

ARMED FORCES DISPATCH



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SIXTY-THIRD YEAR NO. 31
JANUARY 1-15, 2024

Serving active duty and retired military personnel, veterans and civil service employees



DOUBLE BOOP Navy Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Dylan Pilkington, N34 Security Department working dog handler, praises Military Working Dog Rocky during a MWD demonstration at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Dec. 15, 2023. Pilkington's bond with Rocky is vital, as it is their job, as a team, to defend their operating area and its various missions. Camp Lemonnier hosts MWD demonstrations as part of its world-class support for tenant commands, service members and transient U.S. assets. U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Allison Payne.

Navy signs \$6 million contract to clean up site of Tustin blimp hangar fire

by Gary Warner, Stars and Stripes

The Navy has agreed to pay more than \$6 million to demolish and remove remnants of a World War II-era blimp hangar in Southern California that was destroyed last month in a fire, service officials said Dec. 20.

The fire destroyed one of two historic hangars, and concerns over environmental contamination forced some schools, parks and businesses near the former Marine Corps Air Station in Tustin to close. The base was shut down in 1999.

The Navy said ECC Environmental LCC, an international company with its headquarters in Burlingame, Calif., near San Francisco, was awarded the \$6.03 million to handle the cleanup. The company has 14 offices worldwide and has been contracted frequently to build or dismantle military structures.

The Navy will manage the \$6 million contract for the site that the military has owned since 1942, the service said. The funds will come primarily through the federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission, which is responsible for selecting, closing, and monitoring the later uses of military installations shuttered primarily in the 1990s.

"The Navy cares about the health and safety of residents," said Gregory Preston, director of the Department of the Navy Base Realignment and Closure Program Management Office. "We continue to work closely with local officials and other agencies to safely and effectively manage the cleanup of the community and the hangar site."

Local officials in Orange County have been critical of the pace and funding of Navy efforts to clean up the remnants of the hangar and mitigate environmental damage in the area. The Navy initially committed \$1 million to local government efforts within days of the fire.

New Pact gives U.S. military access to 15 bases in Finland

The Defense Cooperation Agreement signed Dec. 18 between Washington and Helsinki will give the American forces access to 15 installations — five in the High North near Russia — and permission to store equipment and weapons on Finnish soil. <https://news.usni.org/2023/12/21/new-pact-gives-u-s-military-access-to-15-bases-in-finland>

Navy recovers Army Blackhawk, crew remains from crash in Eastern Med.

The Navy, along with a contracted salvage team, recovered the remains of three Soldiers and the Army Blackhawk they were aboard that crashed in the Mediterranean Sea on Nov. 10, the service announced Dec. 20. Five special operations Soldiers, assigned to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, died in the crash. Two Soldiers were recovered immediately following the crash while three remains were recovered by the salvage team. <https://news.usni.org/2023/12/21/navy-contractors-recover-blackhawk-three-remains-from-mediterranean>

Navy relieves commander of electronic warfare squadron deployed on Carl Vinson

The commanding officer of an electronic warfare squadron from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island deployed to the Western Pacific on USS *Carl Vinson* has been relieved of command, the Navy said Dec. 22.

<https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2023-12-22/navy-growler-squadron-commander-relieved-carl-vinson-12441615.html>

LARGEST PAY RAISE FOR TROOPS IN 22 YEARS

by Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON - The Senate approved a compromise \$886 billion defense bill on Dec. 13 that will give service members the largest pay raise in more than two decades and invest in efforts to counter threats around the world.

Senators passed the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual must-pass bill setting policy for the Pentagon, by a vote of 87-13. The legislation must still be approved by the House but is set to raise basic pay for troops in January by 5.2 percent, the biggest hike in 22 years.

The pay increase was one item

to which lawmakers in the Senate and House agreed. The chambers this year passed starkly different versions of the defense bill, with the House padding its legislation with divisive social issues. Those provisions were largely stripped out after months of bipartisan negotiations.

"I'm pleased the final version of the NDAA has many of the strongest provisions of the Senate's original bill," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said in remarks before the vote. "We'll give our service members the pay raise they deserve."

Junior troops struggling with finances could see additional benefits under a measure that

allows the Defense Department next year to give a monthly bonus to ranks E-6 and lower.

A Republican effort in the House to give the same service members a 30 percent raise was left out of the final defense bill. Other conservative priorities that included overturning the Pentagon's travel and leave policy for troops seeking abortions and other reproductive health care were also scrapped.

Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, tried to resurrect a proposal to end the abortion access policy on Tuesday but was unsuccessful. Republican opposition to the policy led to a 10-month blockade of senior military promotions by Sen. Tommy Tuberville,

R-Ala., that Ernst played a role in ending this month.

Republicans said they were proud of the provisions that they were able to push through into the final defense bill, most notably the reigning in of the Pentagon's diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

"I'm pleased that this year's NDAA takes measures to keep our military's focus on war fighting and not the dissemination of woke ideologies by Pentagon bureaucrats," said Sen. John Thune, R-S.D.

The bill is "laser-focused" on threats the U.S. faces, including strategic competition with China
see **Pay Raise**, page 8

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Veterans News

'My savings were drained': Veterans' pensions and benefits are a target for fraud, feds warn

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Defense Department taking action with Warfighter Brain Health Initiative

by Ken Cornwell
MHS Communications

The Defense Department is committed to focusing on warfighter brain health. Some DOD actions include monitoring service members, instituting injury prevention safety measures, and continuing to provide innovative brain injury treatments.

“A top priority for the DOD is taking care of our people,” said Dr. Lester Martinez-Lopez, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. “This priority includes promoting brain health and countering traumatic brain injury in all its forms. As the military community’s understanding of brain health has evolved over the years, the department’s senior leaders recognized the need to develop a departmentwide comprehensive strategy and plan to address these issues.

“The Warfighter Brain Health Initiative is a coordinated effort between operational and medical communities and its critical focus is optimizing the brain health of the warfighter and actively leading the way forward.”

DOD is in its first year of implementing the Warfighter Brain Health Initiative, according to Kathy Lee, director, warfighter brain health policy.

“In 2022, we finalized all the



Ensign Rima McComas fires a Mark 2 40 Bravo (7.62mm) machine gun during a weapons training event aboard USS Monterey (CG 61) Jan. 18, 2021. U.S. Navy photo by MCSN Chelsea Palmer

strategy and actions to include capturing joint requirements so that we had one master roadmap for the department. Now in 2023, we have moved out with safety information and will continue to share more as we further our understanding of brain threats, injuries, and effects on brain health.”

Brain injury is a care and research area DOD has been leading since the start of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. DOD recognized a need to expand its efforts beyond brain injury to better understand and address brain threats, which includes blast overpressure.

According to the DOD, blast overpressure is the sudden onset of a pressure wave from explosions occurring with the use of shoulder-carried artillery and heavy armor in both training and deployment, in breaching buildings and from improvised explosive devices.

“Research has furthered our understanding that blast exposure derives from both enemy action in combat and from training on our own weapons and tactics. Experiences by service members in recent conflicts and training environments illuminated concerns related to repetitive subconcussive blast exposures and effects on brain health.”

“We needed to address threats in holistic and comprehensive ways and started looking at cognition as the main indicator of brain health.”

The Warfighter Brain Health Initiative includes significant efforts to address blast overpressure.

“We have been focusing on identifying threats in our environment and better understanding impacts on brain health so that we can protect troops through their entire careers,” said Lee.

