

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

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## Tricky turning point

Call for military 'independence' from US spotlights Europe's vulnerabilities **Page 2**

German soldiers practice clearing a room during an exercise this month at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany. Friedrich Merz, likely Germany's next chancellor, says Europe needs to prepare to go it alone without the United States.

CARLOS MARQUEZ/U.S. Army



## COVER STORY

# European 'independence' from US eyed

Nations would need 50 new brigades and 300,000 more troops

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — The man poised to be Germany's next leader delivered a jolt this week when he warned that the demise of NATO in its current form could be at hand and said Europe must chart a military course separate from the United States.

Friedrich Merz's center-right Christian Democratic Union party won the federal election, positioning him to lead a government that will grapple with how to deter Russian aggression in an era where American largesse is no longer a guarantee.



Merz

"My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that step by step, we can really achieve independence from the USA," Merz said on a post-election debate show.

"I never thought I would have to say something like this on a television program," added Merz, a longtime advocate of close relations with Washington.

Germany and its neighbors would face a daunting challenge in funding and fielding an independent defense capable of turning back Russian forces.

At a minimum, Europe will need to field 50 new combat brigades and some 300,000 troops to offset what the U.S. would be expected to contribute in the event of a Russian attack, according to an analysis by Bruegel, a Brussels-based think tank.

To prevent a rapid Russian breakthrough in the Baltics, for example, Europeans would need a minimum of 1,400 tanks, 2,000 infantry fighting vehicles and 700 artillery systems, the report said.

"This is more combat power than currently exists in the French, German, Italian and British land forces combined," stated the report, published Feb. 21.

Europeans also would need to surge



ROLYN KROFF/U.S. Army

**German soldiers drive their Leopard 2A6 tank during a competition at the Grafenwoehr Training Area. Friedrich Merz, likely Germany's next chancellor, says Europe must prepare to guarantee its security without the United States.**

beyond the "barebones stockpiles" of munitions currently available. An estimated 1 million 155 mm shells would be the minimum for a stockpile large enough for 90 days of high-intensity combat, the report said.

NATO officials have warned that Russia's wartime economy could have the country in a position to threaten allies within five years.

Bruegel's analysis detailed numerous other shortfalls that allies would struggle to fill. More aviation and transport assets, missile and drone warfare capabilities and intelligence systems for identifying enemy targets would be required.

Bruegel said the various necessities would cost more than \$250 billion annually, or roughly 3.5% of gross domestic product, for European countries.

There's debate about whether Europe is up to such a task.

There also are questions about whether there is enough time to act, given how far behind the Europeans are in matching Russia's military output.

Andrew Michta, an expert on European security at the Atlantic Council think tank, said the "delta" between the level of Russia's force reconstitution and the many deficiencies in most of Europe's militaries means "the risk of

war in Europe is real."

And the neglect of Europe's industrial base over the years means it will take a "decade before any real capabilities can be fielded," Michta said on X.

Such circumstances mean that there is no substituting American involvement on the Continent, Michta said.

Others counter that the United States has become too unreliable.

"Europe can't afford to wait and see if the U.S. will back us," said Benjamin Tallis, director of the Berlin-based Democratic Strategy Initiative. "We can't rely on the U.S. — from now, until they fix their problem," a reference to President Donald Trump's approach to Europe.

In a back-and-forth with Michta on X, Tallis said Europe should turbocharge investment in high-end capabilities, such as precision munitions, to counter Russia's mass rather than try to replicate the American military.

Despite being bogged down in Ukraine and suffering casualties estimated in the hundreds of thousands, Russia now fields a larger military than it did at the start of the war three years ago. And it is churning out munitions at a faster pace than all of Europe combined.

In 2024 alone, Russia produced an

estimated 1,550 tanks, a 220% increase from 2022, Bruegel said.

Military analysts and allies along Russia's periphery, such as Poland and the Baltic states, have warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin's territorial ambitions could eventually extend beyond just Ukraine.

