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## Beyond the 'golden hour'

Changes in war  
test ability to keep  
wounded alive on  
today's battlefield  
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**Army Sgt. Kaitlin Flynn treats a simulated canine casualty during a medic competition at Caserma Del Din, Vicenza, Italy, on Jan. 14.**

**KATHERINE SIBILLA/U.S. Army**



## COVER STORY

# Extending care beyond the ‘golden hour’

In Afghanistan, Iraq, medics aimed to evacuate wounded within hour — then war changed

BY ALISON BATH

*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The Army is testing the ability of its combat medics to keep critically injured soldiers alive on the future battlefield, where they no longer will be able to rely on quick medical evacuations.

That new reality was the hallmark of the recent Best Medic Competition at U.S. Army Garrison Italy in Vicenza as 24 Army and international competitors faced two grueling days that tested their fortitude and expertise.

The U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa event featured service members from Ghana, Liberia and Italy alongside American counterparts.

The competition included a four-hour test designed to assess and reinforce medics' ability to sustain life, prevent further deterioration and make sound clinical decisions, said Sgt. Maj. Shanett Robinson, SETAF-AF's chief medical noncommissioned officer and lead planner for the competition.

“Ultimately, this focus ensures medics are prepared to save lives when evacuation timelines are uncertain, reinforcing readiness for the complex operational environments they are likely to face,” Robinson said.

The competition reflects a departure from the “golden hour” benchmark of stabilizing and readying a seriously wounded service member for transport within 60 minutes of injury to increase survival chances.

The Army is working quickly to develop new protocols and strategies aimed at ensuring that combat medics can quickly assess injuries and keep wounded soldiers alive for hours, even days, until they can be moved to a higher level of care.

Along with medical advancements, the golden hour standard saw the U.S. military's lowest case fatality rate in history during counterinsurgency operations in the Mideast, experts say.

But recent conflicts such as the Rus-



KATHERINE SIBILLA/U.S. Army

**Medics place a casualty training mannequin on a litter during the Southern European Task Force, Africa Best Medic Competition at Caserma Del Din, Vicenza, Italy, on Jan. 14.**

sia-Ukraine war have yielded lessons about the impacts of congested logistics, denied communications and other challenges on the modern battlefield. The U.S. military is preparing for the likelihood that it won't be able to rely on air and technological superiority in large-scale operations against peer adversaries to pull off swift battlefield medical rescues.

“Evacuating casualties to operating rooms within the Golden Hour of injury will be a forgone luxury in large-scale combat operations and other austere operational environments,” an article published last summer in the Army's Military Review said.

The authors noted that the current expectation for medics is to stabilize casualties for as long as three days on the battlefield.

In Vicenza, that potential necessity was reinforced in a delayed evacuation scenario. Programmed dummy patients tested the acumen of the medic teams in skills such as hemorrhage control, airway and breathing management, pain control and infection prevention. Participants also were measured in their ability to spot, assess and respond to changes in a patient's condition while under stress and with limited resources.



GLEIDINE IRISH LEBORNIO/U.S. Army

**Army Staff Sgt. Travis Dionne demonstrates airway management techniques during a delayed evacuation casualty management training at Vicenza.**

That need for critical thinking is key in helping combat medics interpret changes in vital signs that could indicate a wounded soldier is in trouble, said Staff Sgt. Travis Dionne, a grader for the delayed evacuation scenario.

Scorers also evaluated participants' ability to apply appropriate life-saving medical treatments quickly in response, he said.

Participants in the Vicenza competi-

tion were divided into teams of two. Sgt. Rishabh Jishnu and Spc. Michael Andress, both from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, earned first place in the competition, receiving an Army Commendation Medal, SETAF-AF said in a statement.

Fellow 173rd members Sgt. Kaitlin Flynn and Spc. Jean Sagesse came in second and earned an Army Achievement Medal. Sagesse also had the highest individual score on the Army Fitness Test portion of the competition, according to the statement.

Sgt. Cornelius Adagbe and Leading Seaman Ato Amonoo-Rockson of Ghana came in third, receiving a certificate of achievement, SETAF-AF said.

For Sgt. James Deboo, a medic from the 173rd who will go on to compete in the Army's Best Medic Competition at Fort Sam Houston in Texas, the SETAF-AF event was an opportunity to set an example for his junior soldiers. He said his goal was “to promote a mentality of getting out there and doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable so that they're more comfortable in the future with that next experience.”

