband was ready, the lab approached the development command in March to plan the test. The technology is still in the early stages, with more tests of the autonomous system ahead.

But it could be a game-changer for saving lives and aircraft in future wars, said Col. Justin Highley, commander of the center's Technology Development Directorate.

"At some point, the aircraft could essentially take over and then just come to a hover or go to a holding pattern, or you return to base," Highley said. "We want to be able to integrate and test (these systems) and figure out what combination of technologies make the most sense to give to our warfighters."

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MILITARY

Revisions to Air Force PT taking shape

Effort aims to revive service's warrior ethos

BY ZADE VADNAIS
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is preparing major changes to its physical fitness assessments, according to its top enlisted member.

An internal message posted on social media Monday from Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force David Flosi says the service is "likely going to" implement biannual testing for all airmen, bring back waist measurements to assess body composition and replace the 1.5-mile run with a 2-mile version.

The authenticity of the message was confirmed by a Flosi representative, but officials declined to say whether the specific changes it mentions will in fact be implemented.

The service is finalizing updates to its physical training policies as part of efforts to "revive warrior ethos," an Air Force spokesperson said in response to questions.

The current fitness assessment includes a cardiovascular component — either a 1.5-mile run or a 20-meter shuttle run introduced in 2022 — along with pushups and situps or approved alternatives.

Airmen who score 90 or higher out of a possible 100 points are currently



TIFFANY DEL Oso/U.S. Air Force

Airmen run during a physical fitness assessment at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash., in October.

allowed to test just once per year, a policy introduced in 2010 as an incentive for high performers. That exemption is expected to be eliminated under the new guidance.

The updates also aim to correct pandemic-era policies that did not adequately prepare airmen for operational demands, according to the spokesperson.

In 2020, amid COVID-19 restrictions, the Air Force removed waist circumference as a scored component of the

fitness test and moved it to a standalone body composition program. At the time, officials said the change was permanent.

Since then, airmen have been required to schedule a separate waist measurement during their birth month in addition to completing their fitness assessments.

The measurement will likely be reintegrated into the fitness test and scored using a height-to-waist ratio chart, replacing the pre-2020 version,

which did not account for height, according to Flosi's message.

The overhaul follows a March 12 directive from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth calling for a rapid reassessment of physical training standards across the military.

Hegseth told the undersecretary for personnel and readiness to gather information on military standards "pertaining to physical fitness, body composition and grooming" and review changes to the standards since 2015.

Flosi's message is not dated, but it was sent to senior enlisted leaders on June 19.

In February, the Air Force briefly updated its official fitness assessment scorecard to include waist circumference as a scored element but removed the category just days later without explanation.

In April, Stars and Stripes obtained an internal email summarizing fitness assessment changes planned for Air Force recruits in both basic and technical training. Air Education and Training Command, which oversees both programs, declined to provide further information.

The Air Force has not formally updated its fitness assessment guidance since 2022. Officials say new instructions will be released once finalized.

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Former soldier pleads guilty to trying to sell secrets

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

SEATTLE — A former Army sergeant with an intelligence unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., pleaded guilty to charges that he tried to sell military secrets to China, according to federal authorities.

Joseph Daniel Schmidt, 31, faces penalties of up to 10 years in jail and a \$250,000 fine for each count of retention of national security information and attempt to deliver national security information, the U.S. attorney for the Western District of Washington said.

Schmidt's guilty plea was entered June 18 during a hearing before U.S. Magistrate Judge Brian Tsuchida at the U.S. District Court for Western

Washington in Seattle. He is scheduled to be sentenced Sept. 9.

Schmidt was a team leader in the human intelligence section of the 109th Military Intelligence Battalion at the Army-Air Force base from January 2015 to January 2020, according to court records. The unit provided intelligence to I Corps, the Army's Indo-Pacific command, based at Lewis-McChord.

In his position, Schmidt had access to secret U.S. military information. He learned to speak Mandarin during his time in the Army and traveled at least once to China while off duty.

After leaving the Army in early 2020, Schmidt contacted the Chinese Consulate in Turkey and visited Istanbul to

interest Chinese intelligence officers in documents that he had taken from the Army. He also emailed Chinese security forces offering to turn over national defense information.