Putin himself has compared his campaign in Ukraine to the 18th-century empire expansions of Peter the Great.

Trump's recent assertions that Ukraine is responsible for the war there and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a dictator have rattled allies already wary about the American president's long-held skepticism about the value of NATO.

While many allies are anticipating significant U.S. troop reductions in Europe at some point, Trump hasn't made his position clear yet.

Merz said he was uneasy about the future.

As allies prepare for a NATO summit in June, the question is "whether we will still be talking about NATO in its current form or whether we will have to establish an independent European defense capability much more quickly," Merz said.

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## MILITARY

# Drones, AI take center stage in Mideast

Exercise normally focuses on mines, explosive ordnance

By SHANNON RENFROE  
*Stars and Stripes*

MANAMA, Bahrain — A recent U.S.-led maritime exercise in the Middle East shifted its focus to building artificial intelligence and drone capabilities as the Navy and its partners work to address increasingly sophisticated threats in the region.

The emphasis represents a change at this year's International Maritime Exercise, which normally focuses on mines and explosive ordnance disposal, among other training.

It also comes as the Navy and other nations in the region prioritize adaptation to technology used by Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Yemen and other countries, service officials say.

For example, Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen have launched swarm drone attacks against ships in the Red Sea in the past year.

The U.S. and its partner navies in the region also are defending against cyberattacks on their systems, Vice Adm. George Wikoff, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, said.

"Cyberattacks are a great example of where AI can make a real impact," Wikoff said, adding that it has "great promise" as a cyber protection tool.

AI also is becoming a bigger factor in stopping adversaries, Wikoff said.

Information picked up by Navy sensors in the sea regarding such activity as drug or weapons smuggling can be evaluated more efficiently using AI, which allows a better understanding of what is happening in regional waterways, he said.

"Our ability to get through that data and find what's really important is always a challenge, and AI is helping accelerate that," Wikoff said.

He noted that Task Force 59, a Bahrain-based unit focused on testing and deploying drones and using AI, has played an important role in leading Navy security efforts at sea.

Wikoff made the comments as the 12-day IMX25 ended this month. The



ARIF PATANI/U.S. Navy

**Chief Petty Officer Davin James, right, provides instructions to Jordanian navy 1st Sgt. Mohammed Alqeisy before a dive during International Maritime Exercise 25 in Aqaba, Jordan, on Feb. 13.**



Stars and Stripes;

**Sailors with the Navy's Task Force 59 launch a drone boat from a pier at Naval Support Activity Bahrain in 2022.**

exercise also included noncombatant evacuation, search and seizure, vessel defense, search and rescue, and mass casualty response, the Navy said.

It was linked to Cutlass Express, an exercise in eastern and southern Africa led by U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa. Together, there were about 30

countries and 5,000 personnel participating in the exercises, the Navy said.

The maritime portions took place in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and northern Indian Ocean.

"If you look around the room today, you'll see naval personnel from every

continent on the Earth with the exception of Antarctica," Wikoff said during the exercise's closing ceremony.

This year's IMX took place during a period of relative calm in the region. That is chiefly due to the Houthi militants' stoppage of their attacks on ships in the Red Sea because of a ceasefire reached between Israel and Hamas in Gaza last month.

Even so, there were about 50% fewer participants in the exercise than in previous years, Navy officials noted. In 2022, about 60 nations participated, they said.

Wikoff attributed the drop to the fact that navies are stretched by multiple global obligations, adding that participant numbers aren't the sole factor determining success.

"It's about the quality of the training and (whether) those that participate ... get what they want out of it," Wikoff said.

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## MILITARY

# Navy on track to meet recruiting goal

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Navy is on track to meet its recruiting goal for the second consecutive year, the service announced this month, just four months into fiscal 2025.

The sea service has contracted about 14,000 recruits since October, according to a post shared by the Navy to the social media site X. Of those, more than 12,700 have shipped out to Great Lakes, Ill., for the service's basic training program, according to an official.

