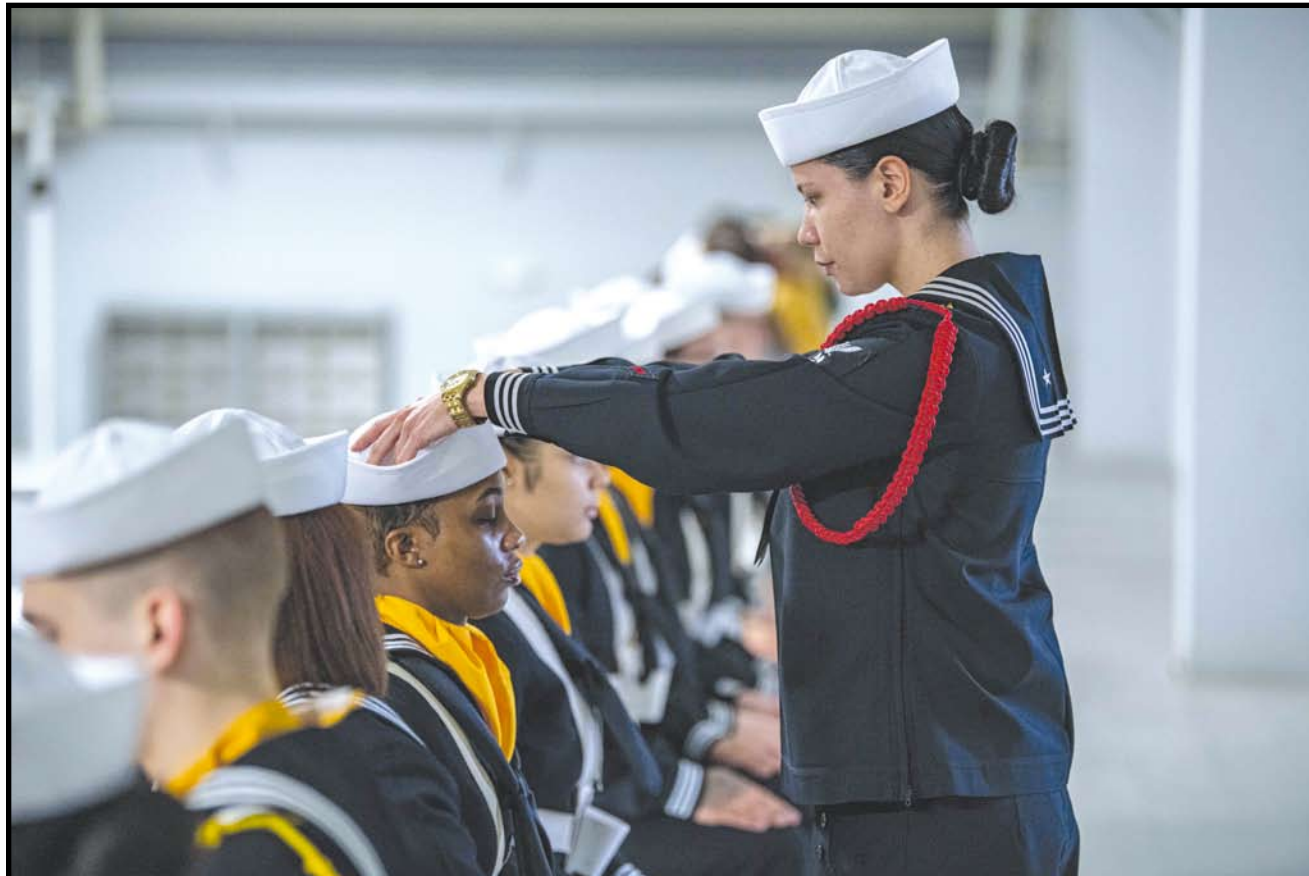


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SIXTY-FOURTH YEAR NO. 43  
 FEBRUARY 23, 2025



**SHIP SHAPE** Petty Officer 2nd Class Jennifer Andujar adjusts a recruit's cover during U.S. Navy Recruit Training Command's pass in review in Great Lakes, Ill., Feb. 06, 2025. More than 40,000 recruits train annually at the Navy's only boot camp. Official U. S. Navy photo

## DOD prepares invitation to bring back troops separated for refusing COVID vaccine

by C. Todd Lopez, DOD News

Over the course of 500 days, beginning in 2021, nearly 8,000 active duty and reserve service members were involuntarily separated from service for refusing to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Many others left voluntarily to avoid the vaccine mandate.

Now, the Defense Department plans to invite those service members back into uniform at the same rank they held when they separated.

President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order on Jan. 27, 2025, regarding reinstating service members discharged under the department's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

As part of the executive order, active duty and reserve service members who were discharged solely for refusing to receive the COVID-19 vaccine may request reinstatement to their former rank.

The Defense Department rescinded the mandate to take the COVID-19 vaccine on Jan. 10, 2023.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently directed the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness to provide guidance to the military departments on how to proceed.

"This guidance will provide procedures to rapidly reinstate individuals who were involuntarily discharged or voluntarily left to avoid vaccination," Hegseth wrote.

That guidance, now in the hands of the military departments, details the efforts the service branches must take.

A large part of that effort involves records reviews: identifying service members who were involuntarily separated or voluntarily separated to avoid vaccination and then communicating with those service members to let them know they are invited back into service.

Service members involuntarily discharged, solely for their refusal to take the vaccine, will be contacted directly by their respective services, according to the guidance.

"The secretaries of the military departments will invite these service members to seek reinstatement by applying to have their records corrected to reflect continued service such that back pay, benefits, bonus payments, or other compensation, subject to required offsets, will be available," the guidance reads.

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4067895/>

## MILITARY SPOUSES EXEMPTED FROM RETURN-TO-WORK MANDATE

by C. Todd Lopez  
 DOD News

While the president has ordered federal employees who have been working remotely and teleworking back to their offices, an exception is now in place for those federal employees who are spouses of military service members.

agement released a memorandum titled "Guidance on Exempting Military Spouses and Foreign Service Spouses from Agency Return to Office Plans" on Feb. 12. The memo explains how federal civilian employees who are also military spouses are exempt from the return-to-work mandate.

that their return-to-office plans categorically exempt all military spouses authorized to engage in remote work," the memorandum explains. "This includes both military spouses appointed under the Military Spouse Employment Act authorities and those appointed under other hiring authorities."

"Agencies should ensure that all such military and foreign service spouses are permitted to continue with any applicable remote work arrangements," the memo says.

The memo also said agencies may continue hiring military spouses in remote work positions.

Across the active-duty military, more than 48% of service members are married. Their spouses face challenges finding employment because the military lifestyle includes frequent moves, making it difficult to commit to a single employer or develop a career. That inability to find meaningful work makes life even more difficult for families who may depend on having a dual-income household.

According to the memorandum, the policy covers spouses of members of the armed forces on active duty, spouses of service members who retired with 100% disability, and spouses of service members who died while on active duty. Spouses of National Guard members on full-time guard duty are also included. The memo also covers spouses of U.S. foreign service members.

According to DOD's "2023 Demographics Profile of the Military Community," approximately 64% of military spouses want to be employed. Of the spouses who want to be em-

see **Spouses**, page 2

The Office of Personnel Man-

"Agencies should ... ensure



Military families are getting help from DoD to connect spouses with prospective employers. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Alex Fairchild

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# Head of French Navy hosts U.S. Pacific Fleet boss aboard FS Charles De Gaulle

by Lt.j.g. Jack Scypinski  
USS Carl Vinson

PHILIPPINE SEA – Adm. Steve Koehler, commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, met with Adm. Nicolas Vaujour, chief of staff of the French Navy, aboard the French aircraft carrier FS Charles De Gaulle, Feb. 14.