Schmidt moved to Hong Kong in March 2020 and contacted Chinese intelligence services again trying to pass classified information. He also offered to turn over a device that allows for access to secure U.S. military computer systems.

In addition to the documents, Schmidt sought a position with the Chinese as an intelligence or security asset. During his time in China, he traveled to Beijing. Schmidt emailed information to news media in China affiliated with the government.

Schmidt's case file offered little insight into his motivation beyond an email that he sent to his sister.

"I learned some really terrible things about the American government while I was working in the Army, and I no longer feel safe living in America or like I want to support the American government," he wrote.

Schmidt was indicted Oct. 4, 2023, and a warrant for his arrest was issued. The Chinese did not renew his visa and Schmidt was arrested at San Francisco International Airport when he arrived on a flight from Hong Kong on Oct. 6, 2023. Schmidt initially entered a plea of not guilty to the charges.

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MILITARY

DOD moves control of Greenland operations

Strategic island will shift from EUCOM to NORTHCOM

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Northern Command will now oversee American military troops and operations in Greenland, which has long been the responsibility of U.S. European Command, the Pentagon announced.

The move comes as President Donald Trump has long mused about taking control of the island, which he has argued is critical to U.S. national security and protecting its Arctic interests.

Trump ordered the change under a biennial review of the Unified Command Plan, which organizes the responsibilities for each of the Pentagon's geographic combatant commands, Sean Parnell, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said in a statement.

"This change will strengthen the joint force's ability to defend the U.S. homeland, contributing to a more robust defense of the Western Hemisphere and deepening relationships with Arctic allies and partners," Parnell said.

While largely symbolic, the change appears to signal the Trump administration's intentions of portraying control of Greenland as critical to the



DANIEL BARNHORST/U.S. Air Force

Maj. David Brown boards his F-16 Fighting Falcon at Pituffik Space Base, Greenland, in February.

defense of the U.S. homeland, which is NORTHCOM's primary mission.

Greenland, which has a population of some 57,000 people, is geographically part of North America, but it has long been culturally and politically associated with Europe. Though its inhabitants have autonomous rule in Greenland, it is a territory of Denmark. It is also home to a U.S. military installation, Pituffik Space Base, which houses about 150 Air Force and Space Force troops who use it primarily for missile warning, missile defense and space

surveillance.

Trump floated the idea of purchasing Greenland during his first term, and he has repeatedly called for the United States to take control of Greenland since his return to the White House in January.

Last month, Trump declined to rule out taking Greenland by force if Denmark declines to part with the island.

"I don't say I'm going to do it, but I don't rule out anything," Trump told NBC News. "We need Greenland very badly."

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth refused to tell House lawmakers outright whether the Pentagon had plans to take Greenland — and Panama — by force.

"Our job at the [Defense Department] is to have plans," Hegseth told Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash. "I think the American people would want the Pentagon to have plans for any particular contingency and thankfully we are in the planning business."

His response drew condemnation from Democrats and Republicans, including Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, who attempted later to get Hegseth to walk back his response.

"It is not your testimony today that there are plans at the Pentagon for taking by force or invading Greenland, correct?" Turner asked Hegseth. "Because I sure as hell hope that it is not your testimony."

Hegseth responded: "We look forward to working with Greenland to make sure it is secured from any potential threats."

The moving of Greenland from EUCOM's area of responsibility to NORTHCOM's is not unprecedented. Congress requires the Pentagon to review its Unified Command Plan every two years. In 2021, the Pentagon moved Israel from EUCOM's purview into the responsibility of U.S. Central Command, which oversees military operations across the Middle East.

Stars and Stripes reporter Svetlana Shkolnikova contributed to this report.

Hegseth orders formation of recruitment task force

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered the formation of a task force intended to bolster and coordinate recruitment by the military services, the Pentagon said in a news release.

The task force "will work swiftly to position the Services to overcome recruiting obstacles, remain competitive, and build on recent recruiting momentum," the release said.

The task force will be jointly chaired by Sean Parnell, assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs, and the undersecretary of defense for per-

sonnel and readiness. Jules Hurst is performing the duties of the undersecretary.