The recruits mark significant progress in the service's effort to recruit 40,600 new sailors by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year. If the Navy achieves the goal, it would be the second consecutive year that the service has met its highest recruiting goal in 20 years.

"Bravo Zulu to [the Navy] for their continued improvement in recruiting numbers and welcoming the next generation of warfighters serving with honor, courage and commitment," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a message shared to X.

Typically, the service begins sharing



CHRISTOPHER M. O'GRADY/U.S. Navy

**Petty Officer 2nd Class Jennifer Andujar adjusts a recruit's cover during Navy Recruit Training Command's Pass in Review in Great Lakes, Ill., on Feb. 6.**

its recruiting data closer to the end of the fiscal year — in late summer or early fall. But the Navy took to social media this month to tout the near 35% milestone.

In August, Navy officials said they were seeing significant results in

recruiting after years of loosening requirements to combat missed enlistment goals. The Navy ultimately contracted 40,978 recruits from October 2023 to September 2024, surpassing its goal of 40,600.

The service set its recruiting goal of

active-duty sailors for fiscal 2024 to attempt to make up for shortfalls from previous years. In 2022 and 2023, the Navy only contracted 22,000 and 30,000 sailors, respectively. Those same years, the Navy also emptied its delayed-entry pool, a program that allows people to sign up for the armed forces up to one year before they start basic training.

The Navy's announcement comes about one month after the Army touted its recruiting success.

Then-Army Secretary Christine Wormuth told The Associated Press in January that the Army is on pace to bring in 61,000 recruits by the end of the fiscal year in September and will have more than 20,000 additional young people signed up in the delayed entry program for 2026. It's the second consecutive year of meeting the goals.

In total, by Sept. 30, the services recruited about 225,000 new troops — about 25,000 more than the previous year.

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## Carrier captain fired after collision with cargo ship

By ALISON BATH  
AND CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman has been fired following a collision with a cargo ship near the Suez Canal, the Navy announced this month.

Capt. Dave Snowden was relieved of duty on Feb. 20 due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command, the service said in a statement the same day.

Snowden, who had served as the aircraft carrier's commanding officer since December 2023, will be temporarily assigned to Naval Air Forces Atlantic.

"The U.S. Navy holds commanding officers to the highest standard and takes action to hold them accountable when those standards are not met. Naval leaders are entrusted with significant responsibilities to their sailors and their ships," the Navy said.

Capt. Christopher Hill, commanding

officer of the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, will temporarily serve as Truman's interim commanding officer, the Navy said.

Hill led the Eisenhower during its nine-month extended deployment last year in the Middle East.

The Eisenhower returned from its deployment in July and is currently undergoing scheduled maintenance at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Virginia.

Snowden's dismissal comes after Truman was involved in a late-night collision on Feb. 12 with Panama-flagged Besiktas-M in a congested area near the Suez Canal.

The mishap left the carrier with scrapes and gashes along its right back end, including a small slash that penetrated its hull well above the waterline.

There were no injuries, and there was no flooding.

Truman's propulsion system was not damaged, the Navy said at the time. The collision remains under investigation.

But the collision, which is under investigation, damaged a line handling space, the fantail and a platform above a storage space.

The exterior walls of two storage rooms and a maintenance space also were included in initial damage assessments.

The ship, along with embarked Carrier Air Wing 1, remains at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete undergoing an extensive structural assessment.

That examination will cover Truman's hull and bulkheads to ensure they can bear weight. Bulkheads are interior vertical walls that form compartments within a ship.

It's too soon to say how long the inspection will take and when a comprehensive damage assessment will be available, but the evaluation won't include Truman's flight deck, Cmdr. Timothy Gorman, a spokesman for U.S. 6th Fleet, told Stars and Stripes.

He noted that the carrier conducted

flight operations several days after the collision.

