

# ARMED FORCES DISPATCH



San Diego Navy/Marine Corps Dispatch

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MARCH 16-31, 2024



**IN CADENCE** | Marine Corps Sgt. Natasha Ajin, a drill instructor with Delta Company, 1st Recruit Training Battalion, Recruit Training Regiment, calls cadence during a motivational run at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego Mar. 7, 2024. The motivational run is the last physical training event the Marines will conduct before they graduate from MCRD San Diego and is the first time the friends and families will see their new Marines. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Janell B. Alvarez

## Senate passes VA funding bill that strengthens gun rights for veterans

By Svetlana Shkolnikova, Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON - The Senate passed a long-delayed, full-year spending bill for the Department of Veterans Affairs on March 8 that strengthens gun rights for certain veterans and averts a partial government shutdown.

Senators voted 75-22 to support the legislation, which is part of a \$460 billion spending package that funds VA programs and military construction as well as five other government agencies through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30.

A partial government shutdown was set to take effect at midnight if Congress failed to pass the measure. The Republican-led House approved the package on March 6.

"To folks who worry that divided government means nothing ever gets done, this bipartisan package says otherwise: it helps parents and veterans and firefighters and farmers and school cafeterias and more," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The VA bill was fought over for months as the House and Senate clashed over divisive conservative policies and cuts the House had inserted into its version of the legislation last year.

Most of the controversial riders, such as prohibitions on abortions for veterans and gender-affirming care for transgender veterans, were stripped from the final bill. But a gun rights provision championed by Republicans, as well as some moderate Democrats in the Senate, stayed.

The measure would stop the VA from reporting to a federal gun background check system when veterans are found mentally incapable of managing their financial affairs. Opponents of the decades-old policy argued it infringed on veterans' rights to firearms and relied on an overly broad definition of incompetence.

<https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2024-03-08/senate-veterans-affairs-budget-shutdown-13257003.html>

## DoD to construct pier to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza

The Department of Defense will undertake an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier on the coast of Gaza to deliver up to 2,000,000 humanitarian aid meals per-day, the Pentagon announced March 8. The announcement comes less than a day after the State of the Union address, when President Joe Biden called on the military to lead such an operation. The mission, which will be under the command of U.S. Transportation Command and conducted by the 7th Transportation Brigade from Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., and other forces, will deploy DOD's Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore capability, or JLOTS, with a goal of beginning delivery operations in approximately 60 days.

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3702071/>



**A nearly \$1 trillion defense budget faces headwinds at home and abroad. Read at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2024/03/07/a-nearly-1-trillion-defense-budget-faces-headwinds-at-home-and-abroad/>**

## DOD REPORT DISCOUNTS SIGHTINGS OF ET TECHNOLOGY

by C. Todd Lopez, DOD News  
The Defense Department's All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office released a report March 8 detailing its review of nearly 80 years of reports on government offices and special access programs related to unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP—a new term for what was once referred to as unidentified flying objects.

"AARO has found no verifiable evidence that any UAP sighting has represented extraterrestrial activity," said AARO

acting Director Tim Phillips during a Wednesday briefing at the Pentagon. "AARO has found no verifiable evidence that the U.S. government or private industry has ever had access to extraterrestrial technology. AARO has found no indications that any information was illegally or inappropriately withheld from Congress."

The 63-page "Report on the Historical Record of U.S. Government Involvement with Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena" provides conclusions

drawn following an examination of historical documents and conclusions drawn by U.S. government programs that did work related to UAP dating back to 1945.

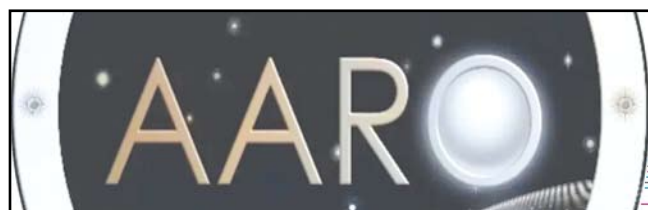
AARO's work also involved investigating claims that there were secret or hidden U.S. government programs related to UAP that might not have been reported to Congress. The AARO team looked into those claims to verify if such programs actually existed.

"AARO assesses that alleged, hidden UAP programs either do not exist or were misidentified, authentic national security programs unrelated to extraterrestrial technology exploitation," Phillips said. "We assess that claims of such programs are largely the result of circular

reporting in which a small group of individuals have repeated inaccurate claims they have heard from others over a period of several decades.

Also, part of the report were assessments of claims made by about 30 individuals AARO interviewed, including former and current U.S. government employees who were allegedly involved in such programs or heard stories about those programs and subsequently misinterpreted what they saw or heard.

"I wish to emphasize that we believe most of the individuals repeating these claims did so without malice or any effort to mislead the public," Phillips said. "Many have sincerely misinterpreted real events or see Report, page 2



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# DOD'S 2025 BUDGET REQUEST PROVIDES 4.5% RAISE FOR SERVICE MEMBERS

by Jim Garamone and  
C. Todd Lopez

DOD News

THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT LAID OUT DETAILS OF ITS \$849.8 BILLION BUDGET REQUEST THIS WEEK, WHICH IS EXPECTED TO FUND OPERATIONS DURING FISCAL YEAR 2025.

Integrated deterrence and campaigning are big parts of the fiscal 2025 budget request. Another focus is building upon the U.S. military's enduring advantages, including its most important advantage: its people.

