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MAKING A SPLASH Sailors conduct helicopter casting training in the Pacific Ocean, Nov. 21, 2025. U.S. Navy photo

MILITARY WORKING DOGS IN U.K. COMPLETE FIRST WATER-CONFIDENCE TRAINING

by Karen Abeyasekere
100th Air Refueling Wing
Military working dogs and handlers from the 100th Security Forces

Squadron conducted water-confidence training in a pool at Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England, recently. This was the first time this

type of training has been conducted at the base.

The goal was to build confidence in the working dogs so they are able to conduct operational tasks while in the water. The training strengthens their overall readiness and force projection capability through building confidence in the water.

This prepares the dogs to operate in unpredictable terrain across the U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa area of operations, while bolstering the 100th Air Refueling Wing's ability to forward deploy in austere environments.



Air Force Military Working Dog Glen swims with his incentive toy, guided by Air Force Staff Sgt. Julian Benjamin at Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England, Nov. 12. U.S. Air Force photo by Karen Abeyasekere

Air Force Staff Sgt. Samuel McPherson praises MWD Juan after he performs a bite maneuver. U.S. Air Force photo by Karen Abeyasekere

Tracking Santa's flight for 70th year

PETERSON SPACE FORCE BASE, Colo. - The North American Aerospace Defense Command is ready to track Santa on Dec. 24 and is celebrating the program's 70th anniversary. NORAD monitors and defends North American airspace 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

On Christmas Eve, NORAD has one additional mission: tracking Santa Claus as he makes his way across the globe, delivering presents to children.

The NORAD Tracks Santa website (<https://www.noradsanta.org>) launched on Dec. 1. It features Santa's North Pole Village, which includes a holiday countdown, games, movie theater, holiday music, web store, and more. The website is available in nine languages: English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese, and Korean.



The official NORAD Tracks Santa app is also in the Apple App and Google Play stores, to count down the days until Santa's journey on mobile devices. NORAD Tracks Santa will also be available on digital media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X, and on contributor platforms, Amazon Alexa, SiriusXM, and OnStar. More information about contributors is available on our website.

On Dec. 24, trackers worldwide can call 1-877-HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723) to ask live operators about Santa's location from 3 a.m. to midnight, Pacific time. Additionally, NORAD is introducing a web-based calling option so children without the means to reach NORAD via phone can call the NORAD Tracks Santa Operations Center directly from our NORADSanta.org website. Virtual translation services will also be able to support more than 200 languages via our call center. While live operators will be unavailable after midnight, trackers can continue to follow Santa's flight until 2 a.m. on Dec. 25 by calling and listening to our Interactive Voice Response system or visiting the website.

NORAD Tracks Santa is a global experience, and the U.S. and Canadian personnel of NORAD are proud to continue the tradition of delighting families everywhere.

Penny shortage hits the NEX: Get ready to round up (or down)

Navy Exchange locations in the continental United States will begin making cents of a new system by rounding up or down to the nearest five cent increment for change given to customers who make a purchase using cash.

This is due to the U.S. Mint stopping production of the penny in August 2025. The Navy Exchange Service Command enables warfighter readiness and strengthens the Navy's quality of life mission. Providing essential products, services, hospitality and outfitting Navy communities around the globe, NEXCOM is continuously evolving to meet the demands of today's military operational environment. U.S. Navy photo



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Dozens of federal agencies initiate counter-UAS collaboration

by C. Todd Lopez
Pentagon News

Over 180 experts from the War Department and other agencies in the federal government met recently for a summit to begin a planned three-year effort to deliver counter-small unmanned aircraft system capabilities to warfighters and keep the skies over America safe from dangerous drones.

In August, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth launched the Joint Interagency Task Force 401. Just two weeks ago, senior leaders from the department and partner agencies, including Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll, met at the White House to discuss how to best leverage the new task force and defend the homeland.

“My priorities for transformation and acquisition reform include improving [counter-small unmanned aircraft systems] mobility and affordability and integrating capabilities into warfighter formations,” Hegseth wrote in the August memo, which directed Driscoll to stand up the task force. “[The department] must focus on speed over process by ... establishing JIATF 401 with expanded authorities to execute capability development and delivery timelines that outpace the threat.”

which Hegseth said will maintain operational capabilities for 36 months, is fully in line with the president’s direction to reestablish air sovereignty over the U.S.

“[The department] must enhance its [counter-small UAS] capabilities to protect personnel, equipment and facilities at home and abroad,” Hegseth said.

Representatives from the War Department, Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies - about 50 total - met for the first time at the Mark Center in Alexandria, Va., as part of an introductory summit for task force partners.

“This was an opportunity to bring together all of the services, all of our interagency partners that have shared interests and equities with countering small UAS threats, because no one agency can solve this on their own,” said Army Brig. Gen. Matt Ross, joint task force commander. “What we’re really trying to do is expand the community of interest into a community of action and make sure we’re taking tangible steps to defeat the UAS threat we face on a daily basis.”

The threat from small UAS is growing, Ross told task force members.

Launching the task force,

see **UAS**, page 4



Army Spc. Kinna Moller awaits the launch of a counter-unmanned aircraft system during a showcase at Nowa Deba Training Area, Poland, Nov. 18, 2025. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Luis Garcia

HOLIDAYS & OBSERVANCES FOR DECEMBER

Bingo’s Birthday Month	Nat’l Egg Nog Month	Nat’l Write a Business Plan	Resolution to Stop Smoking
Car Donation Month	Nat’l Fruit Cake Month	Operation Santa Paws	Tropical Fruits Month
Colorectal Cancer	Nat’l Impaired Driving	Quince and Watermelon	Universal Human
Education and Awareness	Prevention Month	Read a New Book Month	Rights Month
Decembeard	Nat’l Pear Month	Root Vegetables Month	Winter Squash Month
Exotic Fruits Month	Nat’l Sign Up For Summer	Safe Toys and Celebration	World AIDS Month
Farm to Food Bank Month	Camp Month	Seasonal Depression	Worldwide Food Service
Int’l AIDS Awareness	Nat’l Stress-Free Family	Awareness Month	Safety Month
Nat’l Drunk and Drugged	Holiday Month	Spiritual Literacy Month	Write a Friend Month
Driving Prevention Month	Nat’l Tie Month	Take a New Year’s	

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Top 5

- Communities honor West Virginia National Guard members shot in DC
- National Guard shooting victims identified
- DC police to begin patrolling with National Guard after fatal attack
- Commanding officer of Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 36 fired
- Pete Hegseth denies he gave orders to 'kill everybody' on alleged 'narco-boat'

Army

- Army shuts down foreign training brigade mission focused on Middle East and Africa

Navy

- Navy tries to recover helicopter, jet that crashed in South China Sea
- Guam hosts U.S., allied navies for Indo-Pacific exercises
- Navy accepts final Freedom-class littoral combat ship as future USS Cleveland joins fleet

Marine Corps

- Marines hit retention goal 'earlier than ever before,' top Marine says

Air Force

- Air Force F-16 pilot awarded Silver Star for actions in the Middle East
- Air Force tests logistics of next-gen C2 during huge REFORPAC exercise
- Spangdahlem airman given term of 3-plus years in prison for fatal wrong-way autobahn crash
- U.S. stealth fighters based in Britain now fully operational

Space Force

- Space Force won't say who got money to start developing orbital interceptors

Final Freedom-variant LCS, USS Cleveland, delivered to the Navy

MARINETTE, Wis. — The U.S. the future USS Cleveland (LCS 31) from Fincantieri Marinette Marine (FMM) in Marinette, Wisconsin, Nov. 26.

