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## Facing frequent attacks

US troops in Syria  
contend with  
missiles, drones  
launched by  
Iranian-backed  
fighters

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New Jersey Army National Guard soldiers assigned to the 44th Infantry Brigade prepare for an exercise alongside the Syrian Free Army in southern Syria in October.

SCOTT MARALDO/U.S. Army

## MILITARY

# US forces under regular attacks in Syria

## Troops at Conoco fired upon 40 times in just over year

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. forces are fighting Iranian-backed proxies in Syria frequently as they come under militant attacks that analysts say have been aided by the Syrian government.

Dozens of those rocket, missile and drone attacks have focused on a strategic American base at a gas field in northeastern Syria near the Iraq border, a de facto territorial dividing point between forces backed by Iran and the U.S.-led coalition to defeat Islamic State.

Mission Support Site Conoco has been attacked about 40 times since October 2023, U.S. Central Command said in a statement this month.

Many of those attacks have taken place in recent months, after U.S. and Iraqi officials announced the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and in the aftermath of Israel's campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Conoco, a dusty outpost about five miles from an airfield controlled by the Syrian regime, has become the front line for an Iranian proxy attempt to pressure U.S. forces to leave Syria altogether, said Charles Lister, the director of Syria and Countering Terrorism and Extremism programs at the Middle East Institute.

Some of the attacks appear to be directly facilitated by the Syrian regime, said Lister, citing unidentified official U.S. sources.

The U.S. has repeatedly hit back with artillery strikes, mostly targeting Iranian proxies. But it's also struck Syrian government positions, Lister said.

"We're not just looking at war in Gaza, we're not just looking at war in Lebanon, but the U.S. is actually fully engaged in a hot conflict right now, involving Iranian proxies and the Syrian regime in eastern Syria," Lister said.

On Nov. 22, the Pentagon said U.S. forces had been attacked 125 times in Syria and 79 times in Iraq since Octo-



TYLER BECKER/U.S. Army

**Georgia Army National Guard soldiers enter a CH-47 Chinook helicopter during a training mission in western Iraq on Oct. 30. They are part of a coalition to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.**

ber 2023, according to Reuters.

CENTCOM did not respond to earlier Stars and Stripes questions about how frequently the U.S. was responding to militant attacks and whether Syrian government locations were among those being targeted by American artillery fire or other retaliatory strikes.

Although groups linked to Syrian President Bashar Assad's government attacked U.S. forces over the past year, the regime didn't take a very active role, said Renad Mansour, a senior research fellow and director of the Iraq Initiative at the London-based think tank Chatham House.

But the Syrian government and other groups could be changing their thinking "as it becomes clear that [there] are just no red lines for Israel from their perspective, and that they are also at war, and Israel will attack the Syrian regime," Mansour said.

A U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria is working to prevent a resurgence of ISIS. About 900 U.S. service members and an undisclosed number of contractors are operating in Syria, where they support local Kurdish forces.

An additional 2,500 American military forces are in Iraq, the Defense Department said in September. That same month, the White House announced an agreement with Iraq to wrap up the U.S. military mission there next year, though it didn't specify whether the agreement would mean a full troop withdrawal.

Some of those attacks in Iraq and Syria over the past year have killed or seriously injured American military personnel. Eight U.S. service members suffered traumatic brain injuries and smoke inhalation from an Aug. 9 militant drone attack at Rumalyn Landing Zone in northeastern Syria.

Days earlier, four U.S. troops and a defense contractor were injured in a rocket attack Aug. 5 at al Asad Air Base in Iraq.

And three soldiers were killed and dozens more injured in a one-way drone attack at an American outpost in Jordan just across the Syrian border on Jan. 28.

CENTCOM seldom has announced the attacks or U.S. retaliation against the groups responsible for them. But earlier this month, the command revealed a series of recent U.S. retalia-

tory strikes against militia groups in Syria for attacks on American service members and facilities.

Those actions included a Nov. 12 strike targeting a weapons bunker and logistics headquarters of an unnamed Iranian-proxy group for an attack on U.S. and coalition forces at Patrol Base Shaddadi in northeastern Syria.

Last month, the command said the base at Shaddadi had been attacked 22 times since October 2023.

The militant attacks and U.S. response have followed a cyclical, tit-for-tat pattern, said Michael Knights, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute and expert on military and security affairs in Iran, Iraq and the Gulf states.

"For the third time this year, we're probably in a cycle where (militant groups are) going to keep pushing the envelope," Knights said. "And then we're going to crack them a couple of times and then they're going to stop again for a while. That's where we are right now."