The task force will operate under a relatively speedy timeline, with an initial report and an assessment of the current recruiting environment due within 30 days, according to the release. It will then have 60 days to develop a list of policy recommendations and legislative proposals.

Hegseth ordered the completion of a comprehensive communication and engagement plan within 90 days.

The task force's establishment comes as overall recruitment across

the services improved during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, after the Army, Navy and Air Force missed their recruiting goals in the previous fiscal year.

The Army announced this month that it had already met its active-duty recruiting goal for 2025, the earliest the target has been reached in more than a decade.

The service also reached its target for new enlistment last year.

Army Secretary Dan Driscoll credited the service's roughly 10,000 recruiters for achieving the goal.

Members of the task force will in-

clude subject matter experts from across the Defense Department. The secretaries of each military branch will select members for the task force, which will include experts in recruitment policy and marketing and in public affairs.

Members of the task force must be active-duty service members or federal employees and will spend 10 to 15 hours per week on task force duties.

The task force is slated to stand up for a year.

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MILITARY

Troubled contract for military moves ended

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department on Wednesday ended the troubled contract with a private firm tasked with overhauling the movement of household goods for service members and their families.

The contract with HomeSafe Alliance was terminated for cause due to its “demonstrated inability to fulfill their obligations and deliver high quality moves to Service members,” the Pentagon said in a June 18 news release.

The release did not detail specific failures by HomeSafe, but the firm has been plagued with complaints of late pickups and deliveries for months, prompting the Army in April to entirely suspend moves through HomeSafe.

In November 2021, U.S. Transportation Command awarded a \$20 billion contract to the Houston-based firm to handle relocation management work that until then was being done by more than 900 commercial entities for roughly 350,000 moves a year.

HomeSafe is a joint venture between Tier One Relocation and KBR, formerly Kellogg Brown & Root.

HomeSafe did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment on the termination.

The firm was tasked with overseeing all subcontracts for packing, trucking, shipping and storage of goods in moves under the Global Household Goods Contract, or GHC.

Moves under GHC began in earnest in January but were so troubled that several U.S. senators launched inquiries into the contract.

In May, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered sweeping changes to how GHC was being implemented, creating the Permanent Change of Station Joint Task Force to more closely oversee the overhaul.

Transportation Command’s legacy tender-of-service system for relocations had continued to operate in tandem with GHC, with the expectation that the legacy system would be essentially phased out this year.

In May, Hegseth ordered Transportation Command to “fully lev-



JENN DEHAAN/U.S. Army

A mover rolls household goods into a truck at Fort Knox, Ky.

erage” both GHC and the legacy program to handle the summer peak season for PCS moves.

Hegseth has named Army Maj. Gen. Lance Curtis to lead the PCS task force, according to the Pentagon news release.

Curtis is the commander of the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command.

Katie McMichael, executive director of Movers for America, a coalition that has pushed back on GHC’s implementation, commended the Defense Department for ending the contract in

an emailed statement.

“For many months, military families and those who move them have sounded the alarm about the failure of the GHC rollout,” she said.

“We welcome Secretary Hegseth’s swift action to course correct, and we urge the newly established PCS Joint Task Force to continue collaborating with experienced industry representatives as plans for the strategic path forward are now underway.”

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Navy offers jobs ashore to its non-deployable sailors

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

A new Navy program is giving non-deployable sailors a second chance to serve by placing them in shore-based assignments instead of forcing early separation.

The voluntary program, called EMPLOY, was launched by Navy Personnel Command and the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. It allows sailors sidelined by medical conditions, such as injury or illness, to fill billets that would otherwise remain vacant.

“EMPLOY sailors ... will not compete with Sailors rotating from sea to shore,” Rear Adm. Wayne Baze, head of the Personnel Command, said in a June 9 administrative message. “EMPLOY helps to retain our talent.”

The Navy says more than 7,800 sailors are now in a non-deployable status, including those in limited duty or un-



HANNAH FRY/U.S. Navy

The Navy’s EMPLOY program allows sailors sidelined by medical conditions, such as injury or illness, to fill billets that would otherwise remain vacant.

der review by the Disability Evaluation System. Many of them are still capable

of contributing to stateside roles.