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## MILITARY

# Music star/reservist promoted, lauded

Craig Morgan works on music-oriented suicide prevention program with bands

By ALEXANDER BANERJEE  
*Stars and Stripes*

Country music star and Army Reserve soldier Craig Morgan, 61, is seeing his success in his effort to balance a successful civilian career with military service as he uses his years of experience to contribute to an anti-suicide program with the dozens of Army bands.

Morgan was promoted to the rank of chief warrant officer 2 in a ceremony officiated by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Pentagon on Jan. 16, more than two years after the star resumed his military career.

The high profile of the ceremony was not unusual for Morgan, who enlisted again in the Army Reserve in 2023 at a ceremony at the Grand Ole Opry after a prolonged break from his 17 years of service. But it was an honor all the same, he said, to have the senior leader in his command pin his rank.

Morgan originally joined in the Army in 1985 and spent 9½ years in active duty before serving in the Reserve for 6½ years. He left the service to pursue his burgeoning career in music. He has racked up a number of civilian and service-related decorations, including a spot in the U.S. Field Artil-



ALEXANDER KUBITZA/U.S. Navy

**Country music star and Army Reserve soldier Craig Morgan, left, was promoted to the rank of chief warrant officer 2 in a ceremony officiated by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Pentagon on Jan. 16.**

lery Hall of Fame, the U.S. Army's Outstanding Civilian Service Medal and the USO Merit Award.

Morgan's age is not all that unusual in the Reserve, the musician said, or among the warrant officer community. Warrant officers, Morgan said, "are the experts in their field, regardless of the field."

In his case, that field is music: Morgan serves with the 313th Army Band at Redstone Arsenal, Ala., and contributes to a suicide prevention program that uses music to speak to soldiers. The Prevention Music Initiative ensures soldiers' well-being and also keeps them from being non-deployable, according to Morgan, who emphasized that everyone in the chain of

command is committed to taking care of soldiers.

"It's a soldier-led initiative," Morgan said. "We're recording all of the music with soldiers, with military or Army engineers, Army band members, Army vocalists."

Morgan said he thinks the project "is one of the most critical things we've ever done in the music world, especially in the military." He contributes by using his civilian contacts in the industry to help promote the music to a larger audience.

The musician was careful to note that he is not simply back in service because of his musical career but because he is physically fit.

"I hear a lot of people say, 'Oh, this

guy's too old,' " Morgan acknowledged, adding, "Come work out with me. Come participate. Don't sit on the bench and talk about me."

Similarly, Morgan said he's worked with older personnel who "have a lineage of expertise that they bring to the table that the Army should not get rid of," as long as they remain physically and mentally fit. No one, regardless of age, should be able to stay in the military if they cannot meet fitness standards, he stressed.

Asked how often service members want to know how he transitioned into a music career, Morgan responded, "every day."

His advice to them is the same advice he gives to civilians: consult professionals, not simply the opinion of family and friends for validation.

Morgan also said he reminds those serving to appreciate the skills they learn in the military, such as good communication skills.

"I would put any soldier, E-4 and below, with four years in service against any college graduate with four years of college, and I promise you they will communicate better. That soldier will," he said.

As for how he manages his time — between his Army service, maintaining a successful music career, and more recently writing a memoir — Morgan said he put together a great team. Civilians may take the notion for granted or even dismiss it, but Morgan noted that in the military, teamwork is essential.

In both his revived military career and in his civilian career, he said, "I go to the experts."

## Pentagon establishes agency to oversee military moves

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is turning the permanent change of station task force into a permanent, joint activity to reform how the department manages moves, the secretary of defense announced.

"It will be a permanent solution for all service members who move," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a video posted Jan. 23 on X. "We know moving is difficult for everyone involved. Our warfighters deserve the

kind of predictability, accountability and respect during that process [that] brings the stress down and makes it something they can focus on their job."

The Personal Property Activity will be based at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., and will report directly to Hegseth. The PPA will stand up officially on May 1. Before the formation of the task force, permanent changes of station were managed through U.S. Transportation Command.

Hegseth in May ordered the formation of a Pentagon task force to im-

prove the workflow behind permanent change of station moves under the Global Household Goods Contract.

Moves under the contract began with a slow rollout more than a year ago but ramped up in earnest in 2025.

GHC was created because of service member complaints over the performance of the legacy system. But GHC has been plagued by late pickups and deliveries, and several U.S. senators commenced inquiries last spring into its shortcomings.

Army Maj. Gen. Lance Curtis, who

has led the task force since June 2025, has been selected as the PPA's first commander.