Cleveland is the 16th and final ship of its class, marking the completion of the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship (LCS) construction phases — a sustained acquisition effort involving Navy personnel, industry partners, and program management teams for over two decades.



"The delivery of USS Cleveland symbolizes the Navy's unwavering vigilance and a steadfast commitment to protecting national interest and ensuring global stability," said Jay Iungerich, acting deputy program manager of the LCS Program Office.

Following commissioning in Cleveland, Ohio in early 2026, LCS 31 will be homeported in Mayport, Fla. She will support forward presence, maritime security, sea control, and deterrence in key operational theaters.

"We now celebrate the successful outcome of years of innovation and commitment," said Melissa Kirkendall, Program Executive Officer, Unmanned and Small Combatants. "This highly capable and lethal warship is ready to assert maritime dominance and protect global waters with unparalleled precision and power."

LCS 31 honors the city of Cleveland, Ohio. She will be the fourth ship to bear the name. The lineage began with Denver-class protected cruiser, USS Cleveland (C-19), later reclassified as CL-21, commissioned in 1903. She served prominently as flagship of the Atlantic Fleet during World War I.

The second USS Cleveland (CL-55), a Cleveland-class light cruiser, entered service in 1942, leaving her mark on history through extensive action in World War II's Pacific theater, including campaigns in Guadalcanal, Bougainville, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

The third namesake, hull LPD-

9, an Austin-class amphibious transport dock, was commissioned in 1976 and served a distinguished 30-year career. LPD-9's most notable presence was during Operation Desert Shield/Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. She was decommissioned in 2011.

Now, LCS 31 carries the legacy forward, embodying Cleveland's spirit of service.

LCS is a fast, agile, mission-focused warship designed to operate in near-shore environments to counter 21st-century threats. It is a class of small surface combatants armed with capabilities to defeat challenges

in the world's littorals. LCS can operate independently or in high-threat scenarios as part of a networked battle force that includes larger, multi-mission surface combatants such as cruisers and destroyers.

PEO USC designs, develops, builds, maintains, and modernizes the Navy's unmanned maritime systems; mine warfare systems; special warfare systems; expeditionary warfare systems; and small surface combatants.

For more news from Program Executive Office, Unmanned and Small Combatants, visit: <https://www.navsea.navy.mil/Media/News/>

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HEGSETH PRESENTS PURPLE HEART TO SOLDIER, EMPHASIZES HONORING HEROES

by Matthew Olay
Pentagon News

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth presented a Soldier with the esteemed Purple Heart during a brief ceremony attended by just under two dozen service members and civilians in an aircraft hangar at the Dominican Republic’s San Ysidro Air Base, Nov. 27.

Master Sgt. Amy Vreeland qualified for the award as a result of a mild traumatic brain injury she suffered while deployed to Afghanistan in 2019. However, an administrative backlog resulted in her not receiving the award until January 2023 — roughly three and a half years after she sustained her injury.

To make matters worse, the award was mailed to her instead of being presented.

Prior to pinning the Purple Heart on Vreeland, Hegseth made clear that such stories are very relatable to him.

He then spoke about an Army infantry leader of his in Iraq years earlier who, despite having shown great bravery and valor in combat, received his award — a Silver Star — in the mail, much like Vreeland.

“And I remember how much that kind of stung him. ... And it



Secretary of War Pete Hegseth pins a Purple Heart medal on Master Sgt. Amy Vreeland at the San Isidro Air Base in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, Nov. 27. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Aiko Bongolan

stuck with me,” Hegseth said.

He then explained that, since assuming the top leadership role at the Pentagon in January, his philosophy is that all awards based on valor should be presented in person, regardless of the unit the awardee is attached to or where in the world they are stationed.

“Wherever you are, someone [should take] the time. It doesn’t have to be a big ceremony; it could be something intimate like this,” Hegseth said, noting that what’s most important is that commands take the time to “recognize heroism [and] recognize excellence” in person.

“Thank you, sir, for being here today; it’s truly an honor that you have ... taken your Thanksgiving to be here,” Vreeland told Hegseth after he pre-

sented her with the Purple Heart. “I am truly humbled that you would take time out of your day to come here and recognize me. Thank you very much.”

Hegseth noted that the origin of the decoration — the oldest military device still given to military members — dates back to George Washington and the Revolutionary War.

“So, it’s as old as our country,” Hegseth said of the Purple Heart, before reemphasizing the importance of presenting the decoration to Vreeland in person.

“And I hope you’ll do the same in your units,” he told those in attendance.

Vreeland continues to serve on active duty after 20 years of service despite ongoing complications from her injury.

Retired 4-star admiral must stay in prison while appealing bribery conviction, court decides

In a Nov. 25 report by Alison Bath of *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, a retired four-star admiral who once was the Navy’s No. 2-ranking officer will remain in prison while appealing his conviction for bribery, conspiracy and other charges, an appeals court ordered earlier this month. Robert Burke did not show that the appeal of his May conviction presented a substantial question of law or fact likely to result in reversal or an order for a new trial, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled on Nov. 13. Burke was sentenced in September to six years in prison following his conviction in May for his role in a scheme to direct lucrative contracts to a New York-based training company in exchange for a \$500,000-a-year job, stock options and other benefits.

UAS continued from page 2

“Unmanned systems are a defining threat for our time, and I say that because they’re prolific, they’re evolving quickly, and they’re no longer confined to combat,” he said. “The [changing landscape] of drones is putting exquisite surveillance and precision strike capability into the hands of individuals and small groups that used to be reserved for our state adversaries.”

Ross emphasized the task force’s three lines of effort to defeat the counter-small UAS threats: defending the homeland, supporting warfighter lethality and joint force training.

In the short term, according to Ross, homeland defense will focus on the area around Washington; the southern border; and supporting the FIFA World Cup event in June 2026, which is a national special security event.

U.S. Northern Command and Joint Task Force Southern Border personnel have re-

ported some 3,000 drone incursions over the border in the past year and have seen over 60,000 drones just south of the border looking into the U.S., according to Ross.

Ross affirmed his belief that addressing threats from drones at the border isn’t about a hardware solution; it involves communications and data sharing.

“We need a common air picture that includes drones,” he said. “In some cases, we need cross-domain solutions that will allow us to see data that’s picked up on a secret radar and an unclassified sensor. We need to proliferate active and passive sensors that provide air situational awareness along the southern border.”

That kind of integration is what JIATF 401 is all about, and it’s what the task force is expected to bring to bear on the small UAS issue, according to Ross.

In the National Capital Region, the task force will monitor how sensors from various agencies are able to track threats as

they move through the sky, how that information can be passed to decision-makers and how those with the ability to take those threats out of the sky can be given the authority to do so.

“We’re not there yet, but we’re making progress,” Ross said.

Because the 2026 World Cup is a national special security event, it is a priority. One focus JIATF 401 has during the World Cup is to ensure security personnel have access through the Defense Logistics Agency to purchase counter-UAS capabilities that have been rigorously tested by the War Department.

Keeping the drone threat at bay and protecting the U.S. homeland — including people and infrastructure — will take a whole-of-government approach, Ross emphasized.

Refer to <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4343888/dozens-of-federal-agencies-initiate-counter-uas-collaboration/>.



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Former Air Force fighter pilot awarded Silver Star Medal

by Secretary of the Air Force
Public Affairs

ARLINGTON, Va. - A former commander of the 480th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron was awarded the Silver Star Medal during a presentation ceremony at the Pentagon, Nov. 26.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ken Wilsbach presented the nation's third highest award for valor to Lt. Col. William Parks, Office of the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force Junior Executive Officer. Parks was recognized for his efforts in the U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility in early 2025.