"Our FY 25 budget request also upholds our commitment to our people, the service members, military families and civilians who work tirelessly to defend

this nation day in and day out," said Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks during a briefing today at the Pentagon. "Our success in defending the nation and maintaining readiness is inextricably linked to their success."

This budget request, Hicks said, includes a strong focus on the economic stability of service members, military families and civilians, as well as on military family support.

"The budget funds must-pay items related to quality of life and quality of service, such as a 4.5 percent pay raise for our service members that builds on raises for the past three years in a row, including last year's 5.2 percent pay raise," she said.

Going beyond base pay, Hicks

said, this latest request increases the number of child development centers, for instance, and also increases the number of provid-

**Read this story in its entirety at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3703751/dods-2025-budget-request-provides-45-raise-for-service-members/>.**



ers in those child development centers.

Also, of concern is where service members and their families live, she said, including ships and barracks and creating healthy and resilient communities.

"That's why the must-pay items in this budget also include basic housing allowance increases; facility investments in safe, quality family housing to enhance deterrence and improve critical operational infrastructure; making health care, healthy food and child care more accessible — including increasing pay for child care providers; and building a safer workplace — including efforts to combat sexual assault and to prevent suicide and eliminate barriers to care."

All of those things, she said, are "must-haves," which allow service members to focus on the mission of defending the nation.

Another enduring advantage is the U.S. defense industrial base — the collection of tens of thousands of private sector companies that provide services and equipment to the Defense Department. The need to build up the industrial base has been one of the big lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it's a focus of the FY 2025 budget request.

"Other key investments focus on strengthening our munitions and defense industrial base and improving the resilience of our supply chains so that we can deliver what our warfighters need when they need it," Hicks said.

instance, makes "a historic investment" in the submarine industrial base to increase production and reduce backlogs, Hicks said.

Defending the nation includes having the best equipment and being trained and ready to use that equipment to both deter conflict and ensure readiness to defend, if need be.

This latest budget request

also asks for \$167 billion for procurement; \$143 billion for research, development, testing and evaluation; and \$339 billion for operations and maintenance — which includes the training activities that keep service members ready for a war fight.

Integrated deterrence is a centerpiece of the 2022 National Defense Strategy, which was used to develop the FY 2025 budget request.

## Report

continued from page 1

mistaken sensitive U.S. programs, for which they were not cleared, as having been related to UAP or extraterrestrial exploitation."

Phillips told reporters that while researching the AARO report, his team was given an unusual level of access to programs and information, which allowed them to more easily complete the work Congress had asked them to do.

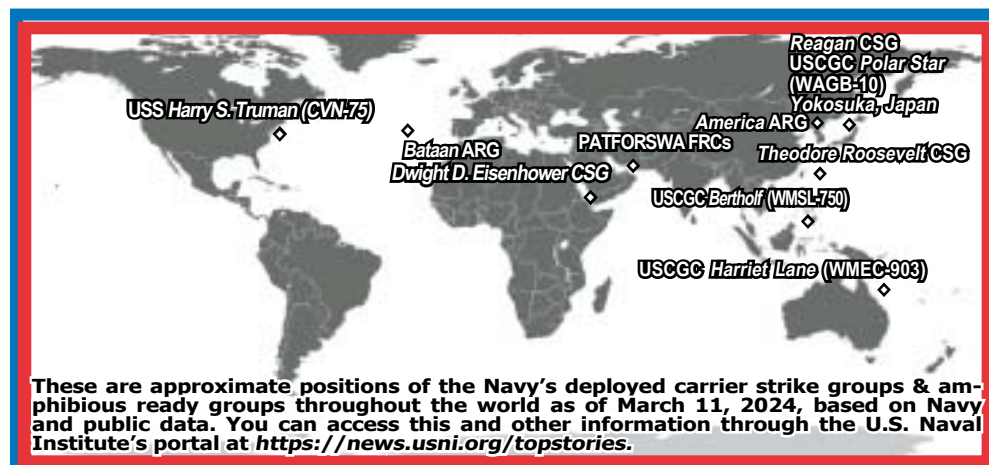
"AARO, as designed by Congress, had unprecedented access to classified programs," Phillips said. "Nobody blocked where we could go or the questions we asked. Nobody in the government influenced the findings in the report. As a career intelligence officer, I am just amazed at the access we had to some of our nation's most sensitive programs. Nobody said, 'No.'"

Lawmakers directed AARO to produce the report as part of the fiscal year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act. Today's report is the first volume of AARO's findings and covers a period from 1945 through October 2023. A second volume, which will be released later this year, will cover findings from interviews and research completed between November 2023 and April 2024.

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Armed Forces

The FY 2025 request, for



These are approximate positions of the Navy's deployed carrier strike groups & amphibious ready groups throughout the world as of March 11, 2024, based on Navy and public data. You can access this and other information through the U.S. Naval Institute's portal at <https://news.usni.org/topstories>.

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## EARLY BIRD BRIEF

### Top 4

- Troops in Iraq, Syria had close calls with militia attacks
- Army's air defense modernization boss on missiles
- Pentagon abandons effort to scale down amphibious ship design
- Few women are trying for elite special operations roles, new data shows

### Army

- Kill the zombies: Army on mission to make Soldiers better writers
- Army Reserve lieutenant colonel dies in noncombat incident in Israel
- Soldiers need abundant, cheap drones for training to adapt tactics, report argues
- Army to fund Black Hawk upgrades using budget from canceled helicopter
- Man gets 8-year term in fatal drunken driving crash at Fort Liberty, N.C.