DOD launched 26 health and performance studies as part of Section 734, also called the Blast Overpressure Studies.

“Section 734 had three elements that we needed to address,” said Lee. “These three areas include: identifying and monitoring blast overpressure, making sure each service member has documentation of these events, and providing safety measures to help avoid unnecessary exposure to blast.”

The studies included monitoring, documenting, providing safety protocols, and establishing mitigation actions. The team also investigated weapons that may cause blast overpressure.

“One of the things we did early on was to codify a list of 15 tier-one weapons that the military departments told us were used most often and by those

with higher risk occupational specialties,” said Lee.

“We categorized 15 weapon systems and found out everything we could about them in terms of blast overpressure and brain effects. We also looked at how the duration and frequency of use affects an individual warfighter.

“We were able to see what the symptoms reports were, and what type of cognitive or thinking changes occurred. This type of work had been done before but at looking at lung and hearing issues not on brain health effects.”

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3622388/>

New BAH rates take effect Jan. 1

by David Vergun
DOD News

Basic allowance for housing, or BAH, rates for 2024 will increase by an average of 5.4 percent. The new rates, which are paid to all U.S.-based active-duty members of the uniformed services when government quarters are unavailable, take effect Jan. 1.

“The proposed 5.2 percent basic pay increase plus the 5.4 percent increase in the basic allowance for housing build upon DOD’s support of military members and their families. These increases ensure the military compensation package remains strong and competitive with the private sector and supports the economic security of our service members and their families,” said Jeri Busch, DOD’s director of military compensation policy.

BAH is a valuable component of the overall pay package and is designed to help offset the rental housing expenses service members may face when living off base in local communities. BAH rates are aligned with the housing costs of civilians with comparable incomes to each pay grade (with and without dependents) to ensure the military community can afford to rent adequate, suitable and available homes in safe neighborhoods, wherever and whenever they may be assigned,” said Kevin Scott, a

housing economist within DOD’s Military Compensation Policy Directorate.

“The Department pays about \$27.9 billion in BAH disbursements to over 1 million service members each year,” he said.

“Considering the large footprint and wide-ranging impact of BAH on the well-being of military families, the department is committed to ensuring BAH data collection and housing estimation processes are driven by industry-leading data sources, innovative methodologies and proven quality assurance techniques,” Scott said.

The 2024 BAH rates were determined directly from verified local housing listings collected in about 300 housing markets, including densely populated metropolises, suburban and rural duty stations, he said.

The BAH rate-setting process relies on a wide variety of data sources that include:

- U.S. Census Bureau survey data
- Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index
- Industry-leading commercial subscription rental cost databases
- Trusted online rental listing websites with verified listings
- Local market expertise from the

services and local military installation housing offices

Housing data include median market rents for a variety of housing sizes. Electricity, heat and water/sewer are also averaged in the computation.

BAH rates are then calculated for each pay grade, both with and without family members, based on the cost of adequate housing for civilians with incomes comparable to each service member pay grade grouping. The goal is to obtain high-quality, accurate, current-year housing cost data.

An integral part of the BAH program is the provision of individual rate protection to all members. No matter what happens to measured housing costs – including the out-of-pocket expense adjustment – an individual member who maintains uninterrupted BAH eligibility in each location will not experience a BAH rate decrease unless the member receives a reduction in paygrade or change in dependency status. This ensures that members who have made long-term commitments in the form of a lease or contract are not penalized if the area’s housing costs decrease, according to the Allowance Division.

Read more at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3617400/>.

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Ryder gives more detail on how Operation Prosperity Guardian will work

by Jim Garamone
DOD News

Houthi attacks on vessels transiting the Red Sea are attacks on the international community and the international community is coming together to defend against the missiles and drones aimed at their vessels, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder at a Pentagon news conference Dec. 21.

The press secretary detailed how Operation Prosperity Guardian will work and called on the Houthis, an Iranian proxy group, to cease targeting international commerce.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III announced the operation during a trip to the Middle East that ended last night. The secretary met with leaders in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Israel during the trip. "The secretary emphasized the strong and enduring partnership between the United States and his key partner nations towards furthering our shared goals of security and stability throughout the Middle East region," Ryder said.

Austin discussed the importance of freedom of navigation

in international waterways and the threat the Houthi attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea pose to world commerce. Between 10 and 15 percent of global shipping flows through the Red Sea, "and these attacks are impacting global trade and commerce, negatively impacting the economies of nations around the world and costing commercial shipping firms billions of dollars," Ryder said.

In Bahrain, Austin announced Operation Prosperity Guardian. The operation is a new multinational security operation under the umbrella the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of Task Force 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea.

Austin further convened a virtual ministerial from Bahrain with ministers, chiefs of defense and senior representatives from more than 40 countries as well as representatives from the European Union and NATO to discuss the increased threat to maritime security in the Red Sea.

Austin used the forum to highlight the effects of the Houthi attacks and called on the representatives to act collec-

tively. The nations must come together "to address this issue collectively, emphasizing that this is an international problem that requires an international response," Ryder said.

There have been solid results: To date more than 20 nations have signed on to participate, Ryder said. "In the days ahead, the United States will continue to consult closely with our allies and partners who share the fundamental principle of freedom of navigation, and we expect to see the coalition continue to grow," he said.

The operation is a global answer to an international issue and the United States will continue to "work with this coalition of the willing where countries will be able to contribute what they feel that they can," Ryder said. Some of these contributions are military assets like ships and aircraft and other contributions include staff and other types of support.

"It's very important to understand that the Houthis aren't attacking just one country, they're really attacking the international community," Ryder said. "They are attacking the economic well-being and prosperity of nations

around the world. So in effect, they really become bandits along the international highway that is the Red Sea."

To further this analogy, the forces assigned to Operation Prosperity Guardian, will serve the highway patrol in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden "to respond to and assist as necessary commercial vessels that are transiting this vital international waterway," the general said. "It's a defensive coalition meant to reassure global shipping and mariners that the international community is there to help with safe passage."

The area is large, roughly the distance between Boston and Washington, D.C., and the operation will work to assure safe passage all along the way.

"Last thing I'd say on this is that the Houthis need to stop these attacks, and they need to stop them now," Ryder said. "That's clear and simple. They really need to ask themselves if they've bitten off more than they can chew, when it comes to taking on the entire international community and negatively impacting billions and billions, billions of dollars in global trade, economic prosperity and international law."

Top 5

- Army to field new rifle, machine gun and optic in 2024
- Fat Leonard, fugitive in Navy bribery case, now facing extradition
- U.S. Army to trim Black Hawk helicopter fleet



EARLY BIRD BRIEF

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- Air Force awards 12 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 4 Bronze Stars for Kabul airlift (see page 4)

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- U.S. soldier suspected of injuring German police officers

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- Tech from Navy's drone task force could support Operation Prosperity Guardian

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Air Force

- U.S. flies bombers for joint drills with South Korea, Japan
- Air Force OTS celebrates first graduates of 'transformational' new program
- Air Force automatically extends enlisted time in grade by two years (see page 5)

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Air Force awards DFCs, Bronze Stars for Afghanistan withdrawal heroics

by **Corey Dickstein**
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force will award one dozen airmen Distinguished Flying Crosses and four more Bronze Star Medals for their efforts during the chaotic 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, service officials said.