More than half of spouses are unhappy with military life, continuing a downward trend in recent years related to family frustrations over quality-of-life issues such as frequent moves and employment difficulties, according to a Defense Department survey released May 16 to Congress.

## MILITARY

# Congress gets analysis of battleship plan

Nonpartisan report suggests lists of questions about ship

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Congress has received its first internal analysis of the proposed “Trump-class” battleships, which are the linchpin of the president’s “Golden Fleet” plan for the Navy’s future.

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service released its report on Jan. 20, outlining the battleship project and including a list of suggested questions for Congress on whether the ships are needed, cost-effective and meet overall Navy strategic goals.

The analysis comes the week after the Congressional Budget Office pegged the likely price of the largest non-aircraft carrier surface ship that the Navy has built since World War II at up to \$22 billion for the first ship. Later ships would cost up to \$12.7 billion, according to the CBO.

The proposed battleships are designated “BBG(X)”: BB for battleship, G for guided-missile, and X for an unfinished design.

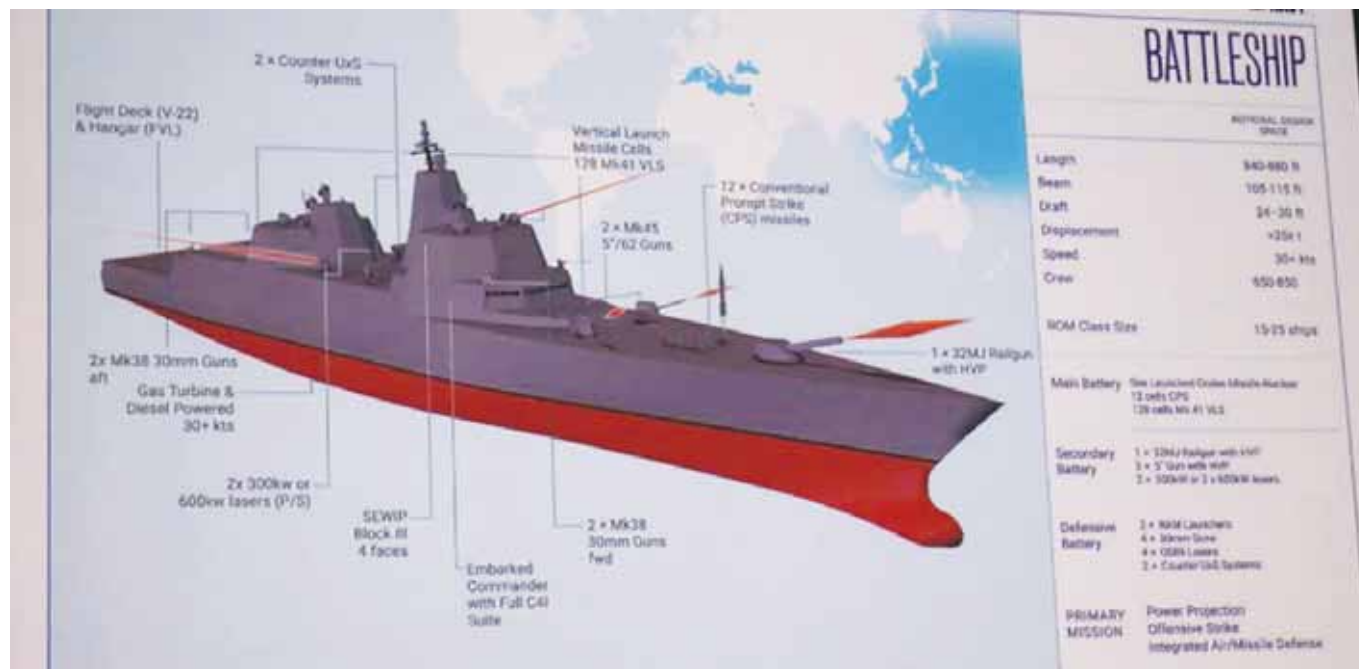
The CRS report notes that the ships would not follow the direction of aircraft carriers in using nuclear propulsion and would have a variety of current and future weapons options.

“BBG(X) would be conventionally powered (i.e., “fossil-fueled”) ships armed with a combination of missiles, guns, lasers and other weapons that would be greater in aggregate than the combination of weapons on the Navy’s current cruisers and destroyers,” the report said.

CRS said the Navy envisions building 15 to 25 BBG(X)s as part of the “forthcoming” Golden Fleet plan that would replace the current plan to build a 381-ship Navy.