"It's a rare day when someone earns a Silver Star, with less than 100 being earned during the Air Force era," said Wilsbach. "After hearing Skate's story, his leadership, decisive action, and skill in the face of danger, I absolutely believe he deserves this honor. Recognizing valor in combat matters, and it is a privilege to serve alongside warfighters like him."

The Silver Star is currently awarded by all branches of the armed forces to any person who, while serving in any capacity, is cited for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States while engaged in military operations involv-

ing conflict with an opposing foreign force, or while serving with friendly forces against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.

Parks, while commanding the 480th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, was serving as the mission commander for a force package consisting of 21 strike aircraft while simultaneously leading four F-16 Fighting Falcons conducting Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses. Parks intentionally placed himself in threat range of a complex air defense zone protecting the enemy's capital.

His heroic decision ensured mission success in crippling enemy ballistic missile production facilities. However, because of these actions, enemy forces had the opportunity to send a barrage of precisely targeted enemy air defense missiles and anti-aircraft artillery aimed at Parks' mission.

For 15 minutes, with enemy missiles detonating mere feet from his aircraft, Parks led his flight through a series of high-G maneuvers and countermeasure employment.

While his fuel was below minimum levels and still within enemy territory, Parks quickly



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Ken Wilsbach presents the Silver Star Medal to Lt. Col. William Parks during a ceremony at the Pentagon, Arlington, Va., Nov. 26. Parks also received the Bronze Star Medal during the ceremony. U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Stuart Bright

coordinated for an emergency rendezvous with two separate tankers, ensuring his flight access to critical fuel and ultimately prevented the probable loss of two aircraft due to fuel starvation.

The citation states "[Parks'] courageous and steadfast actions directly contributed to the survival of his wingman and himself."

Parks shared several of the emotions he experienced during the mission.

"That loneliness settles in, even though it seems like it's all happening fast, you just feel that moment where 'I'm feeling very alone out here tonight,'" Parks said. "And then that transitioned very quickly to elation. As I got a little bit closer, the [command and control] agencies and the Air Force team started picking me up, and my requests of 'Hey, I need help! We're out of gas. I need tankers moved'."

During his eight-month deployment supporting operations Prosperity Guardian, Inherent

Resolve, Spartan Shield, and Rough Rider, Parks led 12 F-16s and 56 Airmen.

As the 480th EFS commander, Parks led the squadron to a record 108 aerial victories against enemy Unmanned Aerial Systems and Land Attack Cruise Missiles. Additionally, Parks guided innovative employment standards by using air-to-ground AGR-20F rockets in an air-to-air role and prioritizing older AIM-9M missiles, saving more than \$25 million dollars in munitions costs and leading to the first successful AIM-9M combat employment in 30 years.

Parks has been credited with six aerial victories protecting the lives of more than 5,000 Sailors aboard USS *Harry S. Truman*

(CVN 75), and he personally defended against five deadly surface-to-air missile engagements targeting his aircraft.

Parks' family has a rich aviation legacy. One grandfather helped the Allies achieve victory in World War II, while the other flew C-47s in Vietnam. His father was an Air Force test pilot, and his uncle was an F-111 weapons system officer. In Parks' generation, his cousin is a KC-135 and C-17 pilot, while his brother flies the C-146.

"It is incredible, and this means a lot," he said. "The amount of aviation and everything that we have in our family, that's what shaped me and helped mold me."

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MAKO Sentry 2026: Generating warfighting-ready Sailors, capabilities in the Pacific

by Capt. Christopher Lopez

CORONADO – Over 140 Navy Reserve Sailors on staff at Pacific Fleet, 7th Fleet, and 3rd Fleet participated in MAKO Sentry 2026 in Coronado and Norfolk, Va., recently

MAKO Sentry 2026 is a Navy Reserve led training event that aims to increase the warfighting readiness of U.S. fleets in the Indo-Pacific. The main objective of MAKO is to train Reserve Sailors to fight from the Maritime Operations Centers (MOCs) as a team to ensure the Navy remains the most lethal, survivable and globally dominant maritime force.

Sailors across the Navy enterprise train together like they would fight in a high-end conflict – from a MOC. Senior, experienced Active and Reserve leaders guide new MOC watchstanders through realistic scenarios and vignettes of operations in

the PACFLT area of operations to enable delivery and refinement of the Navy Warfighting Concept.

“MAKO is hugely valuable. In fact, it’s so valuable that during the government shutdown the Navy designated it as an excepted mission, which means that we were authorized to execute it because of its critical contribution to national security.”

Rear Adm. Joaquin Martinez de Pinillos, reserve deputy commander of PACFLT.

MAKO Sentry is a training event that forges the skills that enable seamless integration with the Active Component at the operational level of war. As the Reserve Force trains to mass mobilize up to 50,000 Sailors within 30 days, MAKO helps to ensure those Sailors are warfighting ready on day one.

“MAKO Sentry is our ability to give basic reps and sets to Sailors who are new to the operational level of war, and it en-

ables them to get the basic training they need as they prepare for larger exercises throughout the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility,” said Martinez de Pinillos.

“MAKO Sentry is critical to exercising MOC processes so that Sailors who have not had much training in a MOC have the opportunity to see it in action and learn the basics effectively – beyond an academic scenario,” said Rear Adm. Richard Meyer, PACFLT reserve director of maritime operations. “It’s critical for our Sailors to get hands-on experience seeing how the battle rhythm runs and how day-to-day operations are going to work, so that when they actually show up in a MOC, they’re much better prepared to conduct their role.”

Navy reserve units and specialties have typically trained as individuals, but rarely together – or as a complete capability.

“In football, that’s like the quarterback not practicing with the receivers or offensive line until game day – which no good coach would do,” said Rear Adm. Kenneth Blackmon, vice commander of Iet Forces Command. “The MAKO series is a game changer for the Navy Reserve, as it enables Sailors across all designators and rates to train together in the same way we would operate together in a MOC in a time of crisis or conflict.”

Across PACFLT, warfighting readiness is driven by a data-driven metric for each Sailor. This includes MOC simulations, including MAKO, specific job qual requirements, OJT in a Sailor’s mobilization position, to name a few. This framework helps Navy Reserve leaders develop individual training plans for each Sailor that prioritize time, funding, and effort toward activities that directly contribute to their warfighting readiness.

####

NAVSUP FLC San Diego completes \$600K galley renovation after five-year effort

NAVAL BASE SAN DIEGO - A five-year effort to modernize the Navy Food Management Team (galley at Naval Supply Systems Command (NAVSUP) Fleet Logistics Center (FLC) San Diego is complete, culminating in a fully refurbished training space turned over to the Navy Food Management Team on Sept. 17. The project began as an idea in early 2020, when then-Master Chief Culinary Specialist Jade Metz checked in to the NFMT as an instructor and immediately saw outdated equipment and deteriorating spaces that hindered training for Sailors across the fleet. “I checked in January 2020, and within a very short timeframe, I realized the equipment was degraded and the space just wasn’t up to the standard our warfighters deserved,” Metz said. “If instructors are taking shortcuts because the galley can’t support advanced techniques, then we’re doing our students a disservice.”