Air Mobility Command approved those honors last month in a final awards board for the evacuation alongside 208 Air Medals and 73 Meritorious Service Medals for airmen

who participated in Operation Allies Refuge, the service announced Dec. 20. The awards will be presented to maintainers, loadmasters, aircraft security forces, aeromedical evacuation personnel and tanker aircrews, who joined hundreds of other Air Force troops cited for their efforts to remove thousands of Americans, Afghans and allies from Kabul in the final days of the war.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is a valor decoration

for heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight. Many of those receiving the honor are joining other members of their crews, including pilots, who had already been awarded the DFC for evacuation actions, according to the Air Force.

Most of the other medals announced this week include combat "C" devices, showing the honors were earned under combat conditions, the service said. One of the three Bronze Stars includes a "V" device for valor, the fourth highest award for battlefield heroics.

The Air Force did not provide names of recipients or their units this week, saying that information would be released later.



Air Force loadmasters and pilots assigned to the 816th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron load passengers aboard an Air Force C-17 Globemaster III in support of the Afghanistan evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul on Aug. 24, 2021. U.S. Air Force photo by Donald R. Allen

Air Force Gen. Mike Minihan, the commander of Air Mobility Command, in a statement called the honors "long overdue."

"I am proud to recognize another group of mobility airmen who accomplished heroic feats two years ago," he said. "There

is no clearer evidence that airmen will always be the magic."

Aircrews worked around the clock in August 2021 to remove more than 124,000 people from Afghanistan as the Taliban capped a lightning-fast offensive to take over much of the country, including Kabul. The aircrews flew people from Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport, where thousands more spent days crowded around the small airport in Taliban-controlled land trying to leave Afghanistan.

On Aug. 26, 2021, an Islamic State suicide bomber set off a blast at the airport's Abbey Gate killing nearly 200 people in the crowd, including 13 U.S. service members.

U.S. military officials have awarded hundreds of honors to troops who served in the evacuation effort. The latest round of Air Force awards could be the final tranche for efforts among airmen because the authorities to grant those awards expired Nov. 30, a service spokeswoman said.

Last month, the Air Force awarded eight Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Bronze Star Medals, 229 Air Medals and 98 Meritorious Service Medals for those who supported evacuation efforts. Those awards were determined by an earlier awards board.

USS John L. Canley to commission in San Diego

Future USS John L. Canley (ESB 6) will join the active fleet Feb. 17, with a commissioning ceremony at Naval Air Station North Island. The first of its name, the ship honors Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. (Ret.) John L. Canley, Ret., who was awarded the Medal of Honor 50 years after his actions during the Battle of Hue City. Canley served as Company Gunnery Sergeant, Company A, First Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division in the Republic of Vietnam from Jan. 31 to Feb. 6, 1968. Sgt. Maj. Canley passed away in Bend, Oregon May 11, 2022. On Nov. 10, 2020, then Secretary of the Navy Kenneth J. Braithwaite announced that ESB 6 would be named USS John L. Canley to honor a man who exemplified all that has made our service strong and our Nation thrive. The ship's sponsor is Patricia Sargent, Canley's daughter. ESB 6 will be the newest commissioned Expeditionary Sea Base and the sixth ship in the expeditionary mobile base platform. ESB 6 is a highly flexible platform used across various military operations. When commissioned, the ship will be employed as a mobile sea-based asset. It will be a part of the critical access infrastructure supporting the deployment of forces, equipment, supplies, and warfighting capability.

Total Battle Force	Deployed	Underway
291 USS 232, USNS 59)	105 (USS 71, USNS 34)	52 (41 Deployed, 11 Local)

These are approximate positions of the Navy's deployed carrier strike groups & amphibious ready groups throughout the world as of Dec. 18, 2023, 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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Places of Worship

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'My savings were drained': Veterans' pensions and benefits are a target for fraud, feds warn

by Linda F. Hersey
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Self-employed contractor Brian Orr, an Army veteran from Colorado, was installing wood floors at a client's home when he got a call Nov. 22 from someone claiming to be a local law enforcement officer.

The caller identified himself as Sgt. Brian Collins of the Douglas County Sheriff's Office and demanded Orr pay back a \$20,900 Small Business Association loan or face jail time.

An arrest warrant had been issued, according to the caller, who forwarded an official-looking stamped document from the "U.S. Court in the District of Colorado" with Orr named as defendant.

Orr said he rushed to pay back a government loan that was not overdue and then kept transferring cash — hundreds of dollars at a time — via a bitcoin ATM as instructed by the caller.

"I panicked. I did not want to go to jail," said Orr, a 46-year-old single parent with a teenage son.

Orr made four transactions totaling \$17,500 in 24 hours, from Nov. 22-23.

Even after Orr made the payments, the calls continued. He said he was told that unless he covered the difference, he would be "re-manded" by the court to jail.

"I didn't have the money. I decided to turn myself in," Orr said. He drove to the county sheriff's office in Castle Rock, where the authorities informed him that he was the victim of a scam.

Veterans and military retirees are a common target for fraud and identity theft because of their benefits, according to the Federal Trade Commission.

"Veterans should know that imposters are reaching out by phone, e-mail, text or social media message. The scammers pretend to be someone legitimate like your bank, a government agency, or even a friend or loved one," said Carol Kando-Pineda, a FTC attorney in the division of consumer and business education.

The Department of Veterans

Affairs is also warning veterans and their families to take extra precautions during the holidays as scammers might try to take advantage of people through fraudulent charities that steal money from donors who are led to believe they are giving to legitimate organizations.

More so, with the flow of millions of dollars to veterans through the recently approved PACT Act, the VA said scammers are looking for ways to steal the payments, which include fraudulent offers to make the claims and complete the paperwork on behalf of the veterans.

"The police did not seem surprised at all," Orr said about the scam. "But they and the bank said that the chances of me getting the money back are zero."

He had saved the receipt codes for the transactions, but the money moved through anonymous accounts that would be difficult to track.

"My savings were drained," Orr said. "I had enough money left to pay the rent."

The experience shook his sense of safety and security, he said.

"I thought the system would protect me somehow," Orr said. "I just don't pick up the phone anymore when I don't recognize the number. I was violated in my home, in front of my family, when I answered those calls."

Veterans and military retirees filed nearly 300,000 fraud reports with the FTC from 2019 through Sept. 30, 2023. Their losses totaled \$842 million.

Veterans are attractive targets because they have "earned access to valuable benefits" in the form of pensions and disability payments.

- Carol Kando-Pineda

Active-duty service members, by contrast, filed roughly 30,000 reports of fraud during the same time for \$142 million in losses, the FTC reported.

In 2021, military consumers reported \$267 million in losses

from fraud, according to the FTC. In 2022, military consumers reported \$414 million in losses - a 55 percent increase.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough held an inaugural meeting Tuesday of a special task force to address scams perpetuated against veterans.

"Veterans face particularly high risks for fraud with the median loss for veterans from fraud 44 percent higher than other civilians," the VA reported.

The agency is setting up a permanent office to coordinate prevention and responses to predatory and fraudulent activities that target veterans' benefits.

Topping the list of fraud complaints reported by the military community are "imposter scams," similar to the demands for payment that Orr had from a caller posing as a law enforcement officer.

In Orr's case, information about his federal Payroll Protection Program loan, also known as PPP, was available online, identifying

him and his business — Orr's Flooring of Castle Rock.

"I thought my loan was forgiven through the bank," he said. "I was working a lot and did not bother to check up on whether the calls were legit until it was too late."