### Navy

- Thieves are stripping sunken World War II shipwrecks of their valuable steel
- Red Hill task force removes last 'residual fuel'
- Naval Academy's Farragut Field sea wall repairs to finish by end of year
- USS *Kingsville*, one of the last new Indy-class littoral combat ships, passes sea trials, will homeport in San Diego

- One of NASA's newest astronauts is a former Navy test pilot from California; will she make it to the moon?
- Government says Mariners' rape on USNS ship may fall under workers comp

### Marine Corps

- Marines select company to build cannon version of new recon vehicle
- Marine quick-response unit heads for home after Middle East deployment
- Elite Marine security team deploys to Haiti amid gang crisis
- The Marines conducted tests of the XQ-58A, the latest development in the autonomous drone program
- Marines hit the high North in separate Arctic exercises

### Air Force

- They stood sentry over America's nuclear missile arsenal. Many worry it gave them cancer.
- Acquisition boss: Spending caps forced USAF to trim 2025 budget request

### Space Force

- Inaugural Red Skies exercise boosts orbital warfare readiness

### National Guard

- Maryland Air National Guard base to transition from aging A-10 aircraft to cyber mission

### Veterans

- Joint VA/DOD medical site launches new health records system
- A veteran was denied a restroom. His case calls Dallas police oversight into question

## DOD acquisition official underscores importance of production in keeping U.S. edge



**Soldiers assigned to the Army's 82nd Airborne Division aim weapons designed to counter unmanned aircraft systems, Fort Liberty, N.C., July 27, 2023. U.S. Army photo by Pvt. Jayreliz Batista-Prado**

by Joseph Clark, DOD News

The Pentagon's top acquisition official underscored the importance of the defense industry's ability to produce new capabilities amid a rapidly changing technology landscape.

William LaPlante, undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, said March 8 that while anticipating future requirements remains essential, the ability to prepare for rapidly emerging threats is critical.

"You can predict all you want; you need to predict, but you also have to be prepared that something, overnight, can just change," LaPlante said during the McAleese Defense Programs Conference in Washington.

The annual conference serves as a forum for defense officials, members of Congress, and industry stakeholders to discuss defense priorities.

LaPlante noted rapid changes in key technologies require

constant adaptation by defense leaders and industry to maintain U.S.' edge.

"Particularly in areas like counter [unmanned aircraft systems] right now," he said. "It's rapidly changing overnight."

He said new UAS systems being fielded by adversaries are often platforms that can be fielded quickly, adding to the challenge in fielding systems to counter them.

"It's not necessarily high tech," LaPlante said, adding that UAS platforms often are low-tech solutions.

"That's why it's hard," he said. "The defenses may be higher tech, and we're having to adjust them all the time because the adversary is adjusting."

LaPlante said that it is not only critical to prototype new technology in response to quickly evolving threats, but to quickly scale production of those new systems.

"I'm trying to make sure that we're always thinking about this production part of things," he said. "Because, actually, in the prototyping and the ideas part, we're actually doing pretty well."

LaPlante said succeeding in the emerging national security environment and meeting the pacing challenge of China, requires pivoting away from manufacturing models that don't allow for buffers against potential need and

focusing on building production capacity.

That pivot will require a steady demand signal from the Defense Department and collaboration between the government and industry.

"We need your help," LaPlante said, adding that adversaries are watching how the Pentagon and industry come together to meet future demands.

### Armed Forces Dispatch

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# General says Centcom area facing 'volatile security situation'

by David Vergun, DoD News  
Just a year ago the U.S. Central Command area was on the verge of "improbable, unprecedented and transformative progress," said Army Gen. Michael E. Kurilla, commander of Centcom.

tors to sow instability throughout the region and beyond, he said.

Iran exploited what they saw as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the Middle East

long vision cannot be realized if countries in the region continue to expand integration with each other and deepen their partnership with the United States," he said.

critical to the world's energy supply and remains essential for the flow of global commerce, he said.

Centcom provides strategic depth to the defense of the U.S. homeland, he said. "American security and prosperity are at risk if we cede this space to Iran, terrorism and China."

Kurilla said the U.S. should remain continuously engaged throughout the region with its partners.

"Our strategic advantage remains our strong military-to-military partnerships, while our adversaries and competitors rely on parasitic, transactional relationships. We also innovate with our partners," he said.

Marine Corps Gen. Michael E. Langley, commander of U.S. Africa Command, also testified.

Langley also emphasized the value of partnerships, not just military-to-military, but also interagency, such as the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development.

Africa faces multiple crises, including terrorism, poverty, food insecurity, climate change and mass migration, he said. These factors sow the seeds of violent extremism and exploitation by Russia across the continent.

"In Africa, modest investments resources go a long way toward achieving our national security interests. Africa faces many challenges, while also offering even more opportunities. With our African partners at the forefront, reinforced by our efforts and the efforts of our allies, we will continue to gain ground towards achieving lasting stability, security and prosperity on this crucial continent," he said.

Lastly, both generals advocated for passing the budget and supplemental funding request, as important to both regional security in their respective areas, as well as national security.



**Navy Seaman Jeremiah Bridges mans a M-240 machine gun on the USS Paul Hamilton while transiting the Strait of Hormuz, Feb. 25, 2023. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Elliot Schaudt**

to its advantage, using its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank and Yemen, he said.

shipping and attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria.

Iran has also developed a full-scale production pipeline for supplying weapons to Russia, fueling its war on Ukraine.

The risk of attack emanating from Afghanistan is increasing, he said.