According to the Navy, the firing of Snowden will have no impact on the Truman's deployment schedule in the Mediterranean.

Unless more serious damage is discovered, the carrier could be quickly repaired and soon resume its deployment, analysts told Stars and Stripes.

Truman's absence from the Middle East probably won't hinder regional U.S. security efforts, which could include a surge in destroyers or other warships, if needed, they said.

The cruiser USS Gettysburg and the destroyer USS Stout, also part of the Truman Carrier Strike Group, are in the Red Sea.

The destroyer USS Jason Dunham, escorting Truman at the time of the collision, remains in the Mediterranean.

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## MILITARY

# Story about veterans told by veterans

**'My Dead Friend Zoe'**  
directed, acted by vets

BY ALEXANDER BANERJEE  
*Stars and Stripes*

Morgan Freeman is just one of the many veterans that make up 90% of the cast in "My Dead Friend Zoe," a comedy-drama that was directed by an Army veteran and produced by Kansas City Chiefs star Travis Kelce.

It opens in theaters Feb. 28.

The film follows a female Army veteran named Merit, played by "The Walking Dead" and "Star Trek: Discovery" star Sonequa Martin-Green, as she reconnects with her veteran grandfather (played by Ed Harris of "Apollo 13" and "The Truman Show") and struggles with attending mandatory therapy sessions despite the pleas of her Department of Veterans Affairs counselor (Morgan Freeman). Throughout the film Merit is haunted by her dead friend, the titular Zoe (Natalie Morales).



Freeman

It premiered at SXSW Film Festival in 2024, where it received the Audience Award, and has a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes with 19 critics weighted at the time of this writing.

Aside from Freeman, who served in the U.S. Air Force from 1955 to 1959, most of the primary cast have not served in the military. But even as minor characters, the veterans cast in the movie play an important role in recurring scenes of VA group therapy sessions.

The scenes follow Merit's struggle to open up about her experiences since leaving Afghanistan but also show other veterans opening up. Their lines were not only entirely unscripted, but true stories, director Kyle Hausmann-Stokes told Stars and Stripes.

"They had to play opposite Morgan Freeman with no script. But I knew they'd be up for it, and they did a great job," Hausmann-Stokes said.

The presence of veterans on set was



MIKE TAING/Junket Productions Inc.

**"My Dead Friend Zoe" lead actresses Sonequa Martin-Green, left, and Natalie Morales during a flashback scene set in Afghanistan.**



Junket Productions Inc.

**From left: Ed Harris, Morales and Martin-Green are seen in a scene from "My Dead Friend Zoe."**

also helpful and inspiring for lead actor Martin-Green, who told Stars and Stripes that she listened closely to her castmates' stories.

Although several members of Martin-Green's family have served, she said that playing Merit was a challenge because so much of it was outside of her own experience. But she was able to ask and learn from the veterans on set, and the director provided her with a lot of footage of veterans discussing their journeys.

Although the story revolves around a female Army veteran and her dead friend, it is heavily based on the expe-

rience of the director and his male platoonmates — who were in the Army at a time when women were not allowed to serve in ground combat roles.

Hausmann-Stokes, who received a Bronze Star for his combat tour in Iraq, said he was determined from the outset to tell a story that centered around female service members because of his post-service experience chronicling veterans' mental health stories for the VA.

"I interviewed hundreds of veterans over the course of four years in every major city across the U.S. And half of those were women," he said. "And I

was completely blown away by their stories and their courage and how they had done all the same things as the men I had spoken with, and then some. So I kind of made a deal with myself at that point."

The dynamic was also applauded by Kelce, an executive producer.

"Sonequa and Natalie bring depth and authenticity to their performances, highlighting the strength, resilience and leadership of women in the military," Kelce said in a statement.

Another unique aspect of the dark comedy is its depiction of the divide between different generations of veterans.

The film closely follows Merit's rocky relationships with two Vietnam veterans: her grandfather, recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and her VA counselor.