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## MILITARY

# Army's upgraded rocket system showcased

## Attention-getting newcomer debuts in Finland exercise

By LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

ROVANIEMI, Finland — The U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery Regiment is no stranger to the High North, but this time its soldiers brought an attention-getting newcomer with them.

The M270A2 Multiple Launch Rocket System made its debut in the field over the past couple of weeks during Dynamic Front, NATO's largest artillery exercise, and the 41st Field Artillery Brigade soldiers in Finland are having some fun with the opportunity.

The brigade trained in Norway earlier this year and Finland in May 2023. It's becoming a regular visitor to the Arctic, with another exercise in Norway scheduled for February.

The regiment's motto, "swift and bold," has jokingly been altered to "swift and cold" amid the below-freezing temperatures.

Dynamic Front stretches across the alliance's eastern flank and includes additional artillery sites in Estonia, Germany, Poland and Romania.

The approximately 440 soldiers in Finland are among the first in the Army to field the upgraded rocket systems, brigade commander Col. Frank Maxwell said.

"That enables us to deliver fires more quickly and more accurately in support of what we need, and (perform tasks) that the A1s just weren't capable of," Maxwell said. The A2 variant boasts an extended firing range, upgraded communication systems and a larger cab that improves crew comfort.

It can fire the Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS, which is now being launched from a different system by Ukraine following the White House's recent authorization for Kyiv to use the longer-range missile to strike deeper into Russia.

Training in the Arctic has presented its challenges. The icy, rugged terrain of Lapland forced soldiers to



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

**Army Sgt. Makayla Sodergren, a crew chief, and Sgt. Johnathan Welch, a gunner, both with 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery Regiment, show off the Multiple Launch Rocket System during exercise Dynamic Front in Rovajavri, Finland, on Nov. 20.**

adapt and remain vigilant to avoid equipment damage and operational delays.

"The main difficulty, I would say, is when we are looking for (cover)," said Pvt. Bradford Shepard, an A2 driver. "It's the rocks, because we don't want to throw a track or damage anything. And then we have how icy it is."

They found solutions by removing the rubber pads from the system's tracks, improving traction and maneuverability.

The U.S. has been training with 27 other nations during the 20-day exercise. Finland shares an 830-mile-long border with Russia, whose full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted the Finnish government to end decades of official neutrality and seek NATO membership.



**U.S. soldiers stage the M270A2 Multiple Rocket Launch System for the first of their live-fire drills during exercise Dynamic Front on Nov. 17.**

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MILITARY

# Coast Guard will hire civilian icebreaker to fill gap

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Coast Guard plans to hire a commercial icebreaker to serve in the Arctic while waiting for the next generation of its cutters to be built in the next several years, service officials told lawmakers.

Vice Adm. Thomas Allan, the deputy commandant for the Coast Guard's mission support, told the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure's subpanel on Coast Guard and maritime transportation on Nov. 14 that an icebreaking tug, the Aiviq, would be painted in Coast Guard colors and transferred from Pascagoula, Miss., to Juneau, Alaska. The Aiviq is scheduled to start icebreaking patrols in 2026.

"We are at least going to make sure we have a presence with that vessel," Allan said.

The Coast Guard has two icebreakers. The USCGC Polar Star, launched in 1976, is usually committed to clear-

ing sea routes around Antarctica. The USCGC Healy was only recently returned to service following a fire.

The addition of the Aiviq is meant to give the Coast Guard another option. At the same time, the U.S. is waiting for the first of 30 icebreaking ships, which were planned under a cooperative deal announced in November with Canada and Finland.

Plans now call for the Coast Guard to use the Aiviq on a contract basis, with a commercial crew. The cost of the deal is still under negotiation, the Coast Guard said.

The Aiviq would serve until three planned Polar Security-class icebreaking cutters become available. Construction of the first ship — to be named Polar Sentinel — is scheduled to start in 2025. The cost of the three ships would be \$1.9 billion.

The Coast Guard originally planned to try to buy the Aiviq for \$150 million as a permanent addition to its fleet.

The ship now will be relinquished back



CHRIS USHER/Department of Defense

**The tow supply vessel Aiviq travels through open water off Alaska.**

to the commercial market after enough new cutters have been built.

"I don't think we are looking to make tremendous investment on the vessel going forward," Allan said.

But some lawmakers complained the Coast Guard plan would do little to close the "icebreaker gap" that the United States faces. Russia has at least 41 icebreakers, while China has dubbed itself an "Arctic adjacent" nation and has four in service.