Hegseth details culture shift at Dept. of War

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth recently sat for a one-on-one television interview in the Pentagon to provide more details on the culture shift at the department and U.S. military actions underway to stymie narcotics terrorists in the Southcom area of responsibility, in particular efforts related to Venezuela’s state-embedded criminal network Cartel de los Soles. The cartel is alleged to be headed by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, designated as a terror organization by the State Department Nov. 24. “gives more tools to our Department to give options to to ultimately say our hemisphere will not be controlled by narco-terrorists, it will not be controlled by cartels, it will not be controlled by what illegitimate regimes try to push toward the American people. So, it’s just about options, and we plan better than any organization in the world here,” Hegseth said.



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Marines, Sailors train for urban operations



The 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted realistic urban training across Arizona and Southern California, Nov. 3-13. The exercise, involving the entire Marine air-ground task force and elements from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 122, assessed 11th MEU's ability to respond to a range of contingency operations.

Story by Lance Cpl. Nicole Stuart
11 MEU

Sailors assess a simulated casualty during Realistic Urban Training Nov. 10. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Oliver Nisbet

As 11th MEU's first large-scale exercise as a composited air-ground task force, the urban training tested the capabilities of 1,200 Marines across a spectrum of scenario-driven missions built to mirror the pressure of real operations. The exercise included various rapid-response missions, such as expeditionary strikes, tactical recoveries of aircraft and personnel, limited-scale raids and the establishment of an expeditionary advanced base.

The unit is (1) ground combat, (2) landing team, (3) logistics combat and (4) aviation combat.

"The MEU's objective for this training is to deploy as a Marine air-ground task force and then work together in pursuit of a

common goal," said Maj. Jordan Vargas, assistant ops officer of the 11th MEU. "This is the first time that the elements of our [air-ground task force] came together and synergized through planning, execution, briefing and debriefing."

This training gives the 11th MEU's Marines and Sailors the opportunity to prove their readiness, lethality and innovation in a controlled but demanding environment overseen by Expeditionary Operations Training Group, I MEF.

"[Realistic urban training] makes us more lethal by bringing together all of the assets that the Corps has," said Sgt. Jackson Intlekofer, a squad leader with

a battalion landing team. "For us at the squad level, we get to integrate with the supporting elements of the [task force] who enable us to go into an objective, kick the door in and do our thing. This makes us much more lethal as a battalion landing team."

Urban training helps 11th MEU to refine its cohesion as a fully integrated air-ground task force. By navigating the exercise, MEU demonstrated a commitment to warfighting readiness, mission accomplishment and teamwork. The lessons learned during the exercise will enhance the MEU's performance in future operations, ensuring its continued effectiveness as a versatile expeditionary force.

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TEST SQUADRONS PROVE ATAWS READY FOR LEGACY HORNET PILOTS

by Michael Smith
Naval Air Warfare Center
An F/A-18 Hornet raced low across the China Lake desert during a simulated terrain collision. Seconds later, the jet pulled up and climbed to safety. The recovery proved the Automatic Terrain Awareness and Warning System could take over when a pilot no longer has time to respond.

The recovery was part of a joint test program by the “Dust Devils” of Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 31 at Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division, in partnership with the “Salty Dogs” of VX-23 at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Maryland.

Controlled Flight Into Terrain has long been one of tactical aviation’s most unforgiving hazards. It occurs when a fully func-

tional aircraft is unintentionally flown into the ground.
Between 2010 and 2016, the Navy and Marine Corps lost several F/A-18 Hornets in training and operational mishaps. Each loss reinforced the need for an automatic safeguard that could save aircrew and aircraft when human limits are reached.

The Marine Corps recognized that need after seeing the Air Force’s Automatic Ground Collision Avoidance System save multiple F-16 pilots. Marine aviators and flight test teams pushed for a similar capability in the F/A-18A-D, launching development under the Navy’s program office for the aircraft, PMA-265, to protect pilots and extend the life of a platform no longer in production.

“The Marine Corps F/A-



A Growler flies over the Point Mugu Sea Range during a photo exercise. U.S. Navy photo by Katie Archibald

18A-D legacy Hornet community was the driving force behind ATAWS,” said Lt. Col. Timothy Burchett, commanding officer of VX-31. “Every Hornet saved means one more aircraft and aviator available for combat.”

How ATAWS works ATAWS builds upon the Hornet’s existing Terrain Awareness Warning System. It continuously predicts the aircraft’s flight path relative to the earth’s surface, using terrain

data, altitude, speed and attitude to calculate when a collision is certain without pilot action.

When a crash is nearly imminent, the system issues visual and audible warnings. If the pilot fails to respond, ATAWS levels the wings automatically. It then instructs a rapid pull-up to clear the terrain. Control is returned to the pilot once the aircraft is at a safe altitude.

Since legacy Hornets use manual throttles, ATAWS intervenes through flight control inputs only. The system engages only after a pilot has missed all visual and auditory cues, providing automatic recovery when there’s no longer time for a human response.

“Any time a system is designed to intentionally take control of the aircraft away from the pilot, extreme diligence is required,” Burchett said. “We had to be absolutely certain it would not interfere with a mission or take action when it shouldn’t.”

Testing the system at China Lake From 2023 to 2025, VX-31 partnered with VX-23. They conducted a joint test campaign to ensure ATAWS operated safely and predictably in various flight conditions. The team executed three phases.

VX-23 completed 32 flights evaluating system logic responses to different dives and recoveries. VX-31 flew 16 flights focused on nuisance testing over flat desert and mountainous terrain to make sure the system would not trigger false warnings or recoveries. The final phase combined both squadrons at China Lake for 16 full-performance flights over seven consecutive weeks.

“The team executed 177 test points that challenged and stressed the system,” said David Pineda, a VX-31 flight test engineer. “Those test points validated that ATAWS met or exceeded the modeled performance.” Maj. Brian “Wedge” Walpole, VX-31 Legacy Hornet department head, said the system’s consistency between simulator and actual performance confirmed its readiness.

“Regardless of terrain or flight profiles, the system flew like the simulator, and we verified the model through flight test,” Walpole said.

Throughout those weeks, pilots did high-G maneuvers and low-angle strafing runs. Flight test engineers in the test bay watched telemetry. Meanwhile, chase plane crews provided visual backup to ensure safety and effectiveness. The team observed only minor anomalies, none requiring design changes.



PHOTO GALLERY



I SPY A Sailor assigned to Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 11 observes the recovery of an inert torpedo during a training event at Silver Strand Training Complex in Coronado Nov. 24, 2025. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class August Clawson



SMALL TRANSIT Marines and Sailors aboard USS Fort Lauderdale and USS Stockdale transit a strait in the Caribbean Sea, Nov. 18, 2025. Forces are deployed in support of the Southern Command mission, DOW-directed operations and President Trump’s priorities to disrupt illicit drug trafficking. Marine Corps photo



PREPARE FOR TAKEOFF Sailors prepare a Super Hornet for takeoff on USS Nimitz in the Philippine Sea, Nov. 25, 2025. Nimitz is deployed to the 7th Fleet AOR. U.S. Navy photo by Seaman Apprentice Franklyn M. Guage



SAN DIEGO AIR & SPACE MUSEUM (Nov. 9, 2025) Max Gurney (center), a 104-year-old Normandy WWII veteran, joined several Korean War and Vietnam War vets during the Spirit of Liberty Foundation’s historic Patriotic Celebration dinner for the 250th birthday of Marine Corps here. Also featured was a specially prepared statement from Gen. Eric M. Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps, read by a Sons of the American Revolution member while standing next to a 6-foot replica of the Declaration of Independence. Courtesy photo

The Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers

The Department of Veterans Affairs recognize the important role of family caregivers in supporting the health and wellness of veterans. Find out if you may be eligible and how to apply for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.

Are you eligible for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers?

You may be eligible if you and the veteran you’re caring for meet all of these requirements.