Merit's grandfather is heavily modeled after the director's grandfather, who served in Vietnam.

"When I got back from Iraq, I kind of thought that he and I would have this conversation about our experiences, and we really didn't," Hausmann-Stokes said. "And it kind of revealed something to me about this schism between Vietnam veterans and my generation of veterans. Because they were the opposite of welcomed home, to put it mildly, and my generation was."

"Most Vietnam veterans are kind," Hausmann-Stokes was quick to note, adding that generational differences are hardly unique to veterans.

Hausmann-Stokes and Martin-Green touted the film's funding model. It was co-produced by Legion M, a fan-owned company that counts tens of thousands of people as shareholders and aims to support independent works.

Also of note is the film's three "impact partners," or nonprofits the audience is encouraged to support — The Bob Woodruff Foundation, The Mission Continues and Everytown for Gun Safety.

The film is using a unique Pay It Forward campaign, in which supporters can donate tickets and support community screenings via The Bob Woodruff Foundation.

Stars and Stripes writer Kaylyn Barnhart contributed to this report.











## MILITARY

# Most Army funds for food spent elsewhere

Report finds 70% of money returned to service's 'big pool'

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army spent nearly 70% of the money it collected from enlisted troops' food allowances on expenses other than meals, even as it struggles to provide them with a nutritious diet, according to a recent report.

Published this month by Military.com, the report cited financial records the Army provided from 11 of its largest bases.

More than \$151 million of the \$225 million deducted from soldiers' paychecks in fiscal year 2024 was "returned to the big pool of Army funds" and spent elsewhere between October 2023 and September 2024, according to an unnamed service official cited by the news site.



DOMINIQUE MENDOZA/U.S. Army

**Culinary specialists assigned to the 4th Infantry Division prepare meals at Fort Carson, Colo., in March 2023.**

The figures apply to junior enlisted soldiers living at the Army bases. At Fort Bragg, N.C., for example, the Army collected \$34.6 million from soldiers and spent \$16.6 million on food. At Fort Cavazos, Texas, the service garnished \$42.5 million and spent \$11.7 million on meals, the report said.

Only two of the 11 bases put more than half of the funds toward meals: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson,

Alaska, collected \$7.5 million and spent \$4 million, while Fort Bliss, Texas, collected \$22 million and spent \$11 million, according to the report.

Starting in 2002, enlisted service members began paying for their meals and received a monthly basic allowance for subsistence, or BAS, to offset that cost. BAS is not calculated based on a service member's income but rather on the Department of Agriculture's food cost index, which measures the average cost of food.

The allowance is currently \$466 per month for enlisted troops and \$321 for commissioned officers. The enlisted allowance has risen each year from \$369 in 2019, according to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's website.

Congress has been aware of the issue. In July 2020, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense reported that the Defense Department may not be "using those funds efficiently or exclusively for the intended purpose" of providing meals to troops.

"The committee is also concerned that the [Defense Department's] current food system is overly complex and inefficient, which may result in higher costs per meal at dining facilities, unnecessary internal competition between on-base food service providers, and poor food service planning," the subcommittee's report said.

Four months earlier, then-Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, questioned then-Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy about the unspent funds during a House Appropriations hearing.

"Either the Army dining facilities are purchasing and preparing three meals a day per soldier, and then wasting half the food, or the money is not being spent on the soldiers' food, and it's being spent on something it's not appropriated for," Ryan said during the hearing, according to an Army Times report. "I'm not really sure what's worse."

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## USAF reviews extended holidays amid efficiency push

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force is scrutinizing the extra day given to troops that turn federal holidays into four-day weekends as the U.S. government hunts for ways to streamline operations.

At many bases, service members receive an automatic "family day," typically scheduled alongside a Friday or Monday holiday.

In the coming weeks, the Air Force "will evaluate Family Days to ensure they align with our ability to support warfighter readiness," Gwendolyn DeFilippi, acting assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs, wrote in a Feb. 11 memo.