"The scammer sounded authoritative and used personal information, including the exact amount of the loan that Brian received in the past, to convince him that this was no scam," said James Watson-Howatt, a friend who organized a Go Fund Me page to help Orr cover his losses.

The Douglas County Sheriff's Office posted a warning on social media after reports by Orr and at least one other resident targeted by thieves posing as police officials.

"Criminals are making the rounds again, impersonating members of our office. Remember, we will never call you looking for you to resolve a situation by paying us money," the sheriff's office posted this month on X, formerly Twitter.

Janine Satterfield Williamson of Virginia is advocating for stronger banking safeguards to stem financial fraud after her uncle, a Navy veteran, was defrauded of more than \$3.5 million.

Her lawsuit against Wells Fargo and the Navy Federal Credit Union are before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Va., involving a series of bank transfers by 76-year-old Larry Cook to foreign bank accounts in a wire fraud scheme.

Cook, who had suffered a stroke that left him cognitively impaired, made dozens of wire transfers in 2020 and 2021 prior to his death, the lawsuit states. His niece discovered the transfers when she was settling his estate.

She wants to see tighter regulations to protect consumers.

"Thieves target money, and veterans have money," Satterfield said, referring to veterans' pensions and benefits. "The military lives and breathes protection of its citizens every day. Shouldn't the bank or credit union do the same for its clients?"

Career and Education

After tough year, military recruiting is looking up

by Jim Garamone
DOD News

It's no secret that 2023 was a tough year for military recruiting, but that situation is looking up, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder during a news conference Dec. 21.

Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, said recruiting will remain challenging, but the services are adapting to the challenging environment and there's reason to be optimistic.

Last fiscal year, only the Marine Corps and the Space Force made their recruiting goals.

Still, there are concerns. Only 23 percent of young people between 17 and 24 even qualify to join the military. Even fewer have expressed the "propensity" to enlist, officials said.

Also working against the recruiting environment is the fact that the military is smaller and in fewer places. Many young people do not know anyone who has enlisted and they do not see service members in their communities or even on a regular basis.

The services are responsible for staffing the force, and they have tried new ways and methods to attract recruits. The COVID-19 pandemic handcuffed military recruiters who were not able to have "the face-to-face kind of communication that is absolutely essential to recruiting efforts," Ryder said.

That is changing, and military recruiters are making the contacts needed to enlist personnel. "You're seeing the services look at many different types of ways to get out and engage with today's youth, as far as highlighting the opportunities that

military service and the benefits that it can provide," Ryder said.

The Army has a program to help recruits qualify for enlistment, and the service works with potential enlistees to meet the enlistment standards. Army officials said 95 percent of those in the program have successfully completed it.

The Air Force has aviation camps where young people get to experience life in the service and the various aviation jobs available to them, Ryder said.

"So, the services continue to be very active and creative in looking at how we can communicate with the public that we serve," the general said.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III has said that the services didn't get into this recruiting situation overnight, and it will take time to correct. "But we are confident that we will continue to see those numbers increase, and it's something that we'll, obviously, continue to work very hard at," Ryder said.

DOD and the services are also working to educate the public about the military. This can be done at airshows, parades, sporting events, base tours and more, Ryder said.

"There are many different ways for people to learn about the military," he said. "But the analysis has shown that at the end of the day, it's a conversation with someone. Billboards and advertisements are important, but at the end of the day it's the conversation about, tell me more about it. What does this mean? What does this look like?"

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3625464/>

Air Force automatically extends enlisted time in grade by 2 years

by Jonathan Snyder
Stars and Stripes

For fiscal year 2024, the Air Force, hoping to retain more of its experienced airmen, has automatically raised the maximum number of years enlisted members may serve at a given rank.

Eligible airmen may serve an additional two years without a promotion before they're forced to exit the service, according to an Air Force spokeswoman. The maximum time an enlisted airmen may spend in a given rank is called high year of tenure.

The Air Force high year of tenure extensions apply to enlisted grades of airman basic through senior master sergeant to keep experienced service members in the ranks and keep the Air Force mission ready, Air Force spokeswoman Master Sgt. Deana Heitzman told Stars and Stripes by email Dec. 8.

The fiscal year 2024 Air Force high year of tenure program is the same as it was in fiscal year 2023, which is an extension up to 24 months, Heitzman said.

"The key change is [high year of tenure] is automatically extended up to 24 months for those it applies to," she said.

This automatic extension will affect fewer than 2,000 airmen, Heitzman said.

Service members of ranks airman basic through airman 1st class may stay in for 10 years without promotion before they're forced out of the Air

Force, senior airmen have 12 years, staff sergeants 22 years, technical sergeants 24 years, master sergeants 26 years and senior master sergeants 28 years.

The Air Force will evaluate the program in late fiscal 2024 before deciding if it should continue into fiscal 2025, Heitzman said. The fiscal year begins Oct. 1.

The Air Force last changed its high year of tenure program in 2019 to permit senior airmen through technical sergeants to serve longer.

Service members who do not wish to serve longer in their current rank may opt out of the automatic extensions, Heitzman said.

Airmen with a high year of tenure now through Sept. 30, 2024, who intend to separate on their original date, must apply to opt-out and receive approval prior to their separation date or Feb. 16, 2024, whichever comes first, she said.

Last year the Air Force announced plans to promote fewer junior and mid-grade non-commissioned officers as a means of rebalancing its force structure.

"The Air Force is taking proactive action to fully leverage our Congressionally authorized end strength and [high-year of tenure] extensions maximize the retention of experienced talent to enhance mission effectiveness," she said.

https://www.stripes.com/branches/air_force/



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McLane assumes command of Naval Surface Forces

by Lt. Zachary Anderson

Commander, Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet

SAN DIEGO – Vice Adm. Brendan McLane relieved Rear Adm. Yvette Davids as commander of Naval Surface Forces and Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet, during a change of command at Naval Base San Diego with USS *Jack H. Lucas* in the background, Dec. 21.

McLane assumes his new position following his tour as Commander, Naval Surface Force, Atlantic.

“We’re a privileged few who get to serve in our nation’s Surface Force, and it is our calling to ensure we remain the most ready and lethal force ever to sail the seven seas,” said McLane. “It does seem like just yesterday I was the chief of staff here under Admiral Rowden’s inspiring leadership and after my service in SURFLANT, I can say that I live and breathe man, train, and equip. I relish, and am grateful, for the opportunity to lead the Surface Force. I look forward to serving alongside all of you.”

A 1990 graduate of the Naval Academy, McLane’s career spans more than three decades with distinguished service in

a variety of roles both ashore and afloat. While in command of USS *Carney* (DDG 64), his ship earned the Battle E and Battenberg Cup and deployed with the *Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group to U.S. 5th Fleet. In major command, McLane served as Destroyer Squadron 50 commodore, as well as commander of Task Force 55 and Coalition Task Force 152 in the U.S. 5th Fleet.

Ashore, McLane served as Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet chief of staff, ran the Israel Desk in the J5 directorate of U.S. European Command, and directed the U.S. 6th Fleet Maritime Operations Center. As a flag officer, he led Navy Recruiting Command, Carrier Strike Group 10 (CSG-10) and was the 60th commander of Naval Surface Force, Atlantic.