"I assess ISIS-Khorasan retains the capability and will to attack U.S. and Western interests abroad in as little as six months and with little to no warning," Kurilla said.

ISIS-Khorasan's area of operation includes parts of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Strategic competition has also continued to evolve across the region, he said.

"China and Russia are quick to capitalize on destabilizing influences. They have shown meager interest or capability to reduce regional tensions, but rather, they have increased their efforts to pressurize regional partners across all elements of national power ... and foster a chaotic landscape favorable for their exploitation," he said.

The Centcom region remains

## ART GALLERY



**ENJOYING THE VIEW** | Army Sgt. Shelby Lewis, a flight engineer assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 211th Aviation Regiment, 103rd Troop Command, Hawaii Army National Guard (HIARNG), conducts flight operations during a CH-47 Chinook flight for Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP) training at the Regional Training Institute, Waimanalo, Hawaii, March 3, 2024. The HIARNG RSP training primarily focuses on ensuring the RSP warrior is mentally prepared, administratively correct and physically ready to ship and complete basic training. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Lianne M. Hirano



**LIFESAVING AIRMAN** | Ken Gibson presents Air Force Tech. AIRMAN Sgt. Emily Berg with a certificate of appreciation from the American Legion during a ceremony in St. Paul, Minn., March 2, 2024. Berg provided lifesaving measures when Gibson suffered a heart attack at a breakfast where airmen were getting ready to leave for a deployment. Official U.S. Air Force photo

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## Navy's top officer emphasizes importance of investing in women

by **Natasha Anthony**  
NAVFAC Washington

WASHINGTON - Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Lisa Franchetti joined a distinguished gathering of military and civilian leaders to commemorate International Women's Day, themed "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress," March 8.

Franchetti, a trailblazer herself as the first woman to serve as CNO and the first woman to be a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided a perspective that resonated with the audience. She shared her personal journey, the challenging assignments she completed, and the fulfillment of leading teams as she rose through the ranks of the U.S. Navy. Her message was centered on work-life balance, integration and the warfighting effectiveness in great leaders, great people and great teams.

"We are the 'they.' It really doesn't matter what level you're at. You're part of the 'they' in your own organization. So, own the culture, create places where people can bring their best to the table every single day and contribute," said Franchetti. "We've got to keep that accelerator down because the adversaries are go-



**Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Lisa Franchetti. Official Navy photo**

ing after our strength. And our strength is our people. And that's what we need to focus on."

On the panel were Naval District Washington Commandant, Rear Adm. Nancy Lacore; Assistant Deputy CNO, Plans, and Strategy, Rear Adm. Heidi Berg; Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy, Management, E. Anne Sandel; and Navy Installations Command Executive Director, Timothy Bridges.

"We have important work to do throughout the enterprise to improve readiness generation and, that includes investing in our people," said Vice Adm.

James Downey, commander, NAVSEA. "This will be a primary focus for us on this larger Navy team here as we align to meet the Secretary and the CNO strategic priorities to maintain maritime dominance and deliver Americans warfighting capabilities."

As the event concluded, Rear Adm. Dean VanderLey, commander of NAVFAC, issued a powerful challenge to the participants. He urged them to harness the energy and inspiration from the shared stories to propel the Navy, and ultimately the nation, toward a brighter and more inclusive future. "In the words of

our CNO, we need all the players on the field, and it's crucial to recognize that a significant number of our most talented and valuable players are women,"

VanderLey emphasized.

International Women's Day beckons a rallying cry that resounds through the ages. The

U.N.s' theme to "Invest in women: Accelerate progress," is an anthem of cause that summons the need to unite, in unwavering solidarity, for women today.

### FLEET AND FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

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Tuesday, March 26 | 0900 - 1100 | BVH (IP)

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Thursday, March 21 | 0900 - 1030 | BVH (IP)

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## Navy base MWR fitness facilities to offer 24-7 access

WASHINGTON - Sailors will soon have access to fitness centers on all Navy installations, including San Diego facilities, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Commander, Navy Installations Command, which oversees all 70 Navy bases around the globe, signed a memorandum on March 8 authorizing installation commanding officers to move forward with implementing 24-hour entry to fitness facilities.

"If we require our Sailors to be physically fit and healthy so they can fulfill the Navy mission and deploy at a moment's notice, then we must provide the facilities and resources for them to do so," said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command.

"Not only does this make sense, it is the right thing to do for the quality of life of our Sailors and other service members."

Military personnel stand duty at varying hours of the day, including night shifts, depending on their roles and responsibilities. As a result, service members often had difficulty getting to the MWR gym during normal business hours and were forced to find alternatives.

"Maximizing access to fitness facilities makes it more convenient for our Sailors," Gray said. "We all know that exercise benefits one's physical health, but it also reinforces mental, emotional, and social health, which are important for our



Screenshot courtesy of navylife.sw.

Sailors' overall wellbeing."

Fitness centers may be staffed or unstaffed outside normal business hours. For the safety of patrons, several restrictions will be implemented while fitness centers are unstaffed. These include: 1) Patrons must be 18 years or older; 2) Patrons younger than 18 must be supervised by a parent or legal guardian; 3) Guests are not permitted access; 4) Access to saunas, steam rooms, whirlpools, and aquatic spaces is not permitted.

Prior to instituting unstaffed fitness facilities, installation commanding officers must conduct initial operational risk assessment to be certified by the base's safety office and develop

a standard operation procedure in order to ensure the safety of Sailors and other authorized patrons.

For more information, Sailors and families can contact their installation MWR fitness center.