This visit was part of Exercise Pacific Steller 2025, a Multi-Large Deck Event (MLDE) in the Philippine Sea involving ships from U.S. Navy Car-

rier Strike Group (CSG) ONE, French CSG, and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. This exercise is designed to advance coordination and cooperation between French, Japanese and U.S. maritime forces. It simultaneously demonstrates capabilities in multi-domain operations, promotes a shared dedication to regional stability, and highlights the U.S. Navy's enduring power projection capability.

“Professionalism is making

the extremely difficult look routine and easy when it is not, and you are example of that,” said Koehler while addressing the crew via the shipboard announcing system. “Our professional militaries do amazing things together on a regular basis, and Pacific Steller is another example of that. Your historic 2025 deployment highlights your ability to integrate and operate alongside like-minded partners to continue to deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific.”

Our allies and partners are one of our greatest strengths and a key strategic advantage. When we operate alongside one another during exercises such as Pacific Steller, we are advancing a shared vision of a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific.

“During Pacific Steller, you are carrying out an extraordinary mission in the literal sense,” said Vaujour, “by the length of the deployment, by the extension we are carrying out today to this Philippine Sea, from the home port of Toulon to more than 6,500 nautical miles and then by the level of integration we are achieving with our American and Japanese partners.”

MLDEs are conducted in a manner that is consistent with international law and with due regard to the safety of navigation and the rights and interests of other states.

Participating large-deck ships include the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70), the French carrier FS Charles de Gaulle, and Japan's Izumo-class multi-functional destroyer JS Kaga (DDH-184).

CSG-1 consists of Vinson, embarked staffs of CSG-1 and Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) one, Carrier Air Wing 2 (CVW-2), the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Princeton (CG 59), and Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers USS Sterett (DDG 104) and USS William P. Lawrence (DDG 110).



Adm. Steve Koehler, commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (4th, from right), is joined by leaders of both U. S. Navy and French Navy on the flight deck of Charles De Gaulle in the Philippine Sea during Pacific Steller 2025, Feb. 14. Pacific Steller 2025 is a multi-large deck event with the Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group, French Carrier Strike Group, and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, fostering alliances and maritime security in support of a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Elizabeth Grubbs

CVW-2 is composed of nine squadrons flying the F-35C Lightning II, F/A-18E/F Super Hornets, EA-18G Growler, E-2D Advanced Hawkeye, CMV-22 Osprey and MH-60R/S Seahawks.

CSG-1 is operating in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations. U.S. 7th Fleet is the U.S. Navy's largest forward-deployed numbered fleet and routinely interacts and operates with allies and partners

in preserving a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

French CSG consists of Charles De Gaulle, its embarked French Strike Force staff and carrier air wing, an air-defense destroyer, multi-mission frigates, a supply ship, an attack submarine, and a detachment of Atlantique 2 maritime patrol aircraft.

The French carrier air wing flies the Rafale Marine (F4)

fighter aircraft, E-2C Hawkeye, and Dauphin, Caiman Marine, and Panther helicopters.

French CSG is currently engaged in Mission CLEMENCEAU 25, sailing alongside its allies and strategic partners to promote a free, open and stable Indo-Pacific for the benefit of French populations, interests, and those of their regional partners, within the framework of international law.

## Navy joins Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo in Indonesia

by Lt.Cmdr. Seth Koenig

BALI, Indonesia – The Navy joined more than 20 navies for the opening ceremony of the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK), hosted by the Indonesian Navy in Bali, Indonesia, on Feb. 16.

MNEK emphasizes multilateral maritime cooperation and disaster response protocols. The exercise takes place in conjunction with the International Maritime Security Symposium

(IMSS), the largest international symposium organized by the Indonesian Navy. The theme of this year's IMSS is “Addressing Maritime Security Challenges with Technology and Cooperation.”

“I am proud of what the U.S. Pacific Fleet and our joint force can generate in terms of military power, our ability to synchronize in all domains, and do all of that with our allies and partners,” said Adm. Steve Koehler, PACFLT commander,

during his presentation at the IMSS. “We will continue to be a reliable maritime partner for all like-minded nations and their citizens in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific. We do so with unity of purpose, and with a powerful and resolute force.”

Continue reading this story at <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/4069389/us-navy-joins-multilateral-naval-exercise-komodo-in-indonesia/>.

## Spouses

continued from page 1

ployed, about 79 percent have found work, while about 21 percent are unable to find work. The new policy memo from OPM will help keep many military spouses employed and serve as a critical recruitment and retention tool.

“Rebuilding our military starts with recruiting and retaining the right people. Spouse employment is a key factor in that

task, helping the department retain service members with hard-earned skills by easing the financial strain on their families,” said Tim Dill, who is currently performing the duties of assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs.

Dill is an Army veteran and Green Beret who served as an infantry and Special Forces officer in the 82nd Airborne Division and 3rd Special Forces Group.

He said his military service gave him a deep understanding of how military service affects family life.

“I witnessed firsthand the challenges that military families face, including frequent moves, long hours and deployments,” he said. “Helping military spouses find and keep jobs helps our military families thrive in challenging circumstances, making us a more focused and lethal force.”

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## USS *Truman* arrives in Greece for repairs following recent collision

by John Vandiver  
Stars and Stripes

MUNICH, Germany - Aircraft carrier USS *Harry S. Truman* arrived recently at a U.S. naval base in Greece for repairs following the Feb. 12 collision near the Suez Canal, the Navy said.

The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier sustained damage to its starboard quarter, including the exterior wall of two storage rooms, maintenance space and other areas, U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa said in a statement.

“While the ship is fully mission capable and the ship conducted flight operations following the collision, pulling into port for emergent repairs will enable the ship to continue deployment as scheduled,” said Capt. Dave Snowden, the carrier’s commander.

The damage was located just behind one of the carrier’s aircraft elevators, which were reported to be undamaged. There were no injuries caused by the collision, and the ship’s propulsion plants also were unaffected, Navy officials have said.

*Truman* is being worked on at the U.S. Navy’s Souda Bay

base in Crete, where a team of engineers and naval architects will carry out a full survey of damaged areas and develop a repair plan, the Navy said.

*Truman* collided with the Panama-flagged bulk cargo carrier *Besiktas-M* at 11:46 p.m. on Feb. 12 as the carrier was transiting a congested area near the Suez Canal. The ship was presumably waiting to head south into the Red Sea. *Truman* has spent about two months on duty in the Red Sea supporting strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, among other assignments.

*Truman*’s escort, destroyer USS *Jason Dunham*, was nearby but not involved in the collision. Other elements of the strike group remain operational “across geographic regions in support of their component commanders,” said *Truman* strike group commander Rear Adm. Sean Bailey.

“Our mission has not changed and we remain committed to responding to any challenge in this dynamic and global security environment,” Bailey said in a statement Feb. 16.

The Navy is investigating the circumstances surrounding the accident.



Carrier USS *Harry S. Truman*, with a jet close behind, sails through the sea. *Truman* arrived at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay, Greece, on Feb. 16 for repairs following a recent collision. Photo by U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa



**JOINT VIKING** U.S. Marines and Sailors ski with Norwegian soldiers during Joint Viking in Bardufoss, Norway, Jan. 14, 2025. The exercise focused on Arctic training and military-to-military engagements. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Brian Bolin, Jr.