The idea of a new, large surface combat vessel has been praised and derided in naval circles since President Donald Trump first announced it during a Dec. 22 news conference at Mar-a-lago.

“They’ll be the fastest, the biggest, and by far 100 times more powerful than any battleship ever built,” Trump said.



Congressional Research Service

## A Navy schematic depicts the proposed “Trump-class” battleship.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle, speaking at the Surface Navy Association National Symposium this month in Arlington, Va., said the battleship was part of a change in Navy thinking.

“Why is the Navy building that? Well, everything’s an evolution,” Caudle said, according to Navy Times. “If I want to shoot 100 things from 100 things, or I want to shoot 100 things from one thing, which is harder?”

Caudle called the proposed battleships “badass” and said they would enable multiple missions thanks to their higher payload, speed, and the ability to use multiple weapons systems simultaneously with a single command and control system aboard a battleship.

Mark Cancian, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote for the center that he believed the ship would never get off the drawing board.

“This ship will never sail,” Cancian said. “It will take years to design, cost \$9 billion each to build, and contravene the Navy’s new concept of operations, which envisions distributed firepower. A future administration will cancel the program before the first ship hits the water.”

China’s Global Times, a government-aligned newspaper, interviewed Zhang

Junshe, a naval analyst with China’s Navy, who said the large size of the battleship would make it more vulnerable and an easier target, especially when full of munitions.

BBG(X)s would be the first battleships procured by the Navy since World War II and would be larger and more heavily armed than any cruiser or destroyer procured by the Navy since the war. The first BBG(X) would reportedly be procured in the early 2030s.

A planned guided missile destroyer, the DDG(X), was recently canceled. The report said the battleship program was expected to benefit from a shift of resources from the destroyer to the battleship.

“The Navy reportedly intends to suspend work on the DDG(X) program as a consequence of starting the BBG(X) program,” the report said.

CRS said the Navy reportedly plans to issue competitive awards to one or more shipbuilders to build BBG(X)s.

It identified General Dynamics Bath Iron Works of Bath, Maine; Huntington Ingalls Industries Ingalls Shipbuilding of Pascagoula, Miss.; and Huntington Ingalls Industries Newport News Shipbuilding of Newport News, Va., as the only current U.S. shipyards that could handle the construction.

CRS said the House and Senate have

several potential questions to ask about the battleship project, including:

- Why has the Trump administration proposed a new class of battleships?

- What analysis of alternatives to the battleship were considered, such as the previously planned DDG(X) guided missile destroyers?

- Would new technologies that the Navy states are to be incorporated into the BBG(X) design — including an electromagnetic railgun and higher-power lasers — be mature enough by the early 2030s to be incorporated into BBG(X)s?

- Would battleships complement the existing fleet and be a cost-effective addition?

- What steps in the Defense Department acquisition process, if any, were set aside to enable the initiation of the BBG(X) program in December 2025?

- Would BBG(X)s be consistent with the Navy’s Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) concept, which calls for spreading the Navy’s sensors and weapons across a wider array of ships and aircraft, to avoid “putting too many eggs into one basket”?

- What impact would BBG(X)s have on available funding for other Navy program priorities?

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## MILITARY

# DOD sets new policy for drones near bases

## Commanders in US get more leeway in countering craft beyond perimeters of facilities

By LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

Base commanders at American military installations stateside are being given more discretion and authority in countering drones under new Pentagon guidance.

Signed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in December, the policy is meant to streamline existing policies for detecting and countering drones at installations in the U.S., a Jan. 26 statement from the Defense Department said.

Commanders are no longer limited to the fence line when it comes to determining what spaces are protected from drone activity, and they now have the authority to make threat determinations based on the totality of circumstances, the statement said.

“The guidance makes clear that unauthorized drone flights are a surveillance threat even before they breach an installation perimeter,” Brig-

Gen. Matt Ross, director of the department’s Joint Interagency Task Force 401, said in the statement.

The task force was established last summer in hopes of rapidly deploying anti-drone tech to the battlefields and military bases.

Inexpensive commercial drones are increasingly used by both civilian hobbyists and foreign adversaries, and the Pentagon in the past year has taken steps to bulk up its defenses at home and abroad.

“There’s no doubt that the threats we face today from hostile drones grow by the day,” Hegseth said last year.

The revised policy says service secretaries will be able to decide which facilities or assets they want to cover based on risk assessments.