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## Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit ONE receives Battle 'E' award

by Gilbert Aquino, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group One  
CORONADO - Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 1 was awarded the battle efficiency recently. The battle "E" award is awarded annually to a select number of commands within Navy Expeditionary Combat Command that display outstanding readiness and efficiency throughout the previous year. "What sets MDSU-1 apart from the other commands is our constant pursuit of excellence across an incredibly diverse range of operations," said Cmdr. Mark Anderson, MDSU-1's CO. "With five units of action, we provided concurrent support to two numbered Fleets, salvage response to Joint and Navy regions across INDOPACOM, and humanitarian support to international, federal, state, and local governments." As an Outside Continental U.S. Command (OCONUS), MDSU-1 provides combat ready, expeditionary rapidly deployable mobile diving and salvage companies to conduct harbor clearance, salvage, underwater search and recovery, and underwater emergency repairs in any environment.





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# PHOTO GALLERY



**TULSA TIME** Cmdr. Christopher Thomas, center, commanding officer of littoral combat ship *USS Tulsa* (LCS 16) Blue crew, is piped ashore during a change of command ceremony held on the ship's flight deck March 8. Littoral Combat Ships are fast, optimally-manned, mission-tailored surface combatants that operate in near-shore and open-ocean environments, winning against 21st-century coastal threats. U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Vance Hand

**DISH DIRECTION** Air Force Airman 1st Class Rashin Ortiz aligns a satellite during Bamboo Eagle 24-1 at March Air Reserve Base. Feb. 2, 2024. Bamboo Eagle trained airmen to establish and maintain a secure network of communication in a simulated remote forward operating location. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Steven Cardo



**DESERT CROSSING** Marines advance toward their objective during a distributed maneuver exercise at Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms Feb. 13, 2024. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Ezekiel Jay Correa

## USS *Halsey* joins U.S. forces in Indian Navy-led Exercise MILAN

Destroyer *Halsey* (DDG 97) recently joined ships, aircraft and personnel from India and numerous other navies for Exercise Milan 2024 in the Bay of Bengal.

This year marks the second time the U.S. has participated in the biennial exercise in order to build combined interoperability with regional allies and partners. MILAN in Hindi means "meeting."

MILAN 2024 includes forces from more than 50 countries, the largest participation in the exercise. This year's exercise focuses on strengthening military-to-military ties to contribute toward a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific.

MILAN 2024 will include a harbor phase followed by a sea phase where ships will focus on high-end tactical training, maneuvering drills, air-defense exercises, submarine familiarization, multinational replenishment-at-sea, communications drills, gunnery exercises, and joint warfighting scenarios.

### Local flag officer announcements

The secretary of the Navy and chief of naval operations recently announced the following assignments:

- Rear Adm. (lower half) **William R. Daly**, selected for rear admiral. Currently serving as commander, Carrier Strike Group Fifteen, San Diego.
- Rear Adm. (lower half) **Carlos A. Sardiello**, selected for rear admiral. Currently serving as commander, Carrier Strike Group One, San Diego.
- Rear Adm. (lower half) **Kevin M. Kennedy** will be assigned as commander, Carrier Strike Group 15, San Diego.
- Rear Adm. (lower half) **Michael S. Wosje** will be assigned as commander, Carrier Strike Group One, San Diego.
- Capt. **Justin A. Kubu**, selected for rear admiral (lower half). Currently serving as commander, Amphibious Squadron Seven, San Diego.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III recently announced that the president has made the following nominations:

- Navy Rear Adm. (lower half) **Bradley D. Dunham** for appointment to rear admiral. Dunham is currently reserve commander, Naval Air Force Reserve, San Diego.
- Navy Capt. **Katie F. Sheldon** for appointment to rear admiral (lower half). Sheldon is currently commanding officer, Navy Reserve Third Fleet Headquarters, San Diego.

### 'Gunsmoke' veterans reunite to remember Vigilant Resolve 20 years later

by 1st Lt. Noah Richardson, 1st Marine Division

Around 150 veterans and active members of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, reunited at Camp Pendleton Feb. 29 to honor the 20th anniversary of Operation Vigilant Resolve.

The battalion, known as "Gunsmoke," served as one of the lead units in the first Battle of Fallujah, known as Operation Vigilant Resolve, in April 2004. Marines like Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John A. Toolan Jr. and Sgt. Maj. (Ret.) Bill Skiles joined the memorial event for the battle. The reunion consisted of a handful of memorial events, including a hike up First Sergeant's Hill in Camp Horno, weapons displays for the vets, and a memorial dinner for the group. Skiles, who served as the first sergeant for Echo Company, 2nd Bn., 1st Marines, in 2004, couldn't hide his excitement to see his Marines again.

"It's just so great to be here and see all these Marines and Sailors and remember the sacrifice of not only them, but the families too," said Skiles, who continues supporting the Marine Corps through his work at the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned. "We're going to hike up this mountain and carry heavy things with us to symbolize what these veterans and families carry with them every day. There are some great memories with these guys, including memories with our company commander, Doug Zembiec, who can't be here today."

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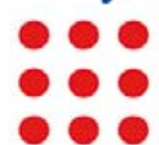
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# SPOTLIGHT: MCB Camp Pendleton wildlife

by Gunnery Sgt.  
Patricia Morris

Camp Pendleton

CAMP PENDLETON - Nestled along the picturesque coastline of Southern California, MCB Camp Pendleton is not only a premier amphibious and expeditionary warfare military installation but also a haven for a wide variety of wildlife, including 19 threatened and endangered species. From the rolling hills to the expansive beaches, the base is home to an array of fascinating creatures thriving in its diverse habitats.