You must be at least 18 years old. And at least one of these must be true for you:

*You’re a spouse, son, daughter, parent, step-family member, or extended family member of the veteran, or you live full time with the veteran, or you’re willing to live full time with the veteran if we designate you as a family caregiver.

Eligibility requirements for the veteran

All of these must be true for the veteran you’re caring for:

*The veteran has a VA disability rating (individual or combined) of 70 percent or higher, and the veteran was discharged from the U.S. military or has a date of medical discharge, and the veteran needs at least six months of continuous, in-person personal care services, and the veteran needs to be enrolled in VA health care.

Personal care services are services the veteran needs from another person. They include care or assistance to support these parts of the veteran’s life:

- *Health and well-being.
- *Everyday personal needs (like feeding, bath-

ing, and dressing)

*Safety, protection, or instruction in their daily living environment.

Note: Active-duty service members undergoing a medical discharge will need to apply for VA health care before or after submitting their application for caregiver assistance.

Learn more about active-duty service members and VA health care at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/eligibility/active-duty/>.

How many caregivers can the eligible Veteran appoint?

The veteran can appoint one Primary Family Caregiver (the main caregiver), and up to two Secondary Family Caregivers (people who serve as backup support to the primary caregiver when needed).

What benefits can eligible Primary and Secondary caregivers receive?

Eligible Primary and Secondary Family Caregivers can receive:

- *Caregiver education and training.
- *Mental health counseling.
- *Certain travel benefits when traveling with the Veteran to receive care.

Learn more about VA travel pay reimbursement at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/file-travel-pay-reimbursement/>.

You can apply online, by mail, or in person.

Start here: <https://www.va.gov/family-and-caregiver-benefits/health-and-disability/comprehensive-assistance-for-family-caregivers/apply-form-10-10cg/introduction>.

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Sea Otters, Blue Angels in Fleet Science Center IMAX

For a totally immersive movie experience, you just cannot beat experiencing a movie in IMAX inside the Eugene Heikoff and Marilyn Jacobs Heikoff Giant Dome Theater of the Fleet Science Center, in San Diego’s beautiful Balboa Park. The giant, 76-foot domed screen surrounds you with a highly detailed, large format and increased vertical IMAX image with laser technology, as the theater is filled with the audio of a powerful and clear, precise sound system. Your enveloping movie experience will be the next best thing to being there.

“Sea Otters: A Wild Family Adventure”

New at the Fleet Science Center, “Sea Otters: A Wild Family Adventure” follows the lives of a mother sea otter and Finn, her pup, as they experience life through four distinctly different seasons, each with their own set of unique challenges. Her role is to provide food for her young pup as she teaches him the skills that he will need to survive and thrive on his own, and the role they help play in keeping their natural ecosystem, including vast kelp forests, healthy. Their very survival depends upon how well they do. The location is the rugged, remote coast of British Columbia, Canada’s Vancouver Island.

I was especially looking forward to seeing “Sea Otters: A Wild Family Adventure” because long ago, as a boy growing up in Western Canada, I spent many summer vacations on British Columbia’s Vancouver Island salmon fishing with my dad. This film captures the awesome natural beauty of the rugged and remote British Columbia coastline, and conveys impressions of the vast numbers

of birds and other wildlife in a way that I did not even sense it in person. In each of the four seasons, it is a truly spectacular place, filled with opportunities — and danger. Sharing the dramatic life experiences of a sea otter family was truly special.

“The Blue Angels” Featuring never-before-seen video footage, “The Blue Angels” chronicles the 2022 season with the Navy’s elite Flight Demonstration Squad-



by Jan Wagner

ron—from the intense selection process that includes 7Gs in a human centrifuge as they fight to maintain consciousness; the extremely challenging, difficult and rigorous flight training, the never-ending demands of a long show season—showcasing the extraordinary teamwork, passion, and pride that fuels America’s best, the Blue Angels; and more.

We are given behind-the-scenes access to meetings, learn about team members’ backgrounds, hear what they hear and say in the cockpits, and gain insight into the sacrifices that they and their families make to be a part of this elite team.

I have been covering The Blue Angels for many years in “AutoMatters & More,” and before that I attended the Miramar Air show and

other air shows as a member of the public, but I never had an opportunity to come close to experiencing The Blue Angels from within their cockpits, in tight formation. The skill of these pilots to consistently maintain mere inches of separation from each other as they conduct their incredibly difficult maneuvers with necessary precision is almost impossible to believe. Failure to do so, for whatever the reason, can be and has been fatal, and yet these pilots do so, for performance after performance, in different locations throughout the air show season.

To see this in the domed theater puts you in the middle of the action for a truly breathtaking experience. I urge you, in the strongest way, to see this. The next time you see The Blue Angels in person, you absolutely will have a whole new appreciation and respect for what they do.

For showtimes and more information, visit: <https://www.fleetscience.org>. All documentary films at the Fleet Science Center are available for viewing on a first-come, first-served basis. No reservations are required. To see a second film while visiting the Fleet Science Center, you may purchase entrance to additional documentaries at the ticket counter for \$9.95 each.

To explore a wide variety of content dating back to 2002, with the most photos and the latest text, visit “AutoMatters & More” at <https://automatters.net>. Search by title or topic in the Search Bar in the middle of the Home Page, or click on the blue ‘years’ boxes and browse.

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The Meat & Potatoes of Life



by Lisa Smith Molinari

“Honey, I have my OWN habits now,” my husband, Francis, exclaimed during a recent squabble over his new bedtime routine. Ever since Francis began commuting for work to Connecticut, he’s become accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of audio books.

This habit wouldn’t be a problem if Francis wore EarPods, but according to him, they are annoying and out of the question. Instead, Francis drops off while blaring his most recent book from his cell phone, at full volume, for all the world to hear.

“How am I supposed to fall asleep with all this racket?” I asked when Francis’ new habit surfaced. But he’d only “tsk” and suggest that I get earplugs. Oh, the irony!

Lying there waiting for his phone’s automated settings to turn the book off and end my misery, I couldn’t help but recall other moments when Francis came home with new penchants that developed while he was away.

When Francis spent a year deployed to Djibouti, East Africa, he requested things to make his Containerized Living Unit (CLU, or CONEX box) feel more homey. His quarters contained only a twin bed, a desk and a sea chest. So I

What my Geo-bachelor brought home

sent him high thread-count sheets, a fluffy comforter, pillow shams and a dust ruffle, all in matching shades of “merlot.” I sent luxurious towel sets in a manly paisley pattern, with matching vanity items, a bath mat, and a shower curtain.

His Christmas care package contained cookies that had gone stale in transport, along with a small LED lighted Christmas tree, ornaments, photo frames filled with family pics, and a large Hickory Farms sausage and cheese gift package.

Francis was so excited about the coziness of his box quarters, he invited his buddies over for a party. They brought their soccer chairs and sat around a cardboard box coffee table lit by the LED tree, watching movies on Francis’ laptop and eating Hickory Farms and stale cookies.

When the year was up, Francis didn’t bring home his decor, because it had been ruined by permeating African dust. But he did bring his new interest in interior design, along with a myriad of African souvenirs — wood carvings, clay warrior masks, animal skin drums, and batik wall hangings.

Like the dutiful wife, I integrated Francis’ new mementos into our home’s style, which could best be described as “HomeGoods clearance isle meets garage sale treasures, with Aunt Millie’s hand-me-downs sprinkled in.” I lied and told Francis the African items made us more cultured. But when the animal skin drums began to emit a foul odor that permeated the house, and the kids claimed the masks were evil, we had to make some hard decisions.