Vice Adm. Blake L. Converse returns the salute of Vice Adm. Brendan R. McLane, right, as he relieves Rear Adm. Yvette Davids during a change of command ceremony. U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Claire M. DuBois

Following the end of her tenure as acting SWO Boss, Davids will head to Annapolis where she will become the first female superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy. Davids is a 1989 graduate of the service academy where she majored in oceanography and was a member of the sailing team.

During her time as Naval Sur-

face Forces acting commander, Davids oversaw a continued push for modernization and advancement with the commissioning of *Jack H. Lucas* (DDG 125), the first Flight III Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, a live-fire demonstration of an SM-6 missile utilizing a containerized launch system aboard USS *Savannah* (LCS-26), and the establishment of Surface Readiness Groups in Norfolk and here.

Culturally, Davids promoted connectedness throughout the Force. During a leadership discussion at this year’s culture of excellence symposium, Davids emphasized the importance of building warfighting teams based on mutual respect to foster an optimal environment for

readiness, growth, and sustained excellence.

“Serving as SWO Boss and leading the men and women of our Surface Force has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career,” said Davids. “I salute all Surface Warriors and their families for their faithful service and their dedication to building strong warfighting teams that are ready to do our nation’s bidding.”

On Nov. 30, Davids hosted an all-hands call aboard *Comstock* to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the repeal of Title 10 U.S.C. Section 6015 that previously barred women from combatant ships - a fitting milestone for the career surface warfare officer who deployed in support of Op-

erations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom and whose most recent operational assignment was as Carrier Strike Group 11 (CSG-11) commander.

“Women who serve our Navy today follow in the wake of courageous pioneers who broke glass ceilings and blazed trails that transformed our Navy and created the opportunities for women to serve our Navy in equal standing alongside men,” said Davids. “Today, all the doors of opportunity are open to women who are leading at every level in our Navy.”

The mission of CNSP is to man, train, and equip the Surface Force to provide fleet commanders with credible naval power to control the sea and project power ashore.

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Hospital ship *Mercy* arrives in Palau for Pacific Partnership 24-1

by Lt.Cmdr. Cheryl Collins
PALAU - Hospital ship USNS *Mercy* arrived Dec. 21 in the Republic of Palau to begin the fourth mission stop of Pacific Partnership 24-1, the largest annual multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

preparedness mission conducted in the Indo-Pacific region. This marks the sixth time Pacific Partnership has come to Palau, the previous visit was in 2022.

At the invitation of host nations, Pacific Partnership's mis-

sion partners will conduct tailored humanitarian civil action preparedness activities in areas such as engineering, disaster response, public health, and host nation outreach events.

This year's mission will feature military personnel from Australia, Japan, United Kingdom, Germany, and New Zealand. The Pacific Partnership 24-1 mission has completed stops in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia. Its final mission stop will be in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia.

"The United States is committed to the people of Palau as we share deep ties and a long-

standing friendship that spans decades", said U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Palau, Joel Ehrendreich. "Pacific Partnership allows us to work shoulder-to-shoulder as friends and partner nations to collectively grow our ability to quickly respond to disasters or medical emergencies, if and when that comes to the Indo-Pacific region."

Mercy will anchor off the state of Koror with a team of more than 750 civilian crew members and uniformed military members.

During the Palau mission stop, the Pacific Partnership team will conduct community health engagements in Koror, Peleliu, and Babeldaob, which include

vision screenings, glasses and sunglasses dispensing, dentistry, and chronic disease screening. These services are free and open to the public on a first come,

first serve basis. The U.S. Embassy Koror Facebook page will provide updated information. Follow *Mercy* on <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/>.



Rear Adm. Yvette Davids, acting Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet and Capt. Gil Clark, inaugural commander of Naval Surface Group Southwest, cut the ribbon during the command establishment ceremony. Official U.S. Navy photo

Naval Surface Force establishes Surface Readiness Group in SD

by Commander
Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet
SAN DIEGO - Naval Surface Forces established Naval Surface Readiness Group (SURFGRU) Southwest at Naval Base San Diego Dec. 14.

The ceremony marked the formal establishment of SURFGRU Southwest, which joins Surface Readiness Groups previously established in Japan, Hawaii, Norfolk and Mayport. SURFGRUs will ultimately operate from each fleet concentration area with a mission focus on force generation and preparing more, ready ships for on-time maintenance execution.

"The establishment of Surface Readiness Groups is ultimately about the readiness of our force and achieving our North Star objective of 75 mission capable ships," said Rear Admiral Yvette Davids, Acting Commander, Naval Surface Forces. "These commands will help prepare the Surface Force for the high-end fight."

The North Star goal is an objective set by the Naval Surface Force to have 75 mission-capable ships available on any given day.

The establishment provides a single accountable commander with a team of readiness and train-

ing experts that focus on force generation in support of operational commanders.

"This investment is for our ships to become more ready and more lethal," said Capt. Gil Clark, inaugural commander of Naval Surface Group Southwest. "That lethality comes from the readiness we will generate?readiness allowing our ships to answer any call our nation and our leaders require."

SURFGRUs will play an integral role in achieving North Star 75 goal by spearheading maintenance for ships on the waterfront during their workups. This force generation focus by SURFGRUs will enable destroyer and amphibious squadrons to focus more on operations and tactics. This delineation of responsibility will ultimately provide more effective workup phases for ships, resulting in better prepared Sailors and units for future deployments.

The mission of CNSP is to man, train, and equip the Surface Force to provide fleet commanders with credible naval power to control the sea and project power ashore.

For more news from Naval Surface Forces, visit www.surfpac.navy.mil/ and www.dvidshub.net/unit/COMNAVSURFPAC.

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PARTNERSHIP AT WORK Cmdr. Gale Goodlow, an anesthesiologist, carries a patient following surgery at Pohnpei (Micronesia) State Hospital as part of Pacific Partnership 2024-1 Dec. 18, 2023. The successful surgery restored the patient's hearing. Now in its 19th iteration, Pacific Partnership is the largest annual multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief preparedness mission conducted in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Jacob I. Allison



LINCOLN TOUR University of Louisville Cardinals football team players ride an aircraft elevator during an open ship tour Dec. 24, 2023, aboard aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln prior to the 2023 Holiday Bowl. U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Alonzo Martin-Frazier



PACIFIC SUNBEAM Sunlight hits aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln as it conducts routine operations in the Pacific Ocean, Dec. 6, 2023. U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Clayton Wren

The power to do good: A Marine Corps legal journey

by 2nd Lt. Jorin Hollenbeak
Camp Pendleton

CAMP PENDLETON – Water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, common fact. Water can be placed in a sleeping bag overnight while in sub-freezing temperatures to use body heat as a method of preventing freezing and providing drinkable water, uncommon fact. Experiences teach knowledge in a manner facts cannot, and an uncommon experience is using body heat to preserve water in a drinkable state in real life. Most lawyers may never know or experience this survival technique; however, it's an average Saturday field exercise for Marines.

"I've wanted to be a lawyer ever since I was a kid" said Marine Corps Capt. Katie Berney, Victims' Legal Counsel here, and native of Las Vegas. "Lawyers hold a lot of power in terms of helping people, when you're in trouble you call a lawyer, and I wanted to help people both in and out of the courtroom."

Marine Corps lawyers like Berney embrace an exceptionally demanding lifestyle, earning the pride of being both a Marine and legal professional. However, the legal journey to practice law in the Marine Corps is much more rigorous than in any other branch. Prospective Marine lawyers must attend the same Officer Candidate School and Basic School as all other Marine officers, receiving no special treatment or shortened training cycle. Marine lawyers also become unrestricted line officers upon completion of their training, an honor not bestowed by any other branch of service.