MCB Camp Pendleton takes active steps to preserve regional wildlife and natural resources while providing Marines with the training spaces necessary to meet training and readiness requirements. Many animals call the installation home due to these preservation efforts.

One of the most iconic residents of Camp Pendleton is the California least tern, a small seabird that nests along the sandy shores of the base. Protected under the Endangered Species Act, these elegant birds can be spotted darting through the sky or resting on the beach, a testament to the conservation efforts that are in place to protect their habitat.

Inland birds Camp Pendleton residents might see most often are vultures. These birds are territorial, nonaggressive towards people, and frequently find nests around a reliable food source. They are more active in housing areas during trash days. To prevent vultures and other birds from nesting in housing areas, keep trash lids closed.

"Vultures cannot open trash can lids; however, if the lid is left partially cracked, they can push it open and get into the garbage," said James Asmus, Head of Uplands Management Section, Conservation Law Enforcement, MCB Camp Pendleton. "The best prevention is not to overflow the garbage cans or leave trash bags out."

On land, Camp Pendleton boasts a variety of terrestrial wildlife, including bobcats, coyotes, and a wide range of other bird species. The rolling hills and expansive grasslands provide ample space for these creatures to roam and thrive, creating a harmonious balance between military operations and the natural world.

Harmoniously living with the wildlife on Camp Pendleton requires base patrons to keep food sources away from backyards, patios, and accessible entry points into homes. These small steps help keep residents from waking up to a surprise visitor, such as a raccoon.

"Bold raccoons in the past have snuck a look inside a residence at night if food has been left out, such as dog or cat food,"



Asmus explains. "The best thing to do is to ensure the food is put away at night and not left out on the patio or by any dog doors."

Coyotes are often seen throughout the base roaming for food or looking for other coyotes. They are spotted roaming the foothills in the spring quite often because when male

## San Diego Legion teaches MRF-D 24.3 rugby basics

by Cpl. Manuel Rivera

Marine Rotational Force - Darwin Marines and Sailors with 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, participated in a rugby clinic with members of the San Diego Legion professional American rugby team at Camp Pendleton Feb. 23.

This rugby clinic served as an opportunity for Marines and Sailors to be coached and gain the ability to play against the Darwin Stray Cats during Marine Rotational Force - Darwin 24.3.

"As soon as this opportunity came up, I put my hand up to something I was really, really excited to get to be able to do and it went really well," said Ryan Matyas, a native of Arizona and member of the San Diego Legion Community Foundation.

As the day began, Matyas, along with the San Diego Legion players, were excited to teach the Marines and Sailors about the rugby sport. For most of the Legion players, it was the first time working with Marines as well as being put into coaching positions.

"The Marines have been called the professional athletes of the military," said Matyas. "To put all those core skills together in a game was the end goal, it's for them to see, feel and hear rugby, which allowed them to see the similarities between rugby and the military."

Practice consisted of Marines and Sailors being split up into five groups, working through drills and rehearsals, learning how to pass, catch, tackle, evade and hand off the ball to teammates. After the drills, the Marines and Sailors were split

homes or buildings.

"If you find a tarantula, I would not kill it; just get a dustpan and broom and move it back outside," advises Asmus.

The preservation of wildlife and natural habitats is a priority for MCB Camp Pendleton, with conservation efforts and partnerships in place to protect and enhance the base's biodiversity. Through education, research, and habitat restoration initiatives, the base is continuously dedicated to ensuring the sustainability of its wildlife populations for future generations to enjoy.

As visitors and residents alike explore the vast expanse of MCB Camp Pendleton, they are reminded of the importance of coexisting with nature and the beauty that can be found in the unspoiled landscapes of this military installation. From the stunning coastal vistas to the diverse array of wildlife, MCB Camp Pendleton is a treasure trove of natural wonders waiting to be discovered and appreciated.

coyotes hit a certain age, they are known to search for new packs.

Another species found in the training areas are Tarantulas. These spiders are known for being ground-dwellers and live in old rodent burrows. Tarantulas may look intimidating, but their bite is not dangerous, and it is common to find them in some



**U.S. Marines with Marine Rotational Force - Darwin 24.3, participate in a rugby drill during a rugby clinic with the San Diego Legion rugby team at Camp Pendleton, California. SD Legion was brought in to teach MRF-D 24.3 Marines about rugby, a sport that builds comradery and teamwork. Founded in 2017, the SD Legion is a San Diego base rugby union team with players from all over the world. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Juan Torres**

into three teams and played against each other in a round robin tournament.

"I can teach you how to catch, I can teach how to pass," explained Matyas, "But I can't make people want it, I can't make people buy in, and one thing this group had in spades was buy in."

As the scrimmages concluded, Marines, Sailors, and coaches huddled up to discuss the progress that had been made and how the opportunity would allow MRF-D 24 to improve as a team in the sport of rugby.

"It's so cool for us Marines and the civilian side to come out and play rugby together and get to know each other," says 1st Lt.

Jacob Gregory, a supply officer with 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. "This was awesome, not really going out to the community, but the community coming to us."

Learning an Australian tradition like rugby is just one way the unit prepares to work alongside the Australian Defence Force during MRF-D 24. Marines and Sailors of the Marine Air Ground Task Force continue learning about the culture and traditions of Australians and the ADF to best tie in to the long-standing relationship. MRF-D is one of the best examples of just how strong the U.S.-Australian alliance is, and looks to build on the rich history during the 2024 rotation.