While active duty, the Navy continued to require Francis to be away from home for extended periods, giving him the freedom to add new habits, routines, and interests to his personal repertoire. After a short deployment in the Mediterranean, Francis announced that he’d given up beer, and was now a wine connoisseur. On a TDY to Norway, Francis bought a reindeer pelt, insisting that it belonged on our bedroom floor upon his return. After repeated TDYs to South America, he tried to replace our beloved margaritas with throat-burning Pisco Sours.

And now, post-retirement, Francis’ job in Connecticut has made him a Geo-bachelor once again. Every Monday for the last few years, he packs up clean laundry and food items, and leaves our home to live in Connecticut for the week. While living in hotels and rented apartments, Francis has developed new habits, tolerances and routines that he brings home every Friday.

For example, Francis’ new lifestyle includes no vegetables other than lettuce. He watches bad horror movies and British detective shows to his heart’s content. He leaves the seat up every time. He goes to bed shortly after 9:00 p.m., and much to my dismay, he falls asleep to his blaring audio books.

“I used to dream about having my own commuter apartment, but actually, I get lonely for you,” Francis admitted recently. His confession made me realize that I’m okay with a few questionable souvenirs and annoying habits, as long as my husband always brings home his love.

www.themeatandpotatoesoflife.com

Veterans News

Medal of Honor spotlight: Marine Corps Staff Sgt. William Windrich

by Katie Lange
.....
Marine Corps Staff Sgt. William Gordon Windrich was only in Korea for a short time, but the skills he’d honed during World War II helped him lead his cold, dirty and disheveled comrades to freedom during one of the most savage battles in modern military history.
.....

Windrich didn’t survive the Battle of Chosin Reservoir to tell his own story, but his heroics led him to posthumously receive the Medal of Honor.

Windrich was born May 14, 1921, in Chicago to World War I veteran Herman Windrich and his wife, Marguerite. He had a sister named Virginia.

When Windrich was young, the family moved to nearby Hammond, Indiana, where their father worked as a foreman at the city’s only oil refinery.

Windrich attended several public schools before dropping out and enlisting in the Marine Corps Reserve in June 1938. By November 1940, he was called up to active duty.

During World War II, “Windy,” as he was called, spent nearly

two years in the South Pacific as a machine-gunner, seeing action during the Battle of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands. He was discharged soon after the war ended and, after returning home, earned his GED diploma. At some point, he married his hometown girlfriend, Margaret. They had a daughter named Alita.

Civilian life didn’t suit Windrich, however. So, in February 1946, he reenlisted in the Marine Corps. That summer, while serving aboard USS Mount McKinley, Windrich took part in the atomic bomb testing at Bikini Atoll. In the years that followed, he served in positions in around Washington and in China.

Windrich was on military police duty at Camp Pendleton, when the Korean War broke out in the summer of 1950. As part of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, he was one of the first Marines to see action in the conflict. He took part in the Inchon landing and the capture of Seoul before being transferred to Company I of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division.

Windrich was the company’s platoon sergeant during the infamous Battle of Chosin Reser-



Marine Corps Staff Sgt. William Gordon Windrich, Medal of Honor recipient. U.S. Marine Corps photo

voir, where about 30,000 troops from the United Nations, many of whom were U.S. Marines and soldiers, chased defeated North Korean army soldiers up the Korean Peninsula to try to force them over the border into China. When they reached the Chosin Reservoir, however, about 120,000 Chinese troops surged south over the border instead, ambushing U.N. troops and cutting them off from their main supply route.

The nearly three-week battle was one of the most brutal in military history, waged in below-zero temperatures, heavy snow and frigid winds.

On the night of Dec. 1, 1950, the enemy launched a sudden attack on the forward elements of Company I’s position on Hill 1520. As Marines fell, Windrich organized a group of men and spearheaded an assault toward the top of the hill to confront the enemy forces.

Despite intense enemy automatic weapons, mortar and grenade fire, the group was able to effectively hold back the attackers while the remaining troops withdrew to safer ground. However, the assault group was decimated in the process. Most of the men were either wounded or killed, including Windrich, who suffered a head wound from a bursting grenade.

Windrich fell back to where his company had repositioned themselves. After refusing medical attention, he organized a new group of volunteers to evacuate the fallen Marines on the frozen hillside.

Windrich then placed the rest of the troops on the left flank of the defensive sector as the enemy attacked again. Windrich was severely wounded in the leg and couldn’t stand, but he refused to leave the fight,

shouting words of encouragement and directing his team’s fire until the attack was pushed back. Even then, he continued to direct his platoon to set up defensive positions. Eventually, Windrich succumbed to the bitter cold and excessive blood loss.

“He allowed himself to be placed on a stretcher, and as he lay down, he told one of the men carrying him that he just wanted to go to sleep. Then he died,” read a 1985 article on Windrich in his hometown newspaper, The Times.

Windrich’s bravery and devotion to duty inspired the men around him to hold the line despite the tremendous odds against them. Eventually, they were able to fight their way south to freedom. But the battle took its toll. The U.S. reported more than 12,000 casualties, including more than 3,000 dead.

Windrich’s fellow Marines weren’t able to carry his body down the 70 miles of mountainous terrain, so he was left behind with the promise from commanders that they would come back for all the fallen Americans when they could.

Windrich is one of 17 men who received the Medal of Honor for valiant actions during the battle. On Feb. 8, 1952, his widow and daughter received the nation’s highest honor for valor on his behalf during a Pentagon ceremony.

More than four years after the Battle of Chosin Reservoir ended, the promise to bring Windrich’s body home was fulfilled, and his remains were repatriated. On July 29, 1955, he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, Va.

Near his hometown in Lake County, Indiana, residents and visitors can read about Windrich’s heroics on a section of the Korean War veterans memorial that’s dedicated to him. The National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., has also erected a Chosin Few Battle Monument in honor of those who fought there.

This article is part of a weekly series called “Medal of Honor Monday,” in which the Department of War highlights one of the more than 3,500 Medal of Honor recipients who have received the U.S. military’s highest medal for valor.

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USSMidwayMuseum is recruiting volunteers for docents, air craft restoration, ship restoration and safety <https://www.midway.org/give-join/volunteers/volunteer-opportunities/>

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SD Humane Society Community Pet Pantry offers help to pet parents in need

San Diego Humane Society is supporting families and their pets who need a little extra help. Through the Community Pet Pantry, anyone can visit our campus locations in El Cajon, Escondido, Oceanside and San Diego between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday, to pick up a bag of dog or cat food as well as other supplies as available. No appointment is needed. Tuesday-Sunday | 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

San Diego Humane Society Campus Locations

El Cajon Campus
1373 N. Marshall Ave.
El Cajon, CA 92020

Oceanside Campus
572 Airport Road
Oceanside, CA 92058

Escondido Campus
3500 Burnet Drive
Escondido, CA 92027

San Diego Campus
5480 Gaines Street
San Diego, CA 92110

MOVIES AT THE BASES

**MOVIE SCHEDULES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE SO
PLEASE CHECK THE WEB SITE DAY-OF**

<https://sandiego.navylifesw.com/> select movies at drop-down menu on left

<https://miramar.usmc-mccs.org/dining-entertainment/movies>

<https://pendleton.usmc-mccs.org/dining-entertainment/theater>

NBSD and Lowry Theater Policy

- Outside food and beverage are NOT permitted: Sales from the snack bar support the movie program.
- These Theaters are cashless facilities. Debit and credit cards accepted only.
- **Premium Offerings**
- Audiovisual assistive equipment available to customers at the front counter.
- Handicap seats and child booster seats are available.