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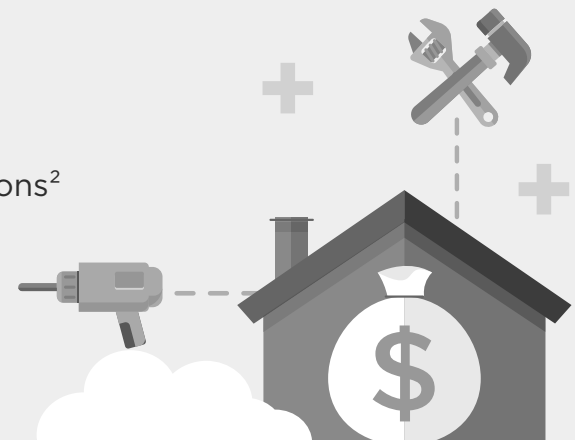
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# MISSION SUCCESS STARTS WITH PEOPLE, JTF SOUTHERN GUARD J1 ENSURES READINESS AND VICTORY

by Staff Sgt. ShaTyra Reed-Cox  
**Joint Task Force Southern Guard**  
 NAVAL STATION GUANTANAMA BAY, Cuba – Missions don't succeed on strategy alone, they rely on the people who execute them.

isn't just about paperwork: it's about people," said Army Master Sgt. Demon Jones Sr., senior enlisted leader for JTF-SG J1. "People are the most crucial component to any mission."

also on the precise management of personnel resources.

Christopher M. Green. "Without proper personnel management, we risk gaps in capability that could impact mission success."

The J1 team ensures that commanders have real-time data to assess current personnel capabilities and make informed decisions about future force requirements through managing daily personnel accountability and developing manning positions.

In addition to routine human resource functions, J1 is responsible for tracking and accounting for all overtime hours worked by USSOUTHCOM headquarters personnel in direct support of the operation. This meticulous oversight ensures resources are managed effectively while

"Our job is to ensure person-

At Joint Task Force Southern Guard, the J1 team works behind the scenes to ensure every service member is accounted for, supported, and ready to perform.

From tracking personnel to filling critical roles, their work keeps the force strong and the mission moving forward.

The successful execution of Operation Southern Guard relies not only on tactical expertise but

"Human resources assistance



## Army

•Army 'transforming-in-contact' unit using more drones than ever before

•Frozen drones and robotic mules: What the Army learned from a key exercise in Germany

## Navy

•Navy Seabees rescue motorists from submerged vehicle

•Navy detective sentenced for choking Sailor unconscious, lying about prior misconduct

•Hundreds from Army, Navy, Marine Corps surge to Guantanamo Bay for migrant detention operation

•Structure at Chinese shipyard may point to China's next aircraft carrier's capabilities

## Marine Corps

•Airfield repairs delayed as Okinawa protests Kadena parachute training

## Air Force

•Air Force delays tech sergeant tests to remove DEI from study guides

•Soldier, Sailor and now Airman: This NCO has served in three branches in 12 years

•U.S., Australia, Japan boost F-35 integration with Indo-Pacific exercise

## Space Force

•Space Force general wants 'more aggressive' acquisition reforms

## National Guard

•Alaska rescue units had a hell of week: 3 planes, 2 countries and 1 stuck helicopter

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•Corpsman receives medal for saving Marine from heat stroke

•Hawaii Soldier to face trial in suspected death of pregnant wife

## Veterans

•Homegrown trips: Desperate for PTSD relief, veterans turn to each other for DIY psychedelic treatments

•Former Fort Carson Iraq War veteran gives up the fight to stay in the U.S.



**Joint Task Force Southern Guard J1 human resources personnel conduct joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Feb. 13. Joint Task Force Southern Guard is supporting illegal aliens holding operations led by the Department of Homeland Security at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. ShaTyra Cox (This photo has been altered for security purposes by blurring out name tapes)**

nel are tracked, supported, and accounted for so that commanders have the manpower they need to complete the mission," Jones explained.

Their work ensures seamless integration between U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and JTF-SG, keeping the force properly manned and mission-ready.

"We maintain and coordinate fills for JTF-SG joint manning document positions, ensuring every role is staffed with the right people at the right time," said Army Chief Warrant Officer 3

maintaining compliance with operational standards.

As part of a multi-service, multi-agency force, J1 personnel must navigate the complexities of working in a joint environment.

Collaboration between not only Department of Defense service members but interagency personnel such as Department of Homeland Security presents unique challenges that also enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the team.

"Being part of a joint team



**SAPPORO, Japan (Jan. 31, 2025) Navy Aviation Support Equipment Technician 1st Class Hernan Hernandezrodriguez, a native of Wenatchee, Wash., and a Navy Snow Team member, works on a snow sculpture during the 75th Annual Sapporo Snow Festival. This is the 40th year the Navy has participated in the festival. U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Matthew Fischer**



**PACIFIC PALISADES (Feb. 15, 2025) Soldiers sort through debris at a homesite here, looking for hazardous waste. U.S. Northern Command deployed about 170 active-duty personnel to help with cleanup of wildfire hazardous waste from the Eaton and Palisades fires. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Maj. Casey Nelsen**

means adapting to different service cultures, processes, and expectations," said Navy Chief Petty Officer Daysha Evans. "Our ability to integrate and support personnel from across all branches ensures a unified and effective force."

J1 also supports joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration for arriving and departing personnel, facilitates task force mail operations, and provides daily personnel status reports, including tracking illegal aliens.

This constant stream of personnel data allows leadership to adjust resources dynamically, ensuring sustained operational capability.

J1's ability to tailor human resources support to the needs of the JTF-SG commander is a determining factor in overall mission effectiveness.

"Our job is to take care of the people who take care of the mission," said Jones. "Without the right personnel in place, equipped and accounted for, the fight cannot continue."

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## NPS develops AI solution to automate drone defense with high energy lasers

by Dan Linchan

MONTEREY - Lasers enable the Navy to fight at the speed of light. Armed with artificial intelligence ship defensive laser systems can make rapid, accurate targeting assessments necessary for today's complex and fast-paced operating environment where drones have become an increasing threat.

To counter the rapidly mounting threats posed by the proliferation of inexpensive uncrewed autonomous systems, or drones, Naval Postgraduate School researchers and collaborators are applying AI to automate critical parts of the tracking system used by laser weapon systems. By improving target classification, pose estimation, aimpoint selection and aimpoint maintenance, the ability of an LWS to assess and neutralize a hostile UAS greatly increases. Enhanced decision advantage is the goal.

The tracking system of an LWS follows a sequence of demanding steps to successfully engage an adversarial UAS. When conducted by a human operator, the steps can be time consuming, especially when facing numerous drones in a swarm. Add in the challenges of an adversary's missiles and rockets traveling at hypersonic speeds, efforts to mount proper defenses become even more complicated, and urgent.

Directed energy and AI are both considered DOD Critical Technology Areas. By automating and accelerating the sequence for targeting drones with an AI-enabled LWS, a research team from NPS, Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Lockheed Martin, Boeing and the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) developed an approach to have the operator on-the-loop overseeing the tracking system instead of in-the-loop manually controlling it.

"Defending against one drone isn't a problem. But if there are multiple drones, then sending million-dollar interceptor missiles becomes a very expensive tradeoff because the drones are very cheap," says Distinguished Professor Brij Agrawal, NPS Department of Mechanical and



(from left) Naval Postgraduate School faculty researchers Brij Agrawal and Leonardo Herrera, with Navy Ensign Nicholas Messina. Official photo by Javier Chagoya

Aerospace Engineering, who leads the NPS team. "The Navy has several LWS being developed and tested. LWS are cheap to fire but expensive to build. But once it's built, then it can keep on firing, like a few dollars per shot."

To achieve this level of automation, the researchers generated two datasets that contained thousands of drone images and then applied AI training to the datasets. This produced an AI model that was validated in the laboratory and then transferred to Dahlgren for field testing with its LWS tracking system.

Funded by the Joint Directed Energy Transition Office (DE-JTO) and the Office of Naval Research (ONR), this research addresses advanced AI and directed energy technology applications cited in the CNO NAVPLAN.