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## AdventureLand day & more at Disneyland

Our online participation has continued too. We meet online most Saturdays from 5:30-7 p.m.. The schedule is on our Meetup page. Anyone may attend, no matter where they live. All they need is an internet connection.

I've been a Disneyland annual passholder for many years. Since COVID-19, however, when I visit Disneyland (and the adjacent Disney California Adventure) has changed significantly. That is because reservations are now required, and Disney limits their number.

Now I must plan all of my visits in advance (INSIDER'S TIP: Try going online to make a reservation close to midnight the night before you want to go. Passholders get penalized if they are no-shows too many times, so they must cancel no later than midnight the day before their reservation is for to not incur the penalty. That is often when new reservation opportunities become available. I sometimes make my reservations well in advance, when reservations are more plentiful — especially if there are special events coming up that I don't want to miss.

I belong to an online Meetup group of like-minded Disneyland fans. It's called the Disneyland Fan Club (<https://www.meetup.com/DisneylandFanClub/>). It mostly attracts people from Southern California, but that isn't a requirement. Beginning during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us started meeting there online to Chat and view worldwide Disney Parks-related YouTube videos. However, since COVID-19 became manageable, many of us have resumed meeting in-person at the Southern California Disney Parks (as well as Knotts Berry Farm and Universal Studios Hollywood).

One reservation that I booked well in advance was for the annual, unofficial "AdventureLand Day" at Disneyland (March 3, 2024). It's an exciting day of widespread Indiana Jones cosplay throughout the Park. It includes a fun treasure hunt, for which the prize that everyone can win is a cool pin. The organizers post information and clues online, and then we walk around the Park trying to solve them (HINT: what has always worked best for me is to team up with a few people who are much better at solving these clues than I am).

Our Disneyland Fan Club Meetup group met the same day, so we went on a bunch of rides together. One was particularly memorable. We were meandering through the river on the Jungle Cruise when our boat stopped. At first we thought that it was just part of the entertainment, since our boat captain was doing a good job of entertaining us, so when she asked us if we could hear the motor running — and we could not — we assumed that she was kidding. Well, it turned out that she was not kidding. Soon another boat arrived and towed us back through the river to the dock, where we disembarked. That was actually pretty cool. I recorded a video of the experience, from which I've extracted a few still photos for you to see.

I have already booked a reservation with a friend to celebrate Disneyland's

Season of the Force. To quote Disneyland: "Touch down in a galaxy far, far away filled with epic encounters, thrilling attractions, exciting flavor adventures and favorite characters from Star Wars!" This event runs from April 5 to June 2. We have reserved May 4 - a date which is a popular play on words. It brings to mind the famous Star Wars line: "May the Force be with you!"

I spent the late afternoon and evening exploring on my own. After having a hearty and reasonably priced dinner at the Rancho del Zocalo Mexican restaurant, I headed over to "Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge," where I rode "Rise of the Resistance." Then I walked over to Main Street USA where I staked out a great spot to watch (and record video of) "Mickey's Mix Magic" fireworks show and projections on Sleeping Beauty Castle.

Next, I rushed over to Disney California Adventure, where I rode on "Soarin' Over California" and then watched the World of Color "ONE" water show spectacular.

Finally, I visited the Disneyana shop, where I could not resist buying a couple of keepsakes (memo to self: do not tempt yourself when you are getting tired!).

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## The Meat & Potatoes of Life



by  
Lisa  
Smith  
Molinari

I was one of the first to arrive, lugging my humongous bag of gear over one shoulder while gripping my ever-present Yeti coffee mug. I was always late, so my punctuality was either a good omen, or a clear sign that I was nervous.

I had no idea which campus building held the Offshore Safety at Sea course. As a sailing novice, I envisioned a neon light blinking "Clueless!" over my head. But I'd been offered the opportunity to crew on an offshore sailboat and the safety course was required. If my lifelong dream was to come true, I needed to get over imposter syndrome and get on with it.

I spied eight people also carrying large bags who accepted me into their wayward group. They included one elderly woman and seven men. After entering the wrong building, one man pulled a rudimentary map out of his bag and stared at it, looking thoroughly confused.

"The blind leading the blind," another man chuckled. The fact that our navigator couldn't read his own map was definitely a red flag.

The elderly woman and I surmised that we should walk toward the water since our classes involved shooting flares. While walking toward the Bay, one of the men spotted a sign pointing us to the right building. He puffed up his chest as if he was

## Every woman should know: 'It's possible'

Ferdinand Magellan.

The course instructors slapped name tags on us and pointed us toward the lecture hall, just past a table offering coffee, fruit, and a heaping bowl of doughnut holes. I snagged an inconspicuous seat in the back left corner of the amphitheater, then snuck back out, unable to resist free food. While selecting a few donut holes, I joked to a hulking man eyeing the jelly-filled ones, "Fruit just doesn't cut it."

"My poor blood sugar," he said with a smile. This brief moment of humanity settled my nerves.

Two more women eventually arrived, seating themselves, like the elderly woman and me, on the fringes. About sixty men filled the rest of the seats. "Why do women place themselves on the sidelines?" I wondered.

"Every Root Cause Analysis of boating emergencies has six 'M's," our instructor boomed. "One — Man. Human error must be considered, but you guys, er, sorry I mean persons, should also analyze Machine, Material, Method, Measurement, and Mother Nature," he fumbled, noticing the few women in the room.