"I chose to become a Marine Lawyer because of their reputation." Said Berney, "In law school I was told by another girl who was a Lawyer in the Army to not go to the Marines because they were crazy, that just sounded like a challenge to me."

Berney also chose to serve in the Marines because Marine lawyers are given the opportunity to grow experience rapidly. The Marine Corps is the smallest branch of service and lawyers that serve within its ranks often get to litigate and experience court at the federal level much faster than their interservice and civilian counterparts.

Berney works as a Victim

Legal Counsel (VLC) officer at Camp Pendleton. VLC officers act as liaisons for victims when communicating with any entity such as NCIS, a prosecutor, or a commanding officer. The VLC holds significant importance in victims legal dialogue, advocating for them and orchestrating solutions to problems that may arise during the legal process. VLCs also prepare victims for court by working with them on what to expect, going through questions they may be asked, and doing dry runs of the court process.

Court experiences can prove exceedingly nerve-racking and traumatic for a victim. Berney works to advocate for victims both before and during trial. Uncomfortable situations may sometimes arise during the court process, such as a prosecutor or defender referencing a victim's sexual history. It is Berney's job to protect victims from non-relevant evidence being brought into trial.

"Half of my time is spent proactively going on the offensive to protect my victims." Said Berney, "The other half is

I MEF Information Group welcomes new sergeant major

by Sgt. Samuel Fletcher
I MEF Information Group

CAMP PENDLETON – Sgt. Maj. Reginald Daniels, the outgoing sergeant major of I Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, relinquished his duties to Sgt. Maj. Theodore G. Ingram III Dec. 22.

Daniels served as the senior enlisted leader for I MIG since March 11, 2022. He helped advance the mission of a unit charged with integrating a legacy force to fight and win in the information environment. He led over 3,100 Marines in his tenure.

Daniels co-led more than 50 MIG Force Preservation Councils, focusing on the holistic approach of mind, body, spirit, post-traumatic growth, spiritual resiliency, and total Marine fitness.

"Sgt. Maj. Daniels is the best command senior enlisted leader I have ever served with or interacted with in my 27-year career," said Master Gunnery Sgt. Sean Nakao, the operations chief of I MIG Headquarters Company. "He is a selfless leader who puts the mission and Marines first."

Ingram III served with Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron-11 as the command senior enlisted



Capt. Katie Berney, a Victims' Legal Counsel officer at Camp Pendleton, poses for a photo at the 22 Area Courtroom Dec. 18. Berney works as a liaison for victims when communicating with entities such as Naval Criminal Investigative Service, prosecutors, or commanding officers, to advocate for victims before and during trial. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Mary Jenni

spent in receive mode, providing information to my clients and ensuring that they fully understand everything. Regardless of which I'm doing, I'm helping people."

Berney finds great fulfillment in helping others as a VLC and accepted career designation, earning a selection to Expedi-

tionary Warfare School. She strives to be more than just a lawyer in uniform, seeking multiple expeditionary law opportunities to further her career and continue helping those in need. Berney's biggest piece of advice for law practitioners both inside and outside of military service is to set the example, do more with less, and enjoy it.

leader prior to the ceremony.

"I really look forward to working alongside Col. Osborne and maintaining the honor courage and commitment of the MIG," said Ingram. "I look forward to executing the mission, taking care of the Marines and sustain the readiness of the MIG."

Sgt. Maj. Reginald Daniels, right, passes the non-commissioned officer sword to Col. William Osborne, during the I MIG's relief and appointment. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Samuel C. Fletcher



New assignments for Marks, Meyer

The secretary of the Navy and chief of naval operations announced the following assignments on earlier this Dec. 18:

Rear Adm. (lower half) **Donald W. Marks** is assigned as commander, Naval Surface and Mine Warfighting Development Center, San Diego.

Rear Adm. (lower half) **Richard W. Meyer** is assigned as deputy commander, Third Fleet, San Diego.

In addition, Rear Adm. (lower half) **Michael T. Spencer** is assigned as commander, Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center, Fallon, Nev.

Pay Raise

continued from page 1

and Russia and the danger from Iran, North Korea and violent extremism, said Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Lawmakers worried about China's growing Navy rejected the Pentagon's request to shrink the U.S. fleet, instead authorizing investment in new ships. They also approved the transfer of Virginia-class submarines to Australia as part of a historic security pact that will create a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines to counter China's influence in the Pacific.

The bill expands the U.S. military's presence in the Indo-Pacific region and provides resources for training, advising and building up the capacity of

the military of Taiwan, the island nation that China considers its rightful territory. Ukraine will also continue to receive military support through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a longstanding program that purchases equipment and weapons for Ukraine.

Multiple measures in the bill tackle weapon supply issues caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year. They aim to replenish the Pentagon's stockpiles and help the U.S. maintain "our own state of readiness and the deterrent effect that goes along with it," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

"Simply put, the NDAA will support our troops, strengthen our military readiness and implement a raft of reforms to strengthen national security," he said.

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Drag racing in-person versus on TV — NHRA finals at In-N-Out Burger Pomona dragstrip 2023

AutoMatters™ & More
by Jan Wagner



2023 has been a very good year for many of us whose passion is for motorsports — especially for six-time NHRA Championship runner-up Doug Kalitta who, in a very close final race, defeated Leah Pruett and, only by so doing, secured his first NHRA Top Fuel Championship. So, to wrap up 2023, I will turn to the NHRA season wrap-up: the NHRA Finals at In-N-Out Burger Pomona Dragstrip. Rather than give you a play by play, round by round report on the eliminations that led to the season championships, I'd like to do this from the point of view of a long-time fan of motorsports — especially auto racing. By so doing, I hope to give even casual observers of motorsports some insight into our enjoyment of them. It comes from years of my experience as a passionate fan of motorsports.

A fan can watch motorsports in-person, as a spectator, and on television. While there are pros and cons to both, they provide different experiences. They complement each other.

On Veterans Day weekend, I drove up to Pomona on Saturday and then again on Sunday to cover the NHRA Finals, as an accredited member of the press. The access that provides is about as in-person as a spectator can get. However, other than getting to be on the other side of the fences to take the unobstructed photos of the motorsports events that we then share with you, as well as access to more restricted things like press conferences, you will see that we can — and I do — what any other spectator who has a regular ticket of admission can do.

Of course, that means the visceral experience of watching



the racing. While you may have purchased reserved seating in suites or grandstands, perhaps you just purchased general admission. That's good too because that almost encourages you to walk around the track and experience different vantage points, just like I do. Sure, a seat in a grandstand with a great view of one particular area might well give you opportunities for great views of some of the on-track action and drama, just think what you are missing.

When I cover a race, I walk and walk — often to the point of exhaustion — to seek out different vantage point and take photos from them. If you get your lens really close to a chain link fence and use a lens setting with a very shallow depth of field, the chain links nearly disappear. Combine that with a telephoto lens and you can get some amazing results, often have to use that technique too, if there is no photo hole in the place in the fence where I want to get some shots.

In contrast, taking photos while sitting in the grandstands will not give you the ability to make the safety fences disappear, unless you are sitting so high in the grandstands that you shoot over the fences. Of course, then you will have photos taken from above. For variety, you might want to leave your grandstand seat and walk around the track, so that you can also take

some more head-on shots.