During a typical engagement with a hostile drone, radar makes the initial detection and then the contact information is fed over to the LWS. The operator of the LWS uses its infrared sensor, which has a wide field of view, to start tracking the drone. Next, the high magnification and narrow field of view of its high energy laser (HEL) telescope continues the tracking as its fast-steering mirrors maintain the lock on the drone.

With a video screen showing the image of the drone in the distance, the operator compares it to a target reference to classify the type of drone and identify its

unique aimpoints. Each drone type has different characteristics, and its aimpoints are the locations where that particular drone is most vulnerable to incoming laser fire.

Along with the drone type and aimpoint determinations, the operator must identify the drone's pose, or relative orientation to the LWS, necessary for locating its aimpoints. The operator looks at the drone's image on the screen to determine where to point the LWS and then fires the laser beam.

**Long distances and atmospheric conditions between the LWS and the drone can adversely affect the image quality, making all these identifications more challenging and time consuming to conduct.**

After all these preparations, the operator cannot just simply move a computerized crosshair across the screen onto an aimpoint and press the fire button as if it were a kinetic weapon system, like an anti-aircraft gun or interceptor missile.

Though lasers move at the speed of light, they don't instantaneously destroy a drone like the way lasers are depicted in sci-fi movies. The more powerful the laser, the more energy it delivers in a given time. To heat a drone enough to cause catastrophic damage, the laser must be firing the entire time.

If the drone continuously moves, then the laser beam will

wander along its surface if not continuously re-aimed. In this case, the laser's energy will be distributed across a large area instead of concentrated at a single point. This process of continuously firing the laser beam at one spot is called aimpoint maintenance.

In 2016, construction of the High Energy Laser Beam Control Research Testbed (HBCRT) was completed by the NPS research team. The HBCRT was designed to replicate the functions of an LWS found aboard a ship, such as the 30-kilowatt, XN-1 Laser Weapon System operated on USS Ponce (LPD 15) from 2014 to 2017.

Early on, the HBCRT was utilized at NPS to study adaptive optics techniques to correct for aberrations from atmospheric conditions that degrade the quality of the laser beam fired from an LWS. Later, the addition of state-of-the-art deformable mirrors built by Northrup Grumman allowed NPS researchers to investigate further impacts of deep turbulence.

Over the years, 15 masters and 2 PhD degrees have been earned by NPS officer-students contributing their interdisciplinary research into hardware and software related to the HBCRT. Investigations by Navy Ensigns Raymond Turner, MS aeronautical engineering in 2022, and

Raven Heath, MS aeronautical engineering in 2023, added to this research. Turner helped integrate AI algorithms into the HBCRT for aimpoint selection and maintenance, and Heath used deep learning to research AI target key points estimation.

Now the HBCRT is also being used to create catalogs of drone images to make real-world datasets for AI training.

Built by Boeing, the HBCRT has a 30 cm diameter, fine-tracking, HEL telescope and a course-tracking, mid-wavelength infrared (MWIR) sensor. The pair is called the beam director when coupled together on a large gimble that swivels them in unison up-and-down and side-to-side.

"The MWIR is thermal," says Research Associate Professor Jae Jun Kim, NPS Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, who specializes in optical beam control. "It looks at the mid-wavelength infrared signal of light, which is related to the heat signature of the target. It has a wide field of view. The gimbal moves to lock onto the target. Then the target is seen through the telescope, which has very small field of view."

A 1-kilowatt laser beam (roughly a million times more powerful than a classroom laser pointer) can fire from the tele-

scope. If the laser beam were to be used, it's generated by a separate external unit and then directed into the telescope, which then projects the laser beam onto the target. However, its use with the HBCRT isn't required for the initial development of this research, which allows the work to be easily conducted inside a laboratory.

With a short-wavelength infrared (SWIR) tracking camera, the telescope can record images of a drone that is miles away. Although necessary, replicating the view of a distant drone in a small laboratory is impossible. To resolve this dilemma, researchers mounted 3D-printed, titanium miniature models of drones fabricated by AFRL into a range-in-a-box.

Constructed on an optical bench, the RIAB accurately replicates a drone flying miles away from the telescope by using a large parabolic mirror and other optical components. This research used a miniature model of a Reaper drone. When a SWIR image is taken of the drone model by the telescope, it appears to the telescope as if it were seeing an actual full-sized Reaper drone.

Continue reading this story at <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/4064895/>.

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# Local Military

**COAST GUARD OFFLOADS MORE THAN \$275 MILLION WORTH OF ILLEGAL COCAINE IN SAN DIEGO**



The crew of Coast Guard Cutter *Woesche* (WMSL 751) offloaded approximately 37,256 pounds of cocaine, with an estimated value of more than \$275 million, on Feb. 13 in San Diego. The offload is a result of 11 separate suspected drug smuggling vessel interdictions or events off the coasts of Mexico and Central and South America by the Coast Guard Cutter *Woesche* in December through February.

**Scan Eagle, an un-manned aerial vehicle, is positioned on the flight deck of Coast Guard Cutter *Woesche* (WMSL 751) during an offload event in San Diego, Feb. 13. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Austin Wiley**

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"The *Woesche* crew faced numerous challenges during this patrol, overcoming the hardest adversities and still had 11 successful drug interdictions," said Capt. Tyson Scofield, the cutter's commander. "Their dedication, strength of character, and resilience ensured the success of our mission, preventing over \$275 million worth of illicit narcotics from reaching the United States and protecting our communities from the devastating effects of transnational crime."

Multiple U.S. agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security, collaborate in the effort to combat transnational organized crime. The Coast Guard, Navy, Customs and Border Protection,

FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, along with allied and international partner agencies, all play a role in counter-narcotic operations.

The fight against drug cartels in the Eastern Pacific Ocean requires unity of effort in all phases, from detection, monitoring and interdictions to criminal prosecutions by international partners and U.S. Attorneys' Offices in districts across the nation.

The law enforcement phase of counter-smuggling operations in the Eastern Pacific Ocean is conducted under the authority of the Eleventh Coast Guard District, headquartered in Alameda. The interdictions, including

the actual boardings, are led and conducted by members of the Coast Guard.

The service continues to increase operations to interdict, seize, and disrupt transshipment of cocaine and other bulk illicit drugs by sea. These drugs fuel and enable cartels and Transnational Criminal Organizations to produce and traffic illegal fentanyl threatening the U.S.

*Woesche* is one of four legend-class national security cutters homeported in Alameda. The Coast Guard Cutter *Woesche*'s crew can operate in the most demanding open ocean environments, and the vast approaches of the Southern Pacific, where significant narcotics trafficking occurs.



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## USS O'Kane returns from 7-month deployment

NAVAL BASE SAN DIEGO -Destroyer USS *O'Kane* (DDG 77), assigned to the USS *Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Strike Group, returned here earlier this month after a seven-month deployment to the U.S. 3rd, 7th and 5th Fleet area of operations.

*O'Kane* departed San Diego with the ABCECSG, July 17, 2024, and remained in U.S. 5th Fleet following the departure of ABCECSG who returned to their homeport in December 2024.

"I am incredibly proud of the exemplary work this team has invested in themselves and their equipment over the past few months," said Cmdr. Rich Ray, commanding officer, *O'Kane*. "We are proud of the work we accomplished this deployment, and we are looking forward to continuing that success into the next challenge."

Following the departure of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) and the Arleigh Burke-class guided-class missile destroyers USS Frank E. Petersen, Jr. (DDG 121), USS Michael Murphy (DDG 112) and USS Spruance (DDG 111) from U.S. 5th Fleet, *O'Kane* and the USS *Stockdale* (DDG 106) remained in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) area of responsibility to support global maritime security operations.