The review comes as the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, drives cost-cutting and efficiency measures across the executive branch of the federal government.

Family days have been a welcome perk for Senior Airman Andrew Clark, who transferred to Yokota Air Base, Japan, from Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M.

"Coming from a base that didn't



JESSICA AVALLONE/U.S. Air Force

**A girl receives a balloon animal at a family day event at Yokota Air Base, Japan.**

practice it to one that does is night and day," he said at the Army and Air Force Exchange Service at Yokota, an airlift hub in western Tokyo.

Clark said he uses the extra time off to recharge before the next workweek. "I think we should keep them," he said.

Kweku Akyeampong, an Air Force spouse and civilian worker at Yokota,

also supports the policy, citing the long hours worked by airmen.

"If they get a holiday off, I think it's cool," he said.

DeFilippi's memo emphasized that federal law does not permit the Air Force to grant civilian employees additional leave on family days. Unless otherwise exempted, civilians are expected to report to work, and con-

tractors must adhere to their respective requirements and employer policies.

Commanders, directors and supervisors are encouraged to treat family days as "liberal leave" days whenever possible, DeFilippi wrote, meaning airmen may use previously earned leave, compensatory time, or preapproved time-off awards.

"The Department of the Air Force (DAF) routinely uses Family Days to recognize our teams' contributions to the mission and our families' enduring support of our efforts," the memo said.

On family days, the Air Force will limit meetings and scheduled activities, and supervising authorities may approve a regular pass for military members, DeFilippi wrote.

"For military members requested to perform duties on these dates, commanders, directors, and supervisors may grant compensatory time off, mission requirements permitting," she wrote.

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## MILITARY

# Guard rescues 296 from flooding in 1 day

## 250 troops work to help as deluge hits Kentucky

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

National Guard troops in Kentucky rescued nearly 300 people from one county in one day as deadly floodwaters rose in the eastern portion of the state and trapped residents in their homes.

"This rescue mission added to the more than 1,000 Kentuckians who have been rescued by our Guard members and with the assistance of [Kentucky State Police] and other local, state and federal partners. We are so proud of all of you and so thankful these families are now safe," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said in a statement.

Additional troops from Indiana National Guard contributed to the 296 rescues in Martin County on Feb. 17 that airlifted people from two housing complexes that had become surrounded by floodwaters, the service said.

Those rescued were taken just a few miles north to Big Sandy Regional Airport in Debord.

From there, a team from the Kentucky Air National Guard helped process evacuees and get them to a shelter in Inez.

Flooding across Kentucky claimed at least 14 lives, according to state officials. At least 220 state and federally managed roads were closed.

Now the state is facing snowfall and icy conditions that could persist.

"The areas hit hardest by flooding are going to get another 3 to 4 inches of snow," Beshear said. "And if the snow wasn't tough enough, it's cold right now, and it's going to get dangerously cold. The wind chills across much of Kentucky are going to get down into the single digits or even lower."

More than 250 Kentucky Guard troops are working in the aftermath of the flooding and the winter weather, according to the governor's office. In response to the floods, troops remain on call for search-and-rescue and high-axle transportation missions.



JON SHREVE/U.S. Air Force

**Airmen from the Kentucky Air National Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron evacuate stranded residents from two housing complexes surrounded by floodwaters in Martin County, Ky.**

In areas with standing water in eastern Kentucky, engineers from the 149th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade are working closely with local officials to assess damage and help clear roads.

Other teams are removing debris, hauling supplies and conducting welfare checks.

Specifically in response to the snowfall and freezing temperatures, Guard troops are staging across Kentucky to assist road crews and emergency re-

sponders as needed.

Troops will remain on duty for as long as necessary, said Army Maj. Gen. Haldane Lamberton, Kentucky's adjutant general.

"It is very much a collaborative effort," he said. "It's not just any one entity or any one resource, but folks coming together to work together, whatever the need."