Movie Rating System



G – General audiences ALL ages admitted.

PG – Parental guidance suggested some material may not be suitable for children.

PG-13 – Parents strongly cautioned some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

R – Restricted under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

NC-17 – No one 17 or under admitted.

Visit our military museums

The Veterans Museum at Balboa Park. The Veterans Museum and Memorial Center is a museum located in historic Balboa Park of San Diego, California. Founded in 1989, it is dedicated to create, maintain, and operate an institution to honor and perpetuate the memories of all men and women who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America. <http://www.veteranmuseum.org/>

Active duty military, Museum Member, Children under 12: Free
Veterans/Seniors: \$4 • Adults: \$5 • Student ID: \$2
2115 Park Blvd, San Diego (Balboa Park) • (619) 239-2300
Hours: Call for current hours (619) 239-2300

MCRD Command Museum & Historical Society. Museum focusing on Marine Corps history from the 19th century to today is also a research library. <https://www.mcrdmuseum.org/>

Free admission • The Pass and ID Center may issue day passes to visitors who wish to visit the museum and do not possess military ID-call (619) 524-4200 for information on base access.

1600 Hochmuth Ave, San Diego, 92140 • (619) 524-4426.
Hours: Mon 8am-3pm, Tue-Fri 8-4; Family day 8-5:45; Sat 10:30-5, • Closed Sunday

USS Midway Museum. The USS Midway Museum is a maritime museum located in downtown San Diego at Navy Pier. The museum consists of the aircraft carrier Midway. The ship houses an extensive collection of aircraft, many of which were built in So Cal.

FREE for children 3 & under and Active Duty military including reservists (w/valid ID). Adult \$39 (ages 13+). Youth \$26 (ages 4-12). Veterans (w/ID) \$26*Must show ID at entrance. Open daily 10-5, last admission 4pm. <https://www.midway.org/>

The Ranch House Complex at Camp Pendleton. Listed as the Santa Margarita Ranch House Nat'l Historic Site and as a California State Historical Landmark. Docent-led tours are available by appointment; masks required. Please email your request to: MCBCAMPEN_history@usmc.mil or phone (760) 725-5758 The Camp Pendleton Historical Society is a 501(c)3 organization in support of the base's History and Museum's programs. Go to: www.camppendletonhistoricalsociety.org/ for information. Hours: Open daily 10am-5pm • Last admission at 4pm

Marine Corps Mechanized Museum Camp Pendleton. Managed under the auspices of Camp Pendleton's Museum Division Office, the collection of over 50 vehicles ranges from World War I to the first Gulf War. It includes Patton tanks, armored wheeled and tracked vehicles, trucks, jeeps and amphibious vehicles. When coming aboard Camp Pendleton, please ensure that you have a valid photo ID for every vehicle occupant along with current registration and proof of insurance.

<https://www.themech.org/> 24194 Vandegriff Blvd, Oceanside, CA 92058. (760) 725-5758. Mon-Thur 8am-4pm, Fri 8am-1pm, Closed Saturday & Sunday

SOCIAL SECURITY MATTERS

I'd like to retire early, but don't want my Social Security reduced

Dear Rusty: I will be 65 this year and my husband is 72 (he retired in 2019 at age 66). I would like to retire and enjoy some time with him before he gets too much older. I do not want to have my benefits cut by retiring earlier, but I don't see a way to be able to do that. My benefit will be \$1343 on my full retirement age (FRA). If I took half his retirement when he retired, it would be less than mine. If I take early retirement and he passes away before me, would I get his full benefit as his survivor, or will it be cut? We are trying to figure it out. His current benefit (before Medicare Part B) is \$2978. It's very confusing.
Signed: Confused and Wondering

Dear Confused: Whenever any Social Security benefit is claimed earlier than full retirement age (FRA), the monthly amount is permanently reduced. If you were to retire at age 65, your Social Security benefit would be reduced by about 13% - in other words, if your FRA (age 67) amount is \$1343, at 65 you would get about \$1164. And at age 66 you would get about \$1253 per month.

Whether you would be entitled to a “spousal boost” from your husband depends on how your FRA amount compares to 50% of his FRA entitlement. If your FRA amount is less than 50% of his FRA amount, then you would get a “spousal boost,” but the amount of that boost would also be reduced if you claim before your FRA. (Note: from the numbers you provided, you may be entitled to a spousal boost and, if so, it would be applied by Social Security when you claim).

Also, FYI, if you take SS before your FRA and are still working, Social Security has an annual earnings test which limits how much you can earn while collecting early benefits. If you earn more than \$23,400 in 2025, you will likely not get all of your monthly SS payments (SS will take away some monthly benefits if you exceed the earnings limit). Of course, if you retire from working, this will not be a problem, because earnings before you claim SS won't count toward the limit.

When you claim your SS retirement benefit now will not affect your survivor benefit from your husband later. If your husband passes first, your benefit as a surviving spouse would be based on the amount your husband was receiving at his death. But if you were to claim your widow's benefit prior to your FRA, your survivor benefit would also be reduced (the amount of reduction depends on how much before your FRA you claim your survivor benefit). If you claim your widow's benefit at or after your FRA, you will get 100% of the amount your husband was receiving at his death (instead of your own smaller amount). It will only be reduced if you claim before your full retirement age.

Can I claim my own SS benefit now and get half of my husband's benefit later?

Dear Rusty: I would like to get an answer concerning taking my Social Security benefit soon and switching to my spouse's benefit when he begins to take his. I am 64 years, 9 months old and my husband is 65 years, 7 months. My benefit is low due to the fact that I did not work for about 25 years while raising our children. My benefit would be \$573 at age 65. My husband's benefit at age 67 will be \$3,326. My first question is: can I receive half of my husband's benefit once he begins drawing his? Secondly, if I draw my benefit now will that reduce the amount I can draw from his benefit later? Signed: Uncertain Spouse

Dear Uncertain: As you may know, the full retirement age (FRA) for both you and your husband is 67. If either of you claim before your FRA your monthly SS retirement amount will be permanently reduced and, if you are currently working, you will be subject to Social Security's Annual Earnings Test (AET) which limits how much you can earn while collecting early benefits. The earnings limit for early filers is \$23,400 for 2025 (changes yearly) and, if that is exceeded, SS will take away some of your benefits (\$1 for every \$2 over the limit). They “take away” by withholding future payments until the penalty is satisfied.

That said, if you claim your personal SS “soon” (e.g., at age 65), you will get about 87% of the amount you would get by waiting until your FRA to claim. You would, indeed, get a “spousal boost” when your husband claims, but you would not get 50% of his age 67 amount. That's because of the way spouse benefits are calculated. When your husband claims, you will get a “spousal boost” added to your early benefit amount (\$573?). The amount of that spousal boost will be computed as ½ of your husband's FRA amount (e.g., \$1663), minus your FRA entitlement (likely about \$661) for a spousal boost of about \$1002. But since you won't have yet reached your FRA when your husband claims, the amount of the spousal boost will also be reduced (to about \$926), which will be added to your age 65 amount of \$573 for a total monthly spousal benefit of about \$1499.

So, the answers to your two questions are:

1. Because you claimed your Social Security retirement benefit early and won't yet be your full retirement age when your husband claims, you will not get half of your husband's benefit when he claims. You would likely get about 45% of his benefit.

2. If you take your own SS retirement benefit now, you will get a higher benefit when your husband claims, but the amount you get will be less than half of his FRA entitlement.

The only way you can get the full 50% of your husband's FRA benefit entitlement is to wait until your own full retirement age to claim Social Security.