At major motorsports events, there's a lot more to enjoy than just watching the racing, including motorsports and other exhibits, food, beverages, souvenir vendors, autograph sessions, car race prep in the garages and so forth. When you go to a motorsports event, be sure to set aside some time for that, too. I do, and I photograph it extensively. You never know what or who you might see.

Professional television coverage of motorsports events shows you far more of the actual races than you are likely to see when you are there in person. However, what is missing is more than just a small, carefully glimpse into everything else. That is why my favorite way to see a race is to record it on a DVR so that I can watch it after I see it in-person, to see what I missed.

To see official press releases, video and results of the 2023 NHRA Finals at In-N-Out Burger Pomona Dragstrip and more, visit www.NHRA.com.

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. Copyright © 2023 by Jan Wagner — AutoMatters & More #821

Hazards of multitasking: A cautionary tale

Military spouses have masters degrees. Millions shop with Mastercard. Some are masters of disguise. And I wouldn't be surprised if a milspouse is one of the Masters of the Universe.

Anything's possible, but one thing is certain: All military spouses are Masters of Multitasking. It's an expertise that comes from managing the many demands of our unpredictable, mobile lifestyles while our active-duty spouses are away from home.

A typical military spouse will figure out ingenious ways to accomplish two, three, or four tasks simultaneously. Despite the miraculousness of these feats, extreme multitasking can become hazardous duty.

Case in point: Recently, while my Navy retiree husband was away in Connecticut, commuting for work, I needed a few groceries. My tendency to multitask was permanently engrained from our active duty years. "Hmm," I thought, "I'll take my bike to the small grocery store down the street for exercise, and I'll catch up on my audio book during the ride." But like many a masochistic milspouse, I didn't stop there. "You know," I bargained with myself, "Gilligan still needs a walk, so I'll let him run alongside my bike. And I'll bring my afternoon coffee."

Envisioning a lovely half-mile ride to McQuaid's Market, I took off on my pink beach bike with my coffee in the cup holder, my headphones playing an audio book, my purse in the basket, and 10-month old yellow lab, Gilligan, happily running alongside on his retract-

able leash. An unseasonably mild afternoon, the descending sun shone on my face as sipped my coffee and inhaled sea air.

"Chapter fourteen. Tom called Eloise" — the back wheel came to a sudden halt and my earphones were plucked out when Gilligan darted into someone's yard. Somehow, I'd avoided falling when Gilligan's retractable leash became tangled in the chain gasket. While he made a most revolting deposit in the grass, I tugged at the snarled leash until — "SNAP!" — it broke in half, one end slurping up into the spring-loaded handle, never to be seen again.

I bagged up the enormous pile left by Gilly and placed it in the basket before carrying on to McQuaid's Market, holding onto the remaining leash. In the last three blocks, Gilligan jerked toward a squirrel running across the road, a cat on top of a garbage can, and another yellow lab behind a fence — stopping my bike, spilling my coffee, and sending the dog-doo and my purse airborne.

Remarkably, I made it to McQuaid's without doing a faceplant on the pavement, tied Gilly's leash to a cart stand, and commanded him to "stay" while I went inside. Adorably, he cocked his lug head sideways, vaguely remembering what I'd trained him to do. Inside McQuaid's, I wandered the aisles to regain my rattled composure, digressing from my short shopping list and mindlessly buying two large bags of food.

"What a good boy!" I exclaimed, finding Gilligan waiting patiently outside.

The Meat & Potatoes of Life



by
Lisa
Smith
Molinari

"Is this YOUR dog?" an angry voice came from an idling car's window. "Dogs like yours get stolen, you know! You think he'll be here when you return, but then, 'Merry Christmas,' your dog now lives in New Jersey!"

Feeling like a scolded child, I stuffed one grocery bag into the basket with the dog doo, hung the other over the handlebars, and took off with Gilly for home. Just as before, he darted back and forth, investigating whatever caught his attention, while I tried to maintain control in the fading light.

Just as we passed the residence of a pit-mix named "Meatloaf," Gilly yanked one last time, causing his leash to wrap around my back tire and become irretrievably jammed in the gasket. "PHSSSSSSSS!" I heard, as the tire went flat.

With Gilligan still attached to the last three feet of leash trapped in the gasket, I carried my incapacitated pink bike, two crushed bags of groceries, my purse, coffee mug and the dog doo the rest of the way. Sweaty and exhausted, I arrived home in the dark, cut Gilligan's leash loose, and salvaged what I could from the battered bags of food.

I'd accomplished nothing but a helluva workout. In my overzealous attempt to master multitasking, I'd ironically earned the distinction of Master of Disaster.

www.themeatandpotatoesoflife.com

San Diego Outreach
Neil Ash Airport
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Camp Pendleton



Become a USO Volunteer

Volunteers are our greatest asset and the backbone of the USO. Whether helping a soldier with a connecting flight, distributing a Care Package, serving snacks with a smile, providing local information, or "welcoming home" 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?

Visit www.USOVolunteer.org. Once you navigate to the webpage, click on "Volunteer at a USO Center," then click "Continental United States." Next select "California" and then the USO San Diego center nearest to you!

Camp Pendleton USO Programs Include:

USO Transitions: <https://www.uso.org/programs/uso-pathfinder-transition-program>
Want to be better prepared for future success before transitioning from the military? Are you a military spouse looking for new opportunities? The USO Pathfinder® Transition Program extends the USO experience to active duty, Reserve, National Guard and military spouses by offering professional development services throughout the duration of military service as well as in preparation for life post-military.

MilSpouse Connect: Monthly events bringing military spouses together to connect and thrive.
Craft & Coffee: USO Camp Pendleton provides creative outlets for adults and children to create fun, whimsical or serious works of art through a variety of mediums. Signs up happen online and are usually advertised through the USO Camp Pendleton Facebook page.

Command Support: USO is here to support! We often help support command events across Camp Pendleton such as Family days and Morale Days. Commands can request support in a number of different ways, from outdoor games, a kids craft, or even our mobile photo booth. We also can help provide small refreshments. To request support, please email our Center Operations and Programs Manager, Crystal Gates at cgates@uso.org. All requests must be submitted within 30 days and although we try our best, not all requests can be granted.

<https://sandiego.uso.org>

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Lowry Theater - NASNI,
619-545-8479
Bldg. 650

Outside food and beverage are NOT permitted. Debit/credit cards only.

Saturday - December 30
12:50pm "LAST SHOWING"

The Marvels pg13
3pm Napoleon r
6pm Silent Night r

Sunday - December 31

1pm Wish pg
3pm Hunger Games: Songbirds & Snakes

Friday - January 5

6pm Anyone But You r
Saturday - January 6

12:50pm Anyone But You r

3pm "LAST SHOWING" Hunger Games:
Songbirds and Snakes pg13

6pm Napoleon r

Sunday - January 7

1pm Wish pg

3pm Silent Night r

Updates: navylifeweb.com



**Pendleton Theater
and Training Center**

Bldg 1330 Mainside (Across
from Mainside Center)

Saturday, January 6

*SENSORY FRIENDLY

1:30pm *Trolls Band Together (PG)

4pm *Wish (PG)

Naval Base Theater - NBSD,
619-556-5568, Bldg. 71
3465 Senn Rd.