Later, we were taught how to extinguish fires, shoot flares, and manage leaks. During the fire lesson, the instructor asked us to break into pairs. The men glanced desperately to each other, obviously reluctant to partner with a woman. And when asked to line up to shoot rocket flares, the men scrambled to go first, as if to say, "Watch how it's done, ladies."

During the leaks workshop, a male partner and I were asked to identify a leak in a flooded make-shift bilge and formulate a plan to stop it. I found the leak right away, but my partner ignored me and kept searching. I grabbed his hand, put it over the leak, and shouted, "Notice it now?"

Later, walking to pool for lifeboat training, he whispered when no one else was around, "Hey, thanks for finding that leak."

"Let's talk about MOB," said our afternoon instructor, "which stands for 'Man Over Board.'" I was beginning to notice a pattern.

During a lesson about Rescue Swimmers, our instructor asked, "Anyone here serve in the Coast Guard? Army? Air Force? Marines?" No one raised their hands. "Navy?" I raised my hand half-mast, as if I represented the entire US Armed Forces, and offered a concession, "Spouse?" No one even glanced in my direction.

A few days after earning my course certificate, I read that on March 7th, 29-year-old, five-foot-two, Cole Brauer completed a solo circumnavigation of the globe, non-stop and without assistance. Brauer was the only woman and the youngest sailor in the 2024 Globe Solo Challenge. Although many refused to sponsor her, considering her a "liability," she finished second place, becoming the first American woman to sail alone around the world.

Brauer told reporters, "It's a fully male dominated world, and ... I really want women to know that it's possible."

## Veterans News

### VFW leader warns about predatory 'claims sharks' illegally targeting veterans

by Linda F. Hersey  
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON - Cracking down on predatory "claims sharks" that charge veterans exorbitant fees to file for disability benefits with the Department of Veterans Affairs is a priority for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, whose leaders urged lawmakers to toughen laws against the illegal practices.

"These companies that prey on veterans must be held accountable and not rewarded for their predatory behavior toward veterans and their survivors," Duane Sarmiento, the VFW's commander in chief, said March 6 at a joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs committees.

Sarmiento was the first witness during a half-day of testimony from a dozen national veterans' groups that included the VFW, Wounded Warrior Project, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Blue Star Families, among others.

The veterans service organizations highlighted their fiscal 2025 legislative agendas before lawmakers from both chambers. Collectively known as VSOs, the nonprofit groups have a mission

to aid and serve veterans, service members, dependents and survivors.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., the chairman of the Senate committee, opened the joint hearing by highlighting his priorities that focused on pending legislation to protect VA benefits and improve their delivery to former service members.

Tester pointed to the Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding VA Benefits Act, also known as the GUARD VA Benefits Act, which would impose criminal penalties including fines and prison time for individuals convicted of soliciting or receiving fees and other compensation to prepare or alter a veteran's disability claim for VA benefits.

Federal law bans individuals and companies from assisting veterans in preparing their claims for disability benefits without accreditation from the VA Office of General Counsel. Many veterans service organizations have been trained by the VA in claims preparation and offer the service for free.

But the VFW and other veterans organizations who testified said the existing law is unenforceable because it lacks criminal penalties.

Tester said the GUARD Benefits Act would restore criminal

**Federal law bans individuals and companies from assisting veterans in preparing their claims for disability benefits without accreditation from the VA Office of General Counsel. Many veterans service organizations have been trained by the VA in claims preparation and offer the service for free.**

penalties that were removed from the law and regulations 20 years ago.

He said record levels of benefits from the passage of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act in 2022 have resulted in a proliferation of businesses illegally charging veterans to file claims for disability benefits when the service is provided for free by accredited veterans organizations, including the VFW.

The accreditation demonstrates the organizations have re-

ceived VA training to prepare the claims and meet VA standards and regulations for providing the service.

Since the PACT Act became law in August 2022, more than 720,000 claims for disability benefits have been filed by veterans who were exposed to burn pits, herbicides and other toxic substances during military service, Tester said.

The act has yielded more than \$1.8 billion in disability benefits to qualifying veterans, according to the VA.

Sarmiento said though some state legislatures recently passed laws to stop individuals and companies from illegally offering to help veterans with their claims, "it is time for a federal fix."

Some companies also fraudulently solicit veterans with offers to boost their disability ratings for higher monthly benefits, he said.

"With the PACT Act, there has been an increase in online ads targeting veterans' benefits

with high fees. Taking money from veterans is distasteful, but taking money from their survivors is absolutely disgusting," Sarmiento said.

He pointed to a pin that he wore on his lapel with picture of a shark's fin and the message: "Do not feed the sharks."

Sarmiento also urged lawmakers to pass the TAP Promotion Act, which would make claims assistance part of the required Transition Assistance Program, an educational course for service members in their final months of active duty.

The program provides service members with employment resources, information on veterans' benefits and counseling services as they begin their transition to civilian life.

The TAP Promotion Act would add claims preparation help by veterans service organizations as a basic component of the course for exiting service members.

Nancy Espinosa, national commander of the Disabled American Veterans, said Thursday in a second day of testimony that her organization conducts extensive outreach to veterans with combat injuries who need help with their disability claims.

Members of the Disabled American Veterans also drive veterans to and from VA medical appointments. Both services are free.

Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, said there should be the same level of attention to a veteran's transition to civilian life as there is to military recruitment of individuals entering the military.

"At one of the first armed service hearings I attended 10 years ago, I made the statement 'Why don't we spend as much money on transition as we do on recruiting?' In other words, let's take care of those veterans when they're coming out," he said.







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