“EMPLOY benefits both the sailor and the Navy,” Lt. Cmdr. Stuart Phillips, a Navy spokesman, in a June 17 email. “We invest a significant amount of time and money in training and developing sailors, and sometimes, they find themselves in a temporary non-deployable status due to injury or a serious illness.”

The program matches sailors to jobs that align with their training and experience — even as they recover, Phillips said. For example, a sailor under monitoring after cancer may still be eligible to work in a shore command.

“To be clear we aren’t lowering or changing standards,” he wrote. “We’re finding ways to keep our Sailors contributing to the mission from ashore while giving them time to recover from illnesses and injuries until they can return to sea duty.”

Sailors must volunteer and meet requirements, including medical provider endorsement, a medical evaluation board and command approval, Phillips said.

The Personnel Command then reviews candidates and assigns them to available billets.

If approved, sailors are reevaluated periodically, and no later than 15 months before their next rotation, according to the Navy administrative message.

Based on their condition, they may return to sea duty, train for a new role or be separated from active service.

Roughly 850 sailors have been considered for EMPLOY so far, and more than 300 have been retained, Phillips said.

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MILITARY

Wearable, mounted tech targets drones

Project Flytrap brings more sophisticated tactics to small units

By **LYDIA GORDON**
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — An array of new drone-busting technology went for a soldierly spin earlier this month at the Army's expansive training grounds in Bavaria, where units are looking for a tactical edge on a transforming modern battlefield.

Troops from the Vilseck-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment took part in a new initiative called Project Flytrap at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, using vehicle-mounted and wearable systems designed to detect, track and jam hostile drones.

The initiative is part of an effort to identify which tools best meet evolving combat demands. Project Flytrap is a high priority for Army leadership, said Col. Donald Neal Jr., the regiment's commander.

The Hohenfels training is the latest effort by the Army to incorporate more sophisticated drone warfare tactics into small-unit formations.

It coincides with a broader U.S. military push to draw lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, where cheap drones have been used to destroy everything from advancing infantry units and tanks to advanced Russian bombers.

Among the systems being tested are the Wingman and Pitbull wearable devices as well as EchoShield radar systems mounted on vehicles.

"This (project) ... has been paramount for us," Staff Sgt. Matthew Salinas, a master unmanned aerial systems operator with the regiment, said. "(It) has been allowing us to be able to be ahead of the curve."

Working in tandem, the Wingman detects drones and sends pings to an earpiece worn by the user, while the Pitbull jams them using radio frequencies. The EchoShield adds long-range detection and tracking capabilities.

"With the equipment that we've been given ... these soldiers at even the lower levels are able to easily detect and engage these drones," said Pvt.



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers set up the Pulsar counter-drone radar and jammer at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, on June 19. The Pulsar is a machine learning-enabled radar capable of long-distance jamming.



Army Chief Technology Officer Alex Miller, center, operates the Smartshooter, a mountable scope that uses artificial intelligence to lock on to drones and assists in firing, during Project Flytrap at Hohenfels on June 18.

Khadrae Graham, an infantryman. He added that the EchoShield allows him to track drones up to roughly 9,000 feet away, including their direction and speed.

Troops also mounted the Smartshooter system to their rifles. It uses artificial intelligence to track and lock on to aerial targets, enabling more precise targeting and engagement.



Pfc. Christopher Rangel of the Vilseck-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment operates the Wingman wearable counter-drone radar during Project Flytrap at Hohenfels.

"You don't have to worry about it," said Pfc. Genrikh Kovalchuk, also an infantryman. "Just put (the rifle) on semi, squeeze the trigger and then the computer itself will realize when you have to actually let that round go and hit the drone."

Alex Miller, the Army's chief technology officer, observed the exercise and worked with soldiers to assess usability and integration at the squad level.

He said the goal is to develop tools that are practical and economical.

"What we're trying to do is figure out how ... we build something that's a couple thousand dollars to destroy something that's only a couple thousand dollars," Miller said.

Miller outlined the counter-drone process as a three-part sequence: sensing, deciding and acting.