That authority can be delegated to service chiefs, according to the Pentagon. Unauthorized surveillance of these designated facilities will now be explicitly considered a threat.



REBECA SORIA/U.S. Army

**A reconnaissance drone takes flight at Fort Stewart, Ga.**

The announcement about streamlined policies comes after a watchdog agency earlier this month called on the Defense Department to take immediate action to protect its assets from drones.

Under existing policies, some of the department’s guidance on countering drones was contradictory and did not address certain counter-drone capa-

bilities and authorities, according to a report from the DOD Inspector General published last week.

The IG found several instances in which military installations and other facilities that conduct critical missions were not covered under the existing drone policies.

In addition, the Pentagon didn’t provide clear policies for the approved use of different types of counter-drone capabilities, according to the report.

As a result, service officials interpreted the guidance in different ways and left a large percentage of installations without the necessary approval to use anti-drone capabilities, the report said.

In the updated guidance, installation commanders are directed to issue their own specific operating procedures within 60 days.

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# Hawaii soldiers receive commissions denied during WWII

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

**KEEHI LAGOON MEMORIAL STATE PARK, Hawaii** — The Army has posthumously commissioned seven University of Hawaii ROTC cadets of Japanese descent who were killed during World War II while fighting as enlisted soldiers in Europe.

Their academic studies were disrupted with the Japanese surprise attack on Oahu on Dec. 7, 1941. They eventually enlisted in the storied ranks of the 100th Infantry Battalion or the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

“Although these men did not have the opportunity to complete their university studies, they’ve earned their degrees in full through their unwavering service and sacrifice on behalf of a grateful nation,” Gen. Ronald Clark, commander of U.S. Army Pacific, said during Monday’s ceremony at Keehi Lagoon Memorial State Park in Honolulu.

Near him was a table holding lei-adorned photos of the soldiers.

“And their memory will live on in



WYATT OLSON/Stars and Stripes

**A lei adorns a photo of Hiroichi Tomita during a ceremony at Keehi Lagoon Memorial State Park, Hawaii, Monday.**

the hearts of their families and in the soldiers who follow in their footsteps with the enduring values of our Army,” he said.

The University of Hawaii in 2012 bestowed bachelor’s degrees on the seven men.

After years of lobbying by local veterans groups, Secretary of the Army Daniel Driscoll last fall approved upgrades to the rank of second lieutenant — the appointment they would have held had they completed the ROTC program, according to Clark.

Commissioned were:

■ Sgt. Daniel Betsui, of Kauai, who died Aug. 2, 1944, in an explosion in Italy.

■ Sgt. Jenhatsu Chinen, of Oahu, who died July 5, 1944, in Italy while storming a hill.

■ Sgt. Robert Murata, of Oahu, who died Oct. 9, 1944, during an artillery attack in France.

■ Staff Sgt. Grover Nagaji, of Oahu, who died June 26, 1944, during the Battle of Belvedere in Italy.

■ Pvt. Akio Nishikawa, of Maui, who died July 11, 1944, in Italy during the Rome-Arno Campaign.

■ Pfc. Hiroichi Tomita, of Maui, who died July 12, 1944, in Italy during the Rome-Arno Campaign.

■ Sgt. Howard Urabe, of Kauai, who died July 4, 1944, during an artillery

attack in Italy.

The outbreak of World War II altered the plans and lives of many young men, but Japanese Americans carried an even heavier burden.

Two months after the surprise attack, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order that in essence treated Japanese Americans as enemy aliens, with many rounded up and imprisoned in relocation camps.

Thus, the seven soldiers commissioned Monday were barred from joining the Army in the opening months of the war.

Instead, they first joined the Hawaii Territorial Guard and later became members of the Varsity Victory Volunteers, which helped build military infrastructure in Hawaii.

By early 1943, Roosevelt reversed course and signed an order creating the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed almost entirely of Japanese Americans and that fought in Europe.

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## MILITARY

# Admiral urges overhaul of facilities ashore

BY ALEX WILSON  
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy preserved its combat fleet for decades while shore-based facilities deteriorated and sailors' quality of life suffered, the admiral in charge of naval installations said.

Ports, dry docks and sailor housing were long treated as lower priorities as the service focused resources on shipbuilding, weapons systems and training, Vice Adm. Scott Gray, head of Navy Installations Command, told Stars and Stripes during his visit to Yokosuka on June 20.

The Navy's combat power and readiness originate ashore, Gray said, and inadequate facilities now threaten the service's ability to compete with major adversaries.