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1617 Mission Ave. Oceanside 92058

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CDMRP advances breast cancer care for military members and their families

Female breast cancer accounted for the highest cancer incidence rate for the ten leading cancers among active-duty members of the military between 2018 and 2022.

by Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs Communications

The Breast Cancer Research Program plays a leading role in the fight against breast cancer by funding innovative research that will bring an end to the disease. Female breast cancer accounted for the highest cancer incidence rate for the ten leading cancers among active-duty members of the military between 2018 and 2022. Innovative research funded by the BCRP contributes to high-impact advances in clinical practice and treatment used within the Military Health System. Continued breast cancer research gives hope to current and future members of the military, and helps warfighters stay mission-ready while knowing their families receive the best care available.

According to data provided by the Defense Medical Surveillance System of the Defense Health Agency, on average, the Military Health System provided care for 67,739 women and 507 men for invasive breast cancer annually between 2015 and 2024, including an average of 420 active-duty military members each year. For females 40-59 years of age, the incidence rate of breast cancer is higher in service members compared to the general population.

Environmental Exposures and Breast Cancer Risk Among Military Women

Throughout their service, members of the military may experience environmental exposures to substances that can increase the risk of developing cancer. The Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes female breast cancer as a presumptive

cancer related to burn pit exposure.

In fiscal year 2019, the BCRP funded a Breakthrough Award – Funding Level 2 – Population Science and Prevention Studies – Partnering Principal Investigator Option, led by Celia Byrne, Ph.D., at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and Mary Beth Terry, Ph.D., at Columbia University, to investigate the association between environmental exposures and breast cancer risk for women serving in the military.

“For our project, CDMRP funding has been critical in supporting research into the reasons why young, active-duty military women are experiencing an increase in early onset breast cancer,” Byrne and Terry said. “CDMRP’s emphasis on the need for innovative and novel approaches to studying breast cancer risk allowed us to design a study to evaluate the impact of environmental determinants of breast cancer and the potential for impact of exposures that, while common in the civilian population, may be more prevalent with military service.”

Byrne and Terry’s study builds on existing resources within the Department of Defense. The team identifies cases of breast cancer diagnoses in active-duty women using the DOD’s Cancer Registry, a registry documenting tumors and cancers across the Military Health System. Then, the researchers obtain pre-diagnostic serum samples from the same individuals through the DOD’s Serum Repository, which stores blood samples collected from active-duty military members. To date, the researchers identified over 850 breast cancer cases from the cancer repository.

By combining biospecimens and other data, including genetic information and blood-based



biomarkers of environmental exposures, the researchers aim to answer longstanding questions regarding potential associations between environmental exposures and risk of breast cancer in specific populations.

“Rather than only looking at genetic factors alone, we must consider how women at higher genetic risk of developing breast cancer might be more susceptible to the influences of these environmental exposures,” Byrne and Terry said.

Triple-Negative Breast Cancer Vaccine Advances to Clinical Trials

Triple-negative breast cancer, an aggressive subtype associated with fast-growing tumors that often spread to other parts of the body, accounts for approximately 10-20% of all breast cancers. This subtype represents a larger proportion of breast cancers among younger women, including the age range for active-duty military service, compared to other age groups. Triple-negative breast cancer lacks estrogen receptors, progesterone receptors and large amounts of HER2/neu protein commonly used as targets for the treatment of other breast cancer subtypes, limiting treatment options.

In fiscal year 2016, the BCRP funded a Breakthrough Award – Funding Level 3 – Clinical

Trial – Partnering Principal Investigator Option, led by the late Vincent Tuohy, Ph.D., George Budd, M.D., and Thaddeus Stappenbeck, M.D., Ph.D., at the Cleveland Clinic, to conduct a phase 1 clinical trial testing a vaccine for triple-negative breast cancer.

The vaccine generates an immune response to alpha-lactalbumin, a milk protein expressed in the breast during late pregnancy and lactation. Most triple-negative breast cancers express high levels of alpha-lactalbumin, making this protein a potential target for treatment or prevention.

The investigators aim to determine the best dose and safety of the vaccine in females recently diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer who recovered from current standard of care therapy. The researchers also test the vaccine in healthy subjects who elected prophylactic mastectomy because of their familial risk for breast cancer.

“CDMRP’s BCRP has been a vital source of funding for studies of novel approaches to breast cancer treatment and prevention,” Budd said. “Thanks to the CDMRP, we have been able to perform a first-in-human trial of a vaccine designed to prevent or treat breast cancer.”

With an early phase clinical trial underway, the research team’s work will inform the next set of clinical trials, demonstrating potential to move new treatments and preventative approaches to patients.

Improving Care in the Military Health System

Since the program’s inception in 1992, BCRP-funded research contributed to the development of digital mammography and digital breast tomosynthesis, also known as 3D mammogram, now adopted as the standard of care for breast imaging and breast cancer detection across all health care sectors, including those where service members and their families seek care.

According to data provided by the DHA Pharmacy Operations Division, Military Health Service providers filled more than 132,900 prescriptions between 2007 and 2024 for FDA-approved drugs developed in part by BCRP-funded research: abemaciclib, palbociclib, ribociclib and trastuzumab.

In 2023, the DHA expanded a

genetic testing pilot program for service members and their families to include the Breast Cancer Index®. Research funded by the BCRP contributed to the development of this prognostic test that evaluates the likelihood of recurrence and benefit from extended anti-estrogen therapy.

Kara Kenan, a disabled U.S. Air Force Veteran due to breast cancer diagnosis, received the Breast Cancer Index test after experiencing side effects from anti-estrogen therapy during the first five years after breast cancer treatment. “I finally had the Breast Cancer Index test, which indicated I wasn’t really getting any additional benefit from continuing on hormonal treatments. I was able to come off of [the treatment], and my body was really grateful because that treatment was really difficult.” Kenan said.

Kenan served as a fiscal year 2024 BCRP peer reviewer, sharing her experiences to help ensure funded research addresses the concerns and need of patients, including service members and Veterans.

“I think we are in a renaissance of what is happening with cancer treatments and diagnostics,” Kenan said. “There’s so much going on right now, and it is all so very exciting.”

For more information about the BCRP, visit <https://cdmrp.health.mil/bcrp/default>

Congratulations to the NMRTC San Diego Sailors of the Year



We are proud to recognize the outstanding Sailors whose dedication, professionalism, and commitment to excellence earned them selection as our Command Sailors of the Year. Each of these leaders embodies the very best of Navy Medicine and plays a vital role in sustaining warfighter readiness and advancing our mission every day.

Senior Sailor of the Year (SSOY): HM1 Kathleen Peterson — Awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal
Sailor of the Year (SOY): HM2 Christopher Johnson — Awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal
Junior Sailor of the Year (JSOY): HM3 Allison Berkley — Awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal
Blue Jacket of the Year (BJOY): HN Cassandra Carl — Awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal
Their hard work, leadership, and dedication directly advance Navy Medicine’s priorities and strengthen our ability to deliver world-class care to those who defend our nation.



Your Local USO Wants You!

Volunteers are our greatest asset and the backbone of the USO. Whether helping a Sailor or Marine with a connecting flight, distributing a Care Package, serving snacks with a smile, providing local information, or “welcoming home” ships and troops from deployment, volunteers are vital to the success of the USO’s mission. While the duties of a volunteer may vary, the goal is always the same – to improve the quality of life of service members, boost their morale, and serve as the link between service members and the American people.

Ready to apply to be a USO San Diego volunteer?

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- Finally, select the USO San Diego center nearest to you!

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