The focus is on identifying affordable radar systems that tie everything together with a network and then selecting electronic warfare tools "to either jam it or knock something out of the sky before we have to blow it up," he said.

Neal, the regiment commander, said the unit is in the third phase of the project. The previous stages involved data collection and systems familiarization.

The project will culminate in August with live-fire drills in Poland that will put the new technology to the test.

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VETERANS

High court: Vets qualify for disability pay

Thousands of medically retired veterans to get retroactive combat disability pay

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Thousands of medically retired veterans are eligible for additional retroactive combat disability pay following a Supreme Court decision that ends a cap on compensation for individuals with less than 20 years of service.

The court unanimously ruled in favor of Marine Corps veteran Simon Soto, who filed a class-action lawsuit arguing the federal government incorrectly reduced the combat-related special compensation that he received after military service.

Under federal law, retired veterans waive a portion of their military retirement pay to receive disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

But veterans receiving combat-related disability pay are an exception under a statute that Congress passed in 2008, according to the Supreme Court decision issued June 12.

Justice Clarence Thomas, writing for the court, stated, “Where, as here, the statutory scheme involves a small group of particularly deserving claimants, it is not extraordinary to think that Congress wished to forgo a limitations period.”

The National Veterans Legal Services Program, a nonprofit firm that represented Soto, estimated the court decision could affect up to 9,000 com-

“The court’s ruling ensures that combat-disabled veterans will receive all the combat-related special compensation they are entitled to by law.”

Tacy Flint
attorney with Sidley Austin

bat-disabled veterans.

Soto’s case had been pending before the Supreme Court since last fall. The court heard oral arguments in April.

Soto, a former corporal who is 100% disabled, had served from 2000 to 2006 with two deployments to Iraq before he was medically retired. Soto worked in mortuary affairs while on active duty. His job was to search for and recover U.S. war casualties, according to court documents.

“He struggled to adjust to civilian life following deployment and eventually received a diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder,” according to court documents.

PTSD is a mental health condition that can develop from witnessing ter-



U.S. Army

Medics and soldiers load a patient onto the airstrip at Forward Operating Base Summerall near Bayji, Iraq, after a car bomb at the base’s front gate in 2004.

rifying events.

Soto filed for combat-related disability compensation in 2016. The payment is non-taxable, and retirees must apply to their service branch to receive it, according to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service at the Defense Department.

The Navy had granted Soto combat-related special compensation but incorrectly applied a six-year statute of limitation to calculate retroactive payments, giving him compensation back to 2010, according to the decision.

The Navy cited a federal law called the Barring Act.

Soto’s pay was backdated to July 2010 based on the Barring Act, which requires veterans to file compensation claims within six years of receiving a VA disability rating, according to court documents.

But the Supreme Court ruled there is no six-year cap.

Under a statute adopted by Congress in 2008, “a retired veteran who establishes that his disability is attributable to a combat-related injury may receive special compensation up to the amount of waived retired pay,” according to the court’s decision.

The Supreme Court stated: “The Barring [Act] establishes default settlement procedures for claims against the government and subjects most claims to a six-year limitations period. However, the act includes an exception: If another law confers authority to settle a claim against the govern-

ment, that law displaces the Barring Act’s settlement mechanism, including its limitations period.”

“We are grateful that the Supreme Court recognized that Congress intended veterans to receive the full amount of their combat-related special compensation, no matter when they seek it,” said Paul Wright, director of the National Veterans Legal Services Program.

Sidley Austin, a private law firm headquartered in Chicago, and the National Veterans Legal Services Program filed a lawsuit in federal court in 2017 on behalf of Soto and similar veterans denied more than six years of retroactive combat disability pay.

“The court’s ruling ensures that combat-disabled veterans will receive all the combat-related special compensation they are entitled to by law,” said Tacy Flint, an attorney with Sidley Austin.

In 2021, a district court in Texas ordered the government to pay all military retirees whose combat-related compensation had been limited.

But a circuit court later reversed the ruling on appeal, prompting Soto’s attorneys to file a petition in 2024 with the Supreme Court.

“Because of this decision [by the Supreme Court], thousands of combat-disabled veterans will finally receive the full amount of the compensation they earned through their service,” Wright said.

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