"That's exactly where you would not want to be if you're going to face down a major peer competitor" such as Chi-

na, Gray said. "If we keep doing business the way we've been doing business, we're going to fail."



Gray

Gray, who oversees about 70 Navy installations worldwide, said he intends to refocus the service on its shore infrastructure, which he described as the "cornerstone" of Navy readiness.

He acknowledged the effort will require a "long and sustained" commitment and said his first step is prioritizing what he called a "minimum viable product" approach.

"No gold plating, no 'I'd really like to have this,'" he said. "It would be nice to have, but I can't afford to buy that anymore. I can afford to buy you what you need to get your mission done, and then the rest of the money is going to

somebody else who's hurting as much or worse than you are."

Gray said he is also examining alternative construction methods, including modular and portable facilities, tension fabric structures and prefabricated buildings.

Among the more unconventional ideas are houseboats custom built to serve as barracks. Gray said he was initially skeptical of the concept but now views it as an option.

"The good thing is, if I have a shortage in one area for a while, and then that shortage wanes or a barracks room comes online, I can take those boats and move them somewhere else," he said.

About \$35 million has been set aside should the Navy choose to explore that option next year, Gray said.

As part of a broader reassessment of spending, Gray said he also plans to reinvest in sailors' quality of life, par-

ticularly through improved and expanded housing and initiatives like free Wi-Fi in all unaccompanied housing.

The Big Beautiful Bill, signed into law by President Donald Trump on July 4, allocated about \$375 million this fiscal year for Navy housing improvements. Roughly \$75 million was designated for 95 high-priority projects across 50 bases, while the remaining \$300 million was slated for six sustainment, restoration and modernization projects, the installations command announced Dec. 18.

"We're really working hard to get more resources to ensure that we kind of adjust for many years of underinvestment in the shore, and we'll continue to push hard and focus on ensuring that we're taking care of our sailors," Gray said.

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# Army Corps removes colonel over Mo. lake issues

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
Stars and Stripes

The Army Corps of Engineers Little Rock District commander was fired this month, service officials said in an unusual announcement that blamed "entrenched bureaucracy" and a failure to follow orders.

Army Col. Patrick Caukin, who took command of the district that covers Arkansas and southern Missouri in September 2025, was relieved of duty earlier this month by Adam Telle, the Army's assistant secretary for civil works, and Lt. Gen. William "Butch" Graham, the head of the Army Corps of Engineers. A separate statement from a pair of Missouri-based Republican lawmakers appears to tie Caukin's dismissal to issues property owners have expressed about Corps of Engineers actions on southern Missouri's Table Rock Lake.

Caukin was not named in the statement — which is unusual for Army relief-of-duty announcements — but a service official confirmed he had been relieved.

The statement provided no specific details about the decision to remove Caukin, a 23-year veteran with combat service and three Bronze Star Medals.

But Telle said the decision was, at least in part, due to bureaucratic issues that "unnecessarily frustrated American citizens."



Caukin

"For the first time in decades, under the Trump administration, commanders who fail to follow orders and overcome entrenched bureaucracy will be dealt with accordingly," Telle said in the statement.

In the same statement, Graham cited "a loss of confidence in [Caukin's] ability to command," the military's standard justification given for removing commanders without providing specifics. But the three-star general added that the decision was "in the best interest" of the American public.

"District commanders across USACE are expected to demonstrate effective leadership committed to rapid and continuous transformation, less red tape, and a bias for action," Graham said. "Our highest priority remains efficiently delivering vital projects for the American people on time and within budget, and this change



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

## Moonshine Beach Recreation Area is at Table Rock Lake in Missouri.

reinforces our steadfast commitment." Caukin could not be reached for comment.

The Little Rock District's deputy commander, Lt. Col. Jesse Carter, has assumed command of the district until a permanent commander is emplaced, according to the Army.

Rep. Eric Burlison, R-Mo., and Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., in a statement applauded Caukin's removal, calling it a "decisive action by the Trump ad-

ministration to address long-standing enforcement issues by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Table Rock Lake and to restore clarity for Missouri property owners."

Lawmakers rarely comment on the dismissal of military officers below the general or admiral grade.

Table Rock Lake is an artificial lake near Branson in southern Missouri that was built by and is administrated by the Corps of Engineers' Little Rock District.

According to the lawmakers, USACE officials ignored congressional intent of a 2025 law by ordering property owners on the lake to remove certain items near the water line including "structures that had existed for decades, including cases that were supported by historical documentation and satellite imagery."