JESSICA ELBOUAB/U.S. Army

**A Kentucky Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawk flies over waterways in eastern Kentucky on Feb. 17.**

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MILITARY

# S. Korea tours extended for troops with families

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The Pentagon has tacked a year on the length of a tour of duty for service members who bring their families with them to South Korea.

Troops on accompanied tours — those who bring their spouses or dependents with them to South Korea — are now expected to serve 36 months in the country, according to a Feb. 11 memo from Tim Dill, assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs.

Service members on accompanied tours were previously expected to stay two years and may still be eligible for the shorter term with a waiver from their service branch, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff's office.

Not all service members are eligible for accompanied tours. U.S. Forces Korea, which oversees approximately 28,500 troops on the peninsula, approves accompanied tours based on its needs and resources. If approved, families are housed in apartment complexes in or close to U.S. military

bases.

Unaccompanied troops serve a year in South Korea and typically live in barracks.

The change will not affect families already in South Korea and USFK will be working with units to waive the extension for new arrivals until October, according to a news release from the command.

"This policy adjustment aims to provide greater continuity within USFK while fostering stronger ties between service members, their families and the local community," the release said. "The extended tour length is expected to enhance operational efficiency by reducing turnover and increasing mission effectiveness."

The Army in August doubled that tour for unaccompanied troops in seven career fields: air traffic control operators, UH-60 Black Hawk repairers, military dog handlers, counterintelligence agents, signal intelligence analysts and Criminal Investigation Division enlisted and warrant officer special agents.

Camp Humphreys, about 40 miles



MONICA GUTHRIE/U.S. Army

**A 2nd Combat Aviation Brigade soldier and his family members pose in traditional Korean clothing during an event at Camp Humphreys, South Korea, in 2023.**

south of Seoul in Pyeongtaek city, has built new housing in anticipation of more residents.

In June, the base, the largest overseas U.S. military installation, opened two new barracks with room for more than 600 single soldiers. The pair of eight-story, \$67 million towers are next to Humphreys' River Bend Golf Course and include 151 suites that each accommodate two tenants.

The base also opened three, \$141 million housing towers for families in September. Combined, they contain

144 three-bedroom, 54 four-bedroom and 18 five-bedroom units and an underground parking garage for 250 vehicles.

Families arriving at Humphreys next year can look forward to a new, 99,000-square-foot school. Humphreys East Elementary is designed to accommodate roughly 440 students and staff once construction finishes around March 2026.

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## Tricare users told to download records before system change

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Military health care beneficiaries are being urged to download their digital health records

from the Tricare online patient portal before April 1 to retain copies.

The Defense Department is decommissioning the Tricare patient portal as part of its transition to the new MHS

Genesis records system. Patient records on the older, Tricare system will not transfer to MHS Genesis.

Health records must be downloaded by individual patients. Failure to do so could result in gaps in medical history, Tricare said.

"All military hospitals and clinics have transitioned to MHS Genesis. We encourage you to take these important steps to save your personal health records before the [Tricare online] patient portal decommissions," said Rear Adm. Tracy Farrill, an official for the Defense Health Agency.

To download the records, beneficiaries should log on to [www.TRICAREOnline.com](http://www.TRICAREOnline.com) and click the blue "Health Record" button to view and download personal health data.

Beneficiaries can also choose the person, data types, date range and format for the records that they need to download.

Medical providers will have patient records, but after April 1 patients will need to request physical copies by completing a form in person and then return at a later designated time to pick up the records.

"Your medical history is a valuable resource for managing your health and saving your records now ensures you have access if you need it," Farrill said.

MHS Genesis came online in October 2023. It was developed as a "state-of-the-market electronic health record system" for the military health system under a \$4.3 billion contract signed in 2015 with Leidos Partnership for Defense Health.

The change from the Tricare online portal to MHS Genesis is meant to streamline electronic health records management.

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