Military and commercial activity in the Arctic region has increased in recent years as warmer seas have opened and enlarged sea lanes across the top of North America, Europe and Asia.

Russia and China held joint naval exercises in October, with the flotilla passing through the Bering Strait just 12 miles from American waters in Alaska.

The Jamestown Foundation, a global security think tank in Washington, D.C., has reported many Russian icebreakers are small or tied up clearing Siberian ports and river mouths.

However, some House lawmakers are worried about the imbalance in the number of icebreakers.

Allan and Vice Adm. Peter Gautier, the deputy commandant for operations, emphasized the joint building project as the key to Americans keeping pace with Russia and China in the future.

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## MILITARY

# Sealift command rolls out plan to fill jobs

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Military Sealift Command is rolling out an initiative to improve mariner recruiting and retention as hundreds of unfilled jobs at sea have forced the command to sideline 17 ships.

The command's efforts to attract and retain workers in the next two years will focus on keeping consistent work and time-off schedules to ensure mariners have a work-life balance. The command is also seeking reforms to pay caps to offer higher wages that will attract more mariners.

"The overarching goal of the workforce initiative is to rebuild mariner trust and improve quality of service. To do this, [Military Sealift Command] is focused on four things: retention, recruiting, quality of service, pay reform, and HR policies and systems," said Rear Adm. Phillip Sobeck, commander of the Navy's Military Sealift Command.

In October, the Military Sealift Command announced it was looking to sideline 17 ships with hopes it would address the workforce shortage crippling its logistics fleet. Sobeck confirmed that the command is moving forward with that plan as part of its new workforce initiative.

The Military Sealift Command operates about 125 civilian-crewed ships responsible for a range of tasks, such as resupplying Navy ships, transporting combat cargo at sea and conducting specialized missions. But the command



KEVIN STEFFANSON/U.S. Navy

**Military Sealift Command will look to attract and retain workers in the next two years by focusing on keeping consistent work and time-off schedules to ensure mariners have a work-life balance.**

is having trouble attracting and keeping workers due to high operational tempo, delayed reliefs, extended deployment time and mandated pay caps, Sobeck said.

"We are just not competitive," he said.

About 5,600 civilians fill 4,500 billets across the Military Sealift Command. It follows a 1.22 model, where for every 100 mariners on a ship, there should be 22 mariners on shore. That model, Sobeck said, is unsustainable. The command is looking to achieve a 1.4 model by 2026 and eventually, a 1.7 model.

The 17 ships will be moved into an extended maintenance period or, in some cases, deactivated. Sobeck said he could not identify specific ships because the fate of some ships could change. He said if or when any of those ships rejoin the fleet is yet to be determined.

"It really is about getting after our retention. So, as those mariners start coming back and we start building the bench is when we will bring ships back as they finish up their extended maintenance," Sobeck said.

Taking 17 ships offline will free up

about 800 mariners, who will be reassigned to higher priority ships, such as fleet replenishment oilers, dry cargo and ammunition ships, expeditionary fast transports and expeditionary sea bases.

"Higher priority ships will be fully manned and mission capable. Bringing consistency to that force is paramount," Sobeck said.

Still, the command needs to fill 800-1,000 jobs to meet the 1.4 model and achieve 95% readiness across its fleet, he said.

"There's currently a critical shortage across the U.S. civilian mariner landscape that certainly affects our ability to crew our combat logistics fleet and the other [government-owned, government-operated] ships and our ability to fully generate ready forces," Sobeck said.

The initiative is meant to help the Military Sealift Command regain mariners' trust. Sobeck said he hopes the change will get the workforce healthy and back to what it means to be a Military Sealift mariner — the ability to sail across the spectrum of ships and grow in their field while being paid competitively.

"We have done career fairs, we have done other things, but we haven't been competitive in the last couple of years," he said. "Rebuilding that and that relationship, I believe, is the winning solution."

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## US defense sites in Europe face risk of Russian sabotage

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. authorities say American defense industrial sites in Europe should step up their security over concerns that Russian saboteurs could target them.

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center, the FBI and several Pentagon agencies issued a joint statement saying the Kremlin has recruited criminals and other proxies to conduct such operations.

"U.S. companies, particularly those supporting entities involved in the Ukraine conflict or other ongoing geo-

political conflicts, are encouraged to enhance their vigilance and security efforts as a precaution," the statement said.

The warning comes after a series of suspected Russian sabotage actions that included the severing of undersea communication cables running from Germany to Finland and elsewhere.