Such items include private docks, decks, septic tanks and outbuildings, according to local news reports dating to 2024. Burlison has been attempting to block the Corps of Engineers from forcing homeowners to remove such items for years, according to Springfield, Mo.'s KYTV news.

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## MILITARY

# Astronaut retires after stints in Navy, NASA

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Longtime NASA astronaut and former Navy helicopter pilot Suni Williams has hung up her spacesuit for the last time.

Calling her “a trailblazer in human spaceflight,” an agency statement announced Williams’ retirement, which began late last month.

During her 27-year career, Williams logged 608 days in space, earning her second place on the list of cumulative time in space by a NASA astronaut.

She ranks sixth on the list of longest single spaceflights by an American, tied with Butch Wilmore, both of whom logged 286 days during NASA’s Boeing Starliner and SpaceX Crew-9 missions, according to NASA.

Williams and Wilmore were part of the first crewed Starliner mission to the International Space Station in 2024. Their original plan to spend 10 days in space turned into more than nine months in orbit due to a Starliner thruster system problem.

They hitched a ride home in March



NASA/AP

**Astronauts Butch Wilmore, back left, Nick Hague, back right, and Suni Williams aboard the International Space Station.**

with SpaceX.

While they were stranded, Williams completed several spacewalks, bringing her total to nine. Her cumulative spacewalk time of 62 hours and 6 minutes is top among female astronauts

and fourth on the all-time list, according to NASA.

“Anyone who knows me knows that space is my absolute favorite place to be,” Williams said in the statement.

“The International Space Station, the

people, the engineering and the science are truly awe-inspiring and have made the next steps of exploration to the moon and Mars possible,” she added.

Williams was also the first person to complete a triathlon and marathon in space. For her 2012 triathlon, she used a stationary bike, treadmill and strength-training machine to simulate the race experience, according to Space.com.

A retired Navy captain, Williams logged more than 4,000 flight hours as a helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft pilot.

She was selected to be an astronaut in 1998. During a 2018 interview with the Scottish Space School in Glasgow, Williams recalled being on a Navy ship when NASA called.

“It was jaw-dropping and all the folks around me were like, ‘No! You’re joking! I can’t believe it!’” she said during the interview. “I had to pinch myself.”

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## Training kicks in at ramen shop, saving choking man

BY BRIAN McELHINEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HANSEN, Okinawa — Two Marines recently provided first aid to a Japanese man in his 80s who was choking while experiencing a seizure at a ramen shop in northern Okinawa.

Cpl. Gabriel Castleman, of Duluth, Minn., and Sgt. Logan Gilbert, of San Antonio, said their Marine training kicked in when the man sitting next to them collapsed at Ramen Tsurumiya in Kin town on Jan. 21.

Both Marines are combat engineers with the 9th Engineer Support Battalion at Camp Hansen.

“I wouldn’t have known to check his airways ... to check if he was choking,” Gilbert said Jan. 23 at battalion headquarters. “I wouldn’t have known to put him in the recovery position and all that.”

Battalion executive officer Maj. Jim McGeady said he received a report of two Marines “involved in an incident”

with locals.

“Usually that’s not good news — we don’t get a lot of that, but this was actually great news,” he said. “They were there at a time and a place where they could help save a man who otherwise may have passed away.”

The Marines have not been officially commended, but McGeady said there will be “more to follow.”

Gilbert said he was having dinner with Castleman around 6:30 p.m. when the Japanese man fell backward onto him. At first, the Marines thought he was laughing at something his friend had said but he seemed to be clawing at his throat.

Gilbert said they laid the man down and tapped him on the back, causing him to cough up food. The Marines then checked his airway and put him on his side with his legs crossed in the recovery position so he wouldn’t choke, Castleman said.

“And then he started foaming out the



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

**Cpl. Gabriel Castleman, left, and Sgt. Logan Gilbert of the 9th Engineer Support Battalion discuss how they helped a Japanese man choking at a ramen shop.**

mouth and then blood started coming out,” he said. “That’s when we were like ... this is actually happening.”

The man convulsed for about seven minutes, Castleman said. When he came to, the Marines helped him sit up. He had no memory of what had happened and began walking around the shop in a daze.

The Marines helped the man to a seat, but after five minutes he stood up again, walked to the bathroom and collapsed, Castleman said. Gilbert said he held the man up for about 10 minutes, then helped him outside when

emergency services arrived.