*O'Kane* and USS *Stockdale*, also deployed with the *Lincoln* group, escorted U.S. flagged and crewed merchant vessels in the Gulf of Aden. During the escort, the destroyers worked alongside other U.S. Central Command forces in successfully repelling multiple Iranian-backed Houthi attacks during transits of the Bab el-Mandeb strait. During the transit, the destroyers were attacked by one-way attack un-crewed Aerial systems, anti-ship ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles which were successfully engaged and defeated. The vessels were not damaged, and no personnel were hurt. The ships were well prepared, supported, and the well-trained Sailors successfully defended the ship.

## Coast Guard interdicts 12 aliens near Point Loma

SAN DIEGO - Coast Guard members recently interdicted 12 aliens aboard a 25-foot sail vessel approximately 12 miles west of Point Loma.

A Customs and Border Protection patrol aircraft and a Coast Guard MH-60 Jayhawk helicopter sighted the sail vessel.

Coast Guard Cutter *Petrel* was notified and diverted and at approximately 11:48 a.m. launched their small boat team members for the interdiction.

All 12 aliens were taken into custody: 11 adult males and one adult female claiming Mexican nationality.

The aliens and the vessel are en route to transfer to the Imperial Beach Border Patrol.



Official Coast Guard video grab

# Boxer celebrates 30 years of service

by Seaman Tyler Miles

USS *Boxer* (LHD 4)

SAN DIEGO - Wasp-class amphibious assault ship USS *Boxer* (LHD 4) marked the 30th anniversary of its commissioning with a ceremony held on the mess decks Feb. 11.

This year's theme was "30 years and thriving," attended by current crew members, past and present *Boxer* leadership to celebrate the ship's remarkable history and the men and women who have served aboard.

Senior Chief Information Systems Technician Adam Randle highlighted the ship's storied history and meaning of *Boxer*'s rest.

"*Boxer* is more than just steel and machinery; it's a home, a legacy, and a symbol of strength," said Randle. "Over the years, this ship has carried generations of Sailors who have stood the watch, answered the call, and upheld the highest traditions of the Navy. I'm proud to serve aboard her and grateful for the camaraderie and resilience of the crew that keeps her mis-

sion-ready."

The sixth and current ship to bear the name *Boxer* was launched on August 13, 1993 and commissioned on February 11, 1995. Since its commissioning, *Boxer* has played a pivotal role in key operations, including 14 deployments spanning both the globe in crises and conflicts, humanitarian missions after natural disasters, and continued maritime security efforts in the Indo-Pacific region.

The ship has earned numerous accolades, more recently the Battle Effectiveness Award; the Maritime Warfare Excellence Award; the Command, Control, Communications and Information Warfare Excellence Award; the Logistics Management Excellence Award; the Self Sufficiency Award; the Force Health and Wellness Unit Award or Green 'H'; and the Captain Edward F. Ney Memorial Food Service Award.

"*Boxer* has a proud legacy of excellence from humanitarian missions to combat operations, always answering the nation's

call with strength and determination. This ship is a testament to the dedication of the Sailors and Marines who have served aboard her, embodying the fighting spirit of the Navy and Marine Corps team," said Capt. Jason Tumlinson, *Boxer*'s commander.

"As we celebrate another year in her storied history, we honor the past while looking ahead to the future, ready to take on any challenge."

The ceremony concluded with a commemorative cake cutting in honor of the ship's accomplishments.

"The true strength of *Boxer* has always been its crew; past, present, and future. The dedication, resilience, and profes-

sionalism of the Sailors and Marines who have served aboard this ship are what make her a force to be reckoned with," said Tumlinson.

"Every mission, every challenge, and every achievement is evident of their hard work and commitment. As we celebrate *Boxer*'s legacy, we also look forward to the future, knowing that with this incredible team, we are ready for anything."

*Boxer* is homeported in San Diego. The crew is made up of approximately 1,200 officers and enlisted personnel and can accommodate up to 1,800 Marines.

For more news from USS *Boxer*, visit <https://www.surfpac.navy.mil/lhd4>.



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## IN PERFECT ALIGNMENT

A Japan Air Self Defense Force F-35A Lightning II prepares to make contact with a U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker assigned to the 465th Aerial Refueling Squadron, Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, as part of exercise Cope North 2025, Feb. 10, 2025 over the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility. The F-35A provides next-generation stealth, enhanced situational awareness, and reduced vulnerability to the realistic combat training and scenarios in CN25. U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Thomas Hansford



## 2 Sailors eject from jet before it crashes in San Diego Bay

In a story compiled from various news sources, two crew members ejected from a Navy jet before it crashed Feb. 12 near Mission Bay. They were quickly rescued by a sportfishing boat, according to reports.

The two occupants of the E/A-18G Growler were first picked up by the Premier Sportfishing vessel and then transferred to a nearby Customs and Border Protection craft, Coast Guard spokesperson Petty Officer Christopher Sappey said.

The crash occurred during what is known as a “go-around maneuver,” in which the aircraft landed and was taking off again, according to Navy spokesperson Cmdr. Beth Teach. The cause of the crash is under investigation.

On a live webcam of San Diego harbor traffic, someone aboard the Premier can be heard telling the Coast Guard that the crew members ejected right after takeoff.

“We’re on our way to help assist,” the man called in about 10:14 a.m. “They’re in the water.”

Shortly afterward someone from the boat reported: “We have both pilots on board and safe.”

Brandon Viets, captain of the Premier, said he had taken a dozen passengers out by Point Loma on a fishing trip when he heard a jet taking off from the naval base that “seemed a little louder than normal.”

He turned and saw two people falling with parachutes. Viets immediately headed toward them in his boat. The jet remained in the air for several minutes before diving into the water, he said.

“All I could see was a plume of water and mud and muck, 70 to 80 feet tall,” Viets said.

“Captain Brandon Viets and the crew of the Premier acted swiftly, and thanks to their professionalism, were able to bring these pilots to safety,” Frank Ursitti, general manager of boat owner H&M Landing, said in a statement.

The two men were taken to a hospital and were in stable condition, authorities said. The Coast Guard deployed two vessels to safeguard the Growler wreckage in the San Diego Harbor, Sappey said.

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## LOCAL PHOTO GALLERY



**STANDING BY** Air Force Senior Airman Kaylee Tillberg, 356th Fighter Generation Squadron crew chief, stands by prior to launching an F-35 Lightning II for a training sortie in Bamboo Eagle 25-1 at Naval Air Station Lemoore, Calif. Feb. 14, 2025. Bamboo Eagle tests and refines skills for high-end combat. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Ricardo Sandoval



**MAKING WAVES** Sailors assigned to USS America conduct small boat operations in the Philippine Sea, Feb. 11, 2025. U. S. Navy photo by Seaman Kenneth Melseth



**RESCUE READY** Sailors assigned to USS Carl Vinson participate in search and rescue training with an MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopter in the Celebes Sea, Feb. 7, 2025. U.S.Navy photo

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## The Meat & Potatoes of Life



by  
Lisa  
Smith  
Molinari

# Restore 'care' to Primary Care Providers

tions ordered," she said, then bid me adieu.

It was the fastest doctor's appointment I'd ever had in my 32 years as a military spouse.

As a long-time Navy wife and patron of dependent military medicine services, I am accustomed to having to change PCMs often due to military moves and the necessary transfer of medical staff to and from military treatment facilities (MTFs). I liked some PCMs better than others, but had been generally satisfied with the care.

However, ever since our last PCS in 2013, our family has experienced drastic fluctuations in the quality and accessibility of military healthcare services at our clinic. Our clinic was initially buzzing with staff and patients, but many of the specialty offices soon closed or were limited to active duty only.