Over the past year, there have been indications of Russia getting more brazen in its sabotage efforts in Europe. Numerous acts of arson and the attempted assassination of a German defense industrial leader are among the operations that have been carried

out, according to allies.

In July, Russian sabotage also was suspected when a package caught fire at a DHL logistics center before being loaded onto a cargo plane in the eastern German city of Leipzig.

Package fires occurred in the same month in Poland and Britain. The senders' intent was to do a test run on delivery channels for such packages, which were ultimately destined for the U.S. or Canada, a Polish prosecutor told the BBC in November.

Gen. Darryl Williams, the Army's top commander in Europe, said last month the situation is increasing the

risks of military escalation should Russian agents take things too far.

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

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said earlier this month that Russia is intensifying its campaign of hybrid attacks across allied territories, "sabotaging industry and committing violence."

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MILITARY

# Marine Corps' birthplace to be rebuilt

## Groundbreaking held for 'The Tun' in Philly

By LYDIA GORDON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Philadelphia has hosted a ceremonial groundbreaking for "The Tun" as part of a project to re-create the historic tavern known to every Marine as the service's birthplace.

Located just a few hundred feet from the original site, the project is spearheaded by The Tun Legacy Foundation, a nonprofit group led by Marine Corps veteran and Philly native Patrick Dailey.

While this month's groundbreaking didn't mark the official start of construction, the foundation used the occasion to celebrate the Marine Corps' birthday as a symbolic milestone, affirming the project's commitment to becoming a reality.

The original Tun Tavern served as a mariners' bar and meeting place for several notable organizations, including the Society of St. George, the Pennsylvania Freemasons, St. An-



Ballinger Architects

**An artist's rendering shows concepts for the exterior of the renovated historic Tun Tavern.**

drew's Society, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, the Navy and the Marines.

While the new tavern will honor its Marine Corps connection, The Tun will remain true to its historical roots, paying tribute to all six organizations, Dailey said.

"This is not a Marine Corps museum. We have one of those in Quantico," he said. "This is a re-creation of a mariner's tavern."

Dailey plans for sections of the tavern to showcase its storied history.

Original menus, donated by the Society of St. Andrew's, will guide

some of the offerings. Plans include a microbrewery and a colonial-style warehouse attached to the replicated tavern, to be dubbed the Peg Mullan's Beefsteak Club, which is what the tavern was known as in the 1740s.

The target opening date is Nov. 10, 2025, to coincide with the Marine Corps' 250th birthday, but financial challenges could delay the project.

The foundation has received two major donations of \$1 million, along with more from fundraising events aided by volunteers, Dailey said. But they'll need plenty more to fully realize the vision.

"If we don't have enough funds, we'll probably have to slow things down, which would be unfortunate," Dailey acknowledged. He plans to host a commemorative event at the site next year, finished or not.

A more realistic opening date, according to Dailey, may be 2030, aligning with the 300th anniversary of the Freemasons, another key group from the original tavern's history.

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# 'Rosie the Riveter' Lucille MacDonald dies at age 98

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Lucille "Cille" MacDonald, who this spring was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for "Rosie the Riveter" work during World War II, died this month

in Valley Island, Maui. She was 98.

MacDonald, a longtime Maui resident who narrowly escaped the Lahaina wildfire last year, was a shipyard welder during the war, according to Pacific Historic Parks, which announced her death.

MacDonald was one of 27 Rosies who attended an April ceremony in Washington, D.C., where they received the Congressional Gold Medal on behalf of the millions of women who labored in the war effort on the home front. The medal is the highest honor Congress can bestow on civilians.

"Rosie the Riveter" was the moniker given to the legion of women who entered the workforce during World War II as the nation's men went off to serve in the armed forces.

About 5 million civilian women toiled in the defense industry and war-related sectors during the four-year war, according to the Defense Department.

MacDonald was born Dec. 9, 1925, in Greenville, S.C., one of nine children. She grew up on a farm picking cotton, according to Pacific Parks.

After the United States declared war on Germany and Japan after the Dec. 7 attack, the 16-year-old MacDonald



MacDonald

boarded a Greyhound bus for the first time and headed south to a shipyard she had heard was hiring, MacDonald said in an oral history posted to Pacific Historic Park's YouTube page earlier this year.

J.A. Jones Construction in Brunswick, Ga., sent her to school for a few days, after which she began work as a ship welder.

"One ship a week, one ship a week," MacDonald recalled of the shipyard's output.

They wore knee-high, steel-toed boots and blue coveralls, she said.

"We worked double shifts, seven days a week," she said. "Not a minute to have a life other than welding."

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