A Kin Fire Department spokesman confirmed that two service members provided aid to the man before an ambulance took him to a hospital.

The Marines said they felt no hesitation to step in and help.

“Hopefully, the more good things that happen like this, they can at least look at Marines and think that, at least that they’re safe and that they can count on us,” Gilbert said.

Stars and Stripes reporter Keishi Kojima contributed to this report.



## MILITARY

# Study finds soot from burn pits in lungs of ailing vets

By LINDA F. HERSEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A new study examining the lasting effects of exposure to military burn pits found soot and dust embedded in the lungs of post-9/11 veterans with restricted breathing and inflamed airways.

The veterans, who were all diagnosed with lung disease, had retained carbon materials in their airways at levels similar to tobacco smokers diagnosed with respiratory bronchiolitis, according to the findings.

The study, published in *Scientific Reports*, found that veterans with a history of exposure to military burn pits had three times the level of carbon particles in their lungs compared to healthy individuals.

The findings offer direct evidence linking burn pit smoke exposure to lasting changes in the lungs of post-9/11 veterans, the authors said.

High levels of carbon particles were “significantly associated with reported burn pit smoke exposure,” according to the study.

Millions of veterans were exposed to toxic smoke from burn pits during deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and other regions, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Open burn pits of up to 10 acres were used to incinerate large volumes of waste, including plastics, chemicals, medical supplies, batteries, tires and unexploded munitions, among other hazardous items.

The research, published in December, is among only a few studies that have sought to quantify particulate matter from burn pits in the lung tissue of veterans, according to the authors.

Lung tissue samples were taken from 24 veterans with lung disease for the study, conducted by National Jewish Health, a nonprofit hospital that specializes in studying and treating respiratory conditions.

The samples were compared to lung tissue from healthy individuals and tobacco smokers.

The participants had a median of three deployments totaling 29 months, on average. Participants all had chronic breathing problems and were diagnosed with deployment-related lung diseases, including bronchiolitis and emphysema, according to the study.

All of the study participants were evaluated at the Center for Deployment-Related Lung Disease at National Jewish Health, in Denver.

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MARC CASTANEDA/Stars and Stripes

The 374th Medical Group at Yokota Air Base, Japan, is one of 13 military medical facilities recently named top health providers by The Leapfrog Group.

## Record 12 military hospitals, clinic across globe on nonprofit ‘top’ list

By MARC CASTANEDA  
*Stars and Stripes*

Twelve hospitals and one clinic on U.S. military bases worldwide have earned top designations from The Leapfrog Group, a nonprofit organization that evaluates health care quality on behalf of consumers and businesses.

All told, 156 medical facilities were named Top Hospitals in 2025, Leapfrog announced last month. The 13 military facilities recognized represent a record number for the annual list, according to a Dec. 18 news release from the Defense Health Agency.

A Leapfrog designation “says to other facilities that we worked hard to meet standards to prevent errors, infections or accidents to our patients,” said Air Force Maj. Katerina Loeffler, officer in charge of the 51st Medical Group’s operating room at Osan Air Base, South Korea.

“So, we’re meeting a higher level of patient care by putting in effort to attain” Leapfrog status, Loeffler said in a video posted this month on the base’s Facebook page.

Of the 12 military hospitals recognized, two are in South Korea, two are in Italy and one is in Japan.

The remaining hospitals are across the United States, from Alaska to California to South Carolina. Naval Health Clinic Cherry Point in North

Carolina was named a Top Ambulatory Surgery Center.

All but two military hospitals earned recognition in the general category. Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital at Fort Polk, La., and Gen. Leonard Wood Army Community Hospital at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., were designated Rural Top Hospitals.

Fewer than 6% of hospitals nationwide receive Top Hospital status each year, according to DHA’s release.

In Europe, U.S. Naval Hospital Naples and U.S. Naval Hospital Sigonella, both in Italy, earned Top Hospital designations. In the Indo-Pacific, the 374th Medical Group at Yokota Air Base, Japan, and Brian D. Allgood Army Community Hospital at Camp Humphreys, South Korea, also made the list.

“What really sets our hospital apart is that quality care comes first and the Leapfrog score follows,” said U.S. Army Col. Chad Black, director of the Allgood hospital and commander of the 549th Hospital Center and Medical Department Activity — Korea.

Leapfrog evaluates hospitals using safety and quality measures that include medication safety, maternity care and infection prevention. Hospitals must earn “A” grades on the Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade to qualify for Top Hospital status.

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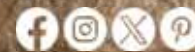


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