Several years ago, I was advised by my PCM to start looking for Tri-care providers because dependents were being phased out. Later I was told the clinic was trying to get beneficiaries back. Two years ago, I was told that there was only one PCM at our clinic and a two month wait to get an appointment. Last year, I was assigned a terrific new PCM, but he was gone after only six months. The next two PCMs I met only once and they were gone.

This story is no coincidence.

In 2013, the Defense Health Agency (DHA) was established to address Congress' concerns about "inefficiencies" (i.e., costs) in military health. The DoD instructed

DHA to ensure that MTFs spend most of their resources on wartime readiness and treatment of military service personnel. DHA's mission was expanded in 2017 to transfer the management and administration of all MTFs worldwide to DHA. The transition was completed in November 2022.

The required emphasis on readiness caused an increase in training and deployment of medical personnel, taking them away from their jobs at 736 MTFs and causing staffing shortages. Uniformed family practice professionals felt underpaid and overworked, and many left the service. DHA shed 200,000 retired and dependent beneficiaries and 12,800 military health billets to cut costs. Beneficiaries were forced out, only to find inadequate Tricare providers.

Eventually, the US Inspector General, watchdogs and the press began openly recognizing the staffing shortages and access to care issues at MTFs, resulting in DoD directives and a Military Health System Strategic Plan for 2024 to 2029 to address the problems. However, the FY 2025 Budget requests only slightly more (.02% to 1.8%) funding for military health system functions.

As I waited at the pharmacy for my prescriptions to be filled, I scanned WebMD for answers to the questions that my new Doc didn't have time to entertain. I wondered how long this PCM would last and hoped that, one day soon, I'd have a Primary Care Manager who actually had time to care.

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# Add a camera grip & shutter button to your cell phone with SnapGrip Pro

In addition to my skills as a photographer, I depend upon my professional cameras to give me reliable, consistent, predictable control of my photography. Often the opportunities to take pictures are fleeting, so either I capture them in the moment or they will be gone forever.

The most basic and arguably the most important control of any camera is the shutter release button. That is what you need to press to take pictures. If that does not work, your picture will not be taken, and perhaps the opportunity will be lost forever.

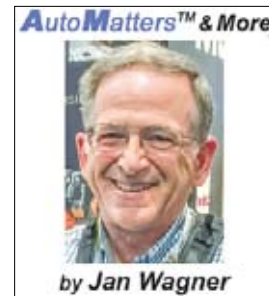
Often, I do not have one of my professional cameras with me. However, I usually have my cell phone (currently an iPhone 14 ProMax).

While even the best and most capable cell phone cameras do not offer some of the features and capabilities of professional cameras, such as my Canon R1, they are getting better and better all the time — with such important features as multiple physical lenses for everything from wide to telephoto shots, eliminating the need for photographically inferior digital zoom; and incredible image processing — even in low-light situations.

However, cell phones still have one serious deficiency: their lack of a physical shutter release button. I've missed many pictures simply because I failed to find and correctly press that infernal virtual shutter release button on the screen. We should not have to look away from what we are trying to photograph, in order to find and press a virtual shutter release button.

We no longer have to endure that deficiency. I have recently found three companies that are selling magnetically-attached, DSLR-like grips with a camera-like shutter re-

lease button for MagSafe cell phones and cases. Their prices, features and cell phone compatibility vary widely, but they all include an easy-to-use, physical shutter release button. These elevate cell phone photography to a whole new level, making it



much easier for anyone to use their cell phone to take pictures.

I first discovered one of these camera grips a few weeks prior to this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. At CES I was given review samples of three components of the ShiftCam system — all of which use the cell phone's MagSafe feature to firmly connect these devices to the cell phone, even if it is within a MagSafe cell phone case. These items are the SnapGrip Pro, the Snap Pocket Light and the Snap Stand Mini.

The SnapGrip Pro is the heart of the system. Compatible with both iOS (iPhone) and Android, it is an ergonomic, DSLR-like, magnetically-attached handgrip. On top it has a physical shutter release button positioned for your right index finger, just like on a camera. Inside

the grip is a 5000mAh, rechargeable battery pack for fast, efficient, on-demand Qi2 wireless charging of your cell phone.

The default functionality of the Bluetooth shutter button is for taking still pictures. On an iOS or Android cell phone, a single press is all it takes. On iOS, a long press of the button and then holding it down places the cell phone's camera in video mode (burst mode on Android). It is so easy to use that when I gave my iPhone to a number of Knott's Berry Farm employees to take pictures of our group, myself included, they were easily able to use the shutter button to take the pictures.

Since the grip is magnetically attached, it is easy to rotate it between landscape and portrait orientations. When the grip is detached, its shutter button can still wirelessly trigger the camera. The grip also functions as a weighted phone stand.

Other components of the ShiftCam system, including the rechargeable Snap Pocket Light, can easily be magnetically stacked onto the grip. This LED ring light has four light intensity settings, and it surrounds a mirror so that you can make sure you're in the shots. It can even be flipped backwards for selfies.

A magnetically-attached mini tripod (Snap Stand Mini) and a combination selfie stick and tripod, complete with a detachable Bluetooth remote and cold shoe, are also available.

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## Veterans News

### VA implements new flag display policy at facilities

VA has announced a new policy limiting the display of flags at VA facilities, effective immediately.

The policy is intended to establish consistency across the department and aligns with longstanding Department of Defense guidelines.

Under the new directive, only specific flags may be publicly displayed or depicted at VA facilities. These include the United States flag, flags of U.S. states and territories, military service flags, VA flags and official flags of U.S. agencies.

Additionally, flags representing prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA), Senior Executive Service (SES), military command units and burial flags for honoring Veterans and reservists are permitted.

The policy applies to all VA facilities, including offices, government vehicles, medical centers, common areas and parking lots. However, it does not prohibit the inclu-



Courtesy photo

sion of unauthorized flags in museum exhibits, state-issued license plates, grave sites, historical displays or works of art, provided they do not imply official endorsement by the department.

This guidance supersedes VA's previous memorandum on displaying flags during Pride Month, issued in May 2024. However, it does not affect existing policies governing national cemeteries.

"All Veterans and VA beneficiaries will always be welcome at all VA facilities to receive the benefits and services they have earned under the law," Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Doug Collins said in an email to all employees.

"This policy will bring consistency and simplicity to the display of flags throughout the department, ensuring a singular focus on serving the needs of Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors."

VA's implementation follows similar policies maintained by the Department of Defense since the previous Trump administration and upheld during the Biden administration.

For any VA assistance, refer to <https://ask.va.gov/> or call 1-800-698-2411.

### VA dismisses more than 1,000 employees

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs today announced the dismissal of more than 1,000 employees.

Those dismissed Feb. 13 include non-bargaining unit probationary employees who have served less than a year in a competitive service appointment or who have served less than two years in an excepted service appointment.

The personnel moves will save the department more than \$98 million per year, and VA will redirect all of those resources back toward health care, benefits and services for VA beneficiaries.

There are currently more than 43,000 probationary employees across the department, the vast majority of whom are exempt from the personnel actions because they serve in mission-critical positions — primarily

those supporting benefits and services for VA beneficiaries — or are covered under a collective bargaining agreement. VA employees who elected to participate in the Office of Personnel Management's deferred resignation program are also

**Mission-critical positions are exempt from the reductions, which will enable VA to redirect over \$98 million annually to health care, benefits and services for VA beneficiaries.**

exempt from these personnel actions.

The dismissals are effective immediately and have been communicated directly to each employee. As an additional safeguard to ensure VA benefits and services are not impacted, the first Senior Executive Service or SES-equivalent leader in a dismissed employee's chain of

command can request that the employee be exempted from removal.

The dismissals announced are part of a government-wide Trump Administration effort to make agencies more efficient, effective and responsive to the American people. To that end, VA is refocusing on its core mission: providing the best possible care and benefits to veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.

"At VA, we're focused on saving money so it can be better spent on veteran care," said VA Secretary Doug Collins. "We thank these employees for their service to VA. This was a tough decision, but ultimately it's the right call to better support the veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors the department exists to serve. To be perfectly clear: these moves will not negatively impact VA health care, benefits or beneficiaries."

my CALVET Custom benefits and services	Contact CalVet 1-800-952-5626	VA Benefits Hotline 1-800-827-1000	Veterans Crisis Line Dial 988 Press 1	Find a CVSO 1-844-SERV-VET (1-844-7378-838)

# CLASSIFIED ADS

## SOCIAL SECURITY MATTERS

### When should my wife claim Social Security benefits?

*Dear Rusty: I turned 64 in July and my wife turned 62 in August. My wife has not worked for approximately 15 years but does qualify for Social Security on her prior work record. My wife is having some physical issues and would like to not return to work. Since she is eligible to collect Social Security, that would be an option to provide additional income, so she doesn't have to work. My question is how would it affect her future SS spousal benefits based on my record if she begins collecting her own benefit now? I plan to work until at least my full retirement age (67), and maybe longer, but plan to start collecting SS at 67 even I continue working.*

*Signed: Working Husband*

**Dear Working:** If your wife has the required 40 SS quarter credits, she is eligible to collect reduced retirement benefits at 62 (for that needed extra income), but her age 62 benefit will be about 70% of what it would be if she waited until her SS full retirement age (FRA) to claim. That reduction would, in turn, carry over to her spousal benefit when you eventually claim your SS benefit. Here's why:

Your wife's spousal amount when you claim will be a combination of her own SS retirement benefit, plus an auxiliary amount (a "spousal boost") that she is entitled to as your spouse. At age 62, her own benefit will be cut by 30% and she can collect that reduced amount until you claim, at which point her spousal boost will be added to make her benefit equal her spousal entitlement. So, her total benefit as your spouse (when you claim) will consist of her reduced age-62 amount, plus an additional amount as your spouse.

If you claim at 67, your wife will be about 2 years short of her own FRA, which means that her spousal boost amount will also be reduced for early claiming. That reduced spousal boost will be added to her already reduced (age 62) SS retirement benefit, which will make her total benefit less than 50% of your FRA benefit amount.

So, your wife claiming her own reduced SS retirement benefit at 62 also means her spousal benefit amount will be affected, and taking her spousal boost before her FRA means that the boost amount will also be reduced for early claiming. The only way your wife can get the full 50% of your FRA entitlement is to wait until she reaches her own FRA (67) to claim Social Security benefits.

Having said all of that, if your wife's physical issues suggest that she claims her benefits early and she is comfortable with the smaller benefit she will get, then that may be the right choice. For reference, the reduction to your wife's spousal boost amount (if you claim at your FRA) will be about 17%, and that reduced spousal boost will be added to her reduced age 62 SS retirement amount. The end benefit for your wife (if you claim at age 67) will likely be about 42% of your FRA entitlement (instead of 50%).

FYI, you can further delay your own SS retirement benefit (up to age 70) for a higher benefit yourself, but that would also mean your wife would need to wait longer to get her spousal boost. You could also wait to claim your SS until your wife reaches age 67 (her FRA), which would give you a higher personal amount and also ensure your wife gets her maximum spousal boost (but her total will still be less than 50% of yours because she claimed her own SS retirement benefit at 62). When to claim Social Security depends on financial need and life expectancy. If a long life expectancy is anticipated, waiting longer to claim is often the best move. But financial need always trumps waiting longer.

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**Armed Forces Dispatch** newspaper delivery driver for news racks, stands, countertops, etc. Coronado, Silver Strand, Imperial Beach. 2 Thursday mornings a month (approx 3 hours). Must have clean driving record, dependable car w/insurance, base access. 619-280-2985.

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### Armed Forces Dispatch • (619) 280-2985

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## MOVIES AT THE BASES

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## Protecting our heroes against scams

Veterans, active-duty service members, and their families have given so much to serve our country, but unfortunately, their patriotism can be an open door to their heart and wallet. Scammers target veterans, active-duty service members, and their families at a higher rate than they do civilians. They are 40% more likely than their civilian counterparts to lose money to scams and fraud. From fake government calls and predatory entrepreneurship offers to financial scams and identity theft, scammers take advantage of veterans' trust and service history.

Raising awareness is the first step in protecting our veterans. The Social Security Administration (SSA) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) designated March 6, 2025, as National Slam the Scam Day—an outreach campaign to raise public awareness of scams, including Social Security-related scams and other government imposter scams. This is part of National Consumer Protection Week, March 2-8, 2025.

#### Protect yourself and the veterans in your life by recognizing the signs of a scam. Remember:

- Scammers pretend to be from an agency or organization you know to gain your trust.
- Scammers say there is a problem or a prize.
- Scammers pressure you to act immediately.
- Scammers tell you to pay in a specific way.

#### How Veterans Can Protect Themselves

- Be skeptical. Hang up or delete suspicious messages from "government officials" calling about a problem with your Social Security number or account.
- Guard personal information.
- NEVER make payments with gift cards, cryptocurrency, gold bars, wire transfers, or by mailing cash.

#### Report Scams

Visit [VSAFE.gov](http://VSAFE.gov) or call the VSAFE fraud hotline at 833-38V-SAFE (8-7233)

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## Managing menopause: Navigating a challenging transition

### National Institutes of Health

Hot flashes. Trouble sleeping. Sudden changes in mood. Problems with your bladder. Pain during sex. These are all common but uncomfortable symptoms of the transition to menopause.

Menopause isn't a disease or disorder. It's a normal part of a woman's life. Menopause marks the end of menstrual cycles and fertility. Even though it's a natural process, the transition to menopause can be difficult for some women.

Researchers have been working to better understand menopause. Today, women have more options than ever before to help them feel healthy during and after this midlife transition.

### Starting the Transition

The ovaries contain all of the eggs at birth they will ever contain. The menstrual cycle controls the monthly release of eggs until menopause. The menopausal transition starts when this process changes and production of hormones like estrogen begins to decline. Most women start this transition (also called perimenopause) in their late 40s. But it can happen earlier or later.

During this time, women may experience certain symptoms, such as changes in their periods and hot flashes. If a woman hasn't had a period in 12 months, she can say she's entered menopause. But for many women this transition is less clear.

"Around one in eight women enter menopause because of a medical intervention, like having their ovaries removed surgically," says Dr. Sarah Temkin, a women's health expert at NIH. If this happens, they enter menopause suddenly, with no transition. The bothersome symptoms that they experience are often more significant than if they had entered menopause naturally.

If you haven't had a period in a year, blood tests can verify that you've reached menopause. But no test can confirm when you've begun the transition into menopause. If you have symptoms, your doctor may order tests to rule out health conditions.

The menopausal transition usually lasts around seven years. But it can be shorter or longer. Women who don't want to get pregnant should still use birth control for at least 12 months after their last period.

### Cooling Hot Flashes Down

Many women experience only mild symptoms during perimenopause. For others, symptoms are severe and can interfere with work and life. The most common are called vasomotor symptoms. These include hot flashes



and night sweats (see the Wise Choices box).

"A lot of symptoms can be interrelated," says Dr. Andrea LaCroix, a menopause researcher at the University of California, San Diego. "If you have hot flashes, they might interfere with your sleep. Then once you get sleep deprived, you don't feel so good overall."

If you have mild hot flashes, you may be able to manage them with lifestyle changes. These include dressing in layers that can be removed, carrying a portable fan, and avoiding alcohol and caffeine.

Women with severe symptoms now have several drug options to consider. Some women can safely use menopausal hormone therapy, or MHT. Two decades ago, hormone therapy for women in the menopausal transition fell out of favor. Doctors had concerns about the risk of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and blood clots from hormone therapy. These concerns were based on a large study that tested hormone therapy to prevent chronic disease in older women. The study showed higher chronic disease risk for some women taking MHT.

More recent studies have confirmed these findings but also found that healthy, younger women who use MHT don't have the same increased risk as older women. Talk with your health care provider about the potential risks and benefits if you're considering MHT.

Some women can't use hormone therapy because of certain personal risk factors. Others may not want to use it. "But there are other treatment choices," says LaCroix.

LaCroix and others have found that an antidepressant called escitalopram can reduce the number and intensity of hot flashes for some women. Recently, a new drug called fezolinetant was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for treating hot flashes. It works by acting on part of the brain that regulates

temperature.

"All of these treatments have been found to be helpful, so women have choices," LaCroix says.

### Tackling Other Symptoms

Many women struggle with sleep during the menopausal transition. Studies have found that a type of talk therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, can help women with sleep problems during this time of their lives.

Physical activity, yoga, and mindfulness can also help women feel better, stronger, and more in control of their reactions to many symptoms, LaCroix explains, even though these strategies likely do not directly impact

the number or severity of hot flashes.

Some women experience sexual problems during their transition. These can include vaginal dryness, painful sex, and reduced desire. Others have heavy or irregular bleeding, Temkin explains. Many of these problems have treatments women can try. But women often don't know about these options, she says.

"There's a huge amount of stigma about women talking about their reproductive health," Temkin says.

"Women sometimes feel, going through the menopausal transition, that they're in it alone," agrees Dr. Chhanda Dutta, an aging expert at NIH. "And while women experience this transition in very different ways, they need to be aware that they're not alone."

NIH-funded researchers created a website to help women better understand their experiences. It's called MyMenoplan.org. It has tools to help you track symptoms and compare potential treatments.

### Health in Midlife and Beyond

Lifestyle changes can help you stay healthy during and after midlife. The risks for some health problems go up after menopause.

These include heart problems, bone weakness, and diabetes. Whether this is due to menopause or the overall aging process isn't clear.

"But the advice is the same as for all through our lives," Dutta says. "Focus on good nutrition.

Get good sleep. Manage your stress levels. Be physically active."

Such lifestyle changes can help reduce some menopausal symptoms and boost overall health, Dutta says. This can help women feel as healthy as possible from



## Wise Choices

### Transitioning into menopause?

Perimenopause symptoms can be different for everyone and include:

- Changes in your period. Periods happening very close together or farther apart than usual; heavy bleeding or spotting; periods that last for more than a week.
- Hot flashes. A sudden feeling of heat in the upper part or all of your body.
- Night sweats. Hot flashes that happen during sleep.
- Sleep problems. Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Bladder issues. Sudden urges to urinate, or urine leaking during exercise, sneezing, or laughing.
- Changes in vaginal health and sexuality. Vaginal dryness; discomfort or pain during sex; changes in sexual desire.
- Mood changes. Feeling moody or more irritable; feelings of anxiety or depression.
- Changes in body composition. Muscle loss or fat gain; skin can become thinner; joints and muscles may feel stiff or achy.

## Navy Dental Clinic educates base children on cavity prevention

by Elaine Heirigs

Naval Health Clinic Lemoore The Naval Health Clinic Lemoore's Dental Clinic is taking proactive steps to combat childhood dental problems. The team is visiting two local schools onboard Naval Air Station Lemoore during the month of February to provide preventive dental care through community outreach.

Active duty dentists and hospital corpsmen that specialize in dental assisting will visit Admiral Akers School on Feb. 13 and Neutra Elementary on Feb. 20, delivering oral health education to students from preschool through third grade.

"Dental caries, commonly known as cavities or tooth decay, is a common chronic disease among children," said Lt. Hannah Mills, a NHCL dentist and this year's clinic program coordinator. "Teaching children about their teeth, a healthy diet, and how to keep their teeth clean will help set them up for success via prevention."

During these sessions, Navy dental professionals will educate young students about proper dental care, healthy eating habits, and oral hygiene techniques. Students will also receive a toothbrush and toothpaste during the visits.

"Our goal is to promote dental health," Mills explained. "By interacting directly with students in a fun, energetic way, we can make a lasting impact on their oral health habits."

These dental presentations specifically target elementary-age children, recognizing the importance of establishing good dental habits early in life. This education is an investment in the children of active duty service members and their oral health with the aim of reducing future dental health issues through preventive education.

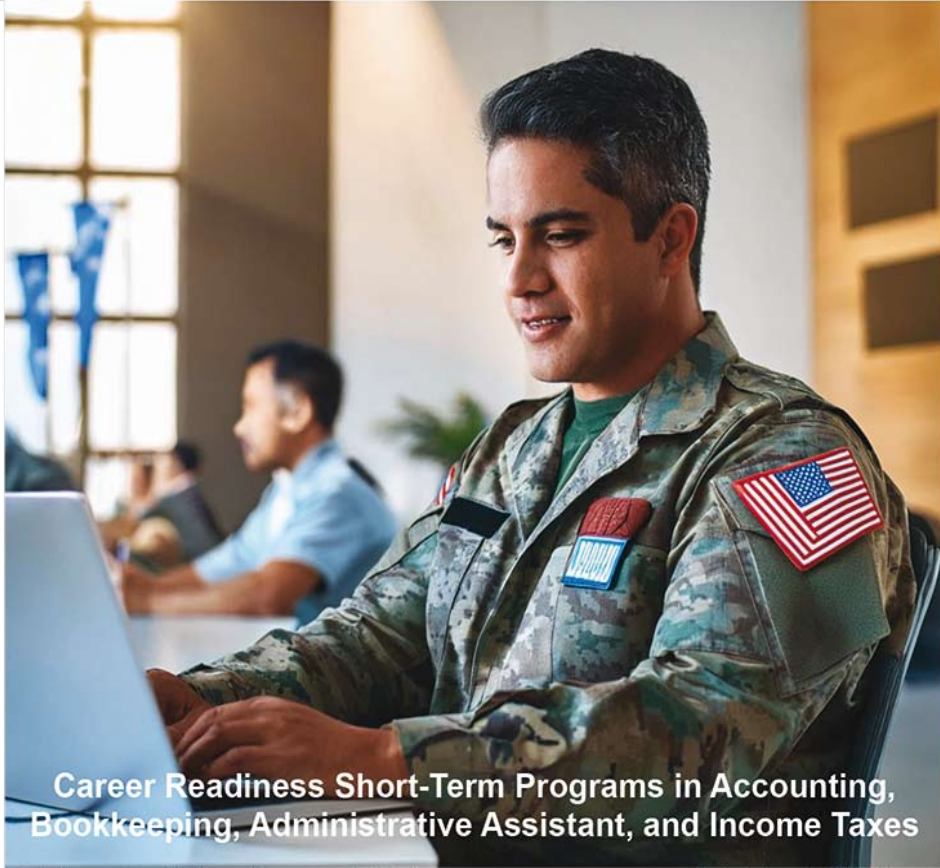
NHCL's community outreach exemplifies the Navy's commitment to supporting military families and promoting health awareness within the base community.



Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Julian Salinas from Naval Health Clinic Lemoore's dental clinic helped students at Admiral Akers School practice proper teeth brushing on a stuffed dinosaur. U.S. Navy photo by Elaine Heirigs Naval Health Clinic Lemoore/Naval Medicine Readiness and Training Command Lemoore Public Affairs.

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