Friday, December 29
6:00 PM - Silent Night (R)

Saturday, December 30
3:00 PM - Napoleon (R)

6:30 PM - Silent Night (R)

Sunday, December 31

12:00 PM - Trolls Band Together (PG)

3:00 PM - Wish (PG)

Friday, January 5
6:00 PM - Anyone But You (R)

Saturday, January 6

3:00 PM - Wish (PG)

6:30 PM - Anyone But You (R)

Sunday, January 7

12:00 PM - Trolls Band Together (PG)

3 PM - Hunger Games: Ballad of Song-
birds and Snakes (PG-13)

Bob Hope Theater 577-4143

MCAS Miramar Bldg 2242

Saturday, December 30

3:00 PM - Napoleon (R)

6:30 PM - Silent Night (R)

Sunday, December 31

12:00 PM - Trolls Band Together (PG)

3:00 PM - Wish (PG)

Friday, January 5

6:00 PM - Anyone But You (R)

Saturday, January 6

3:00 PM - Wish (PG)

6:30 PM - Anyone But You (R)

Sunday, January 7

12:00 PM - Trolls Band Together (PG)

3PM Hunger Games: Songbirds/Snakes

SOCIAL SECURITY MATTERS

I'm 65 and working; Can I collect ex-spouse benefits?

Dear Rusty: I turned 65 earlier this year, and I still work full time. I was divorced four years ago after 38 years of marriage, but my ex-husband has been collecting Social Security for at least 10 years now. Can I start collecting Social Security and still work full time? And can I collect my ex-husband's amount if it is more than mine (and what is the best way to achieve this)? When I went to my local SSA office, they said they had no way of knowing that.

Signed: Working Divorcee

Dear Working Divorcee: Although you are eligible to claim Social Security at age 65, because you are working full time you may wish to wait a bit longer to do so. That's because Social Security has an "earnings test" which applies to anyone who collects benefits before full retirement age, and you have not yet reached yours.

The earnings test imposes a limit on how much you can earn before SS takes away some of your benefits. If you exceed the annual earnings limit (\$22,320 for 2024), Social Security will want back \$1 in benefits for every \$2 you are over the limit and you will need to repay that, usually by having future benefits withheld. If you significantly exceed the limit, you may even be temporarily ineligible to receive SS benefits until you either earn less or reach your full retirement age (FRA) of 66 years and 8 months. So, if your earnings from working will significantly exceed the annual earnings limit (which changes yearly), it's likely that your wisest move would be to wait longer to claim your Social Security. As a bonus for doing so, your monthly payment will have grown and will be higher when you claim later. The earnings test no longer applies after you reach FRA.

Regarding benefits from your ex-husband, you cannot collect his instead of yours. What you may be able to do, when you claim your own benefit, is to get an additional amount which brings your monthly payment up to 50% of his. In order for that to happen, you would need to satisfy the following criteria:

- You are not currently married.
- The personal benefit you are entitled to at your FRA must be less than 50% of your ex-husband's FRA entitlement.

If the above are true, when you claim your own SS retirement benefit you will also get a "spousal boost" to bring your payment up to what you're entitled to as an ex-spouse. The amount of the spousal boost, if you claim Social Security at your FRA, will be the difference between half of his FRA entitlement and your FRA entitlement. If you claim your benefit before your FRA, not only will your own benefit be reduced for claiming early, but the amount of your spousal boost will also be reduced (benefits claimed before FRA are always reduced).

Whenever you decide to claim Social Security, you will be automatically deemed to be filing for benefits from your ex-husband as well (you shouldn't need to apply separately). You've already satisfied the basic criteria of at least 10 years married to get benefits from an ex-spouse and, if you satisfy the above criteria as well, you will be entitled to a spousal boost when you claim. But your current earnings from working full time will likely affect your eligibility to collect Social Security benefits at this time, so waiting until your full retirement age to claim may be your best choice.

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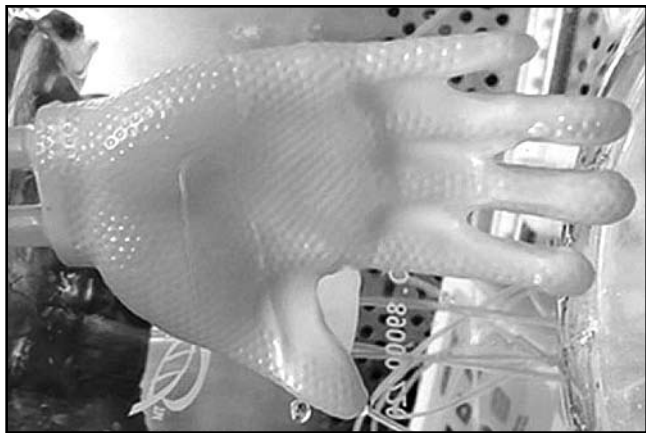
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A bioengineered glove of human skin created for grafting. Alberto Pappalardo and Hasan Erbil Abaci / Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Researchers working on 3D repairs for damaged skin

To repair burns and other skin injuries, surgeons can grow new patches of skin in the lab. But these patches are usually small, and their shapes are limited. Using such patches on complex structures like the hands or face requires lots of cutting and stitching. This can cause damage and scarring.

Researchers are working to find ways to grow 3D skin in the shape of complex body parts. In a new study, a team tested a system to grow skin in the shape of a human hand. They also grew

3D skin grafts to fit the shape of mouse legs. These “wearable” skin grafts are designed to fit on the body like clothing.

The researchers scanned body parts and then used 3D printers to create hollow scaffolds in the desired shapes. Then they grew skin cells on the scaffolds. The cells were bathed in different liquids to encourage the growth of layers similar to natural skin.

After a month, the grafts had a uniform covering of outer skin cells. When tested, the new 3D

skin was stronger than standard flat grafts.

The team finally tested their 3D grafts by transplanting them onto injured mouse legs. The mice regained full functioning of their legs within four weeks.

“Three-dimensional skin grafts that can be transplanted

as ‘biological clothing’ would have many advantages,” says Dr. Hasan Erbil Abaci of Columbia University, who led the study. “They would dramatically minimize the need for stitches, reduce the length of surgeries, and improve the look of repaired skin.”

5 things we learned about Alzheimer’s disease in 2023

(StatePoint) 2023 was a landmark year for Alzheimer’s disease research, including advancements in treatment, risk factors and diagnosis. Here are five significant discoveries made this year:

There are three new approved treatments for Alzheimer’s, with a fourth on the way.

In July, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted traditional approval for Leqembi for mild cognitive impairment due to Alzheimer’s and mild Alzheimer’s dementia. This treatment slows cognitive decline and can help people with early Alzheimer’s maintain their independence.

In June 2021, the FDA granted accelerated approval to Aduhelm for the same purpose. At the Alzheimer’s Association International Conference (AAIC) in July 2023, Lilly reported positive results for a third similar treatment: donanemab. The company expects FDA action in early 2024.

In May, the FDA approved the first treatment for agitation in people with Alzheimer’s — brexpiprazole.

Hearing aids could slow cognitive decline for at-risk older adults.

In the largest clinical trial to investigate whether a hearing loss treatment can reduce risk of cognitive decline, researchers found that older adults with hearing loss cut their cognitive decline in half by using hearing aids for three years.

The intervention included hearing aids, a hearing “toolkit,” and ongoing instruction and counseling. Though the positive results were in a subgroup of the total study population, they are encouraging and merit further investigation.

Blood tests for Alzheimer’s are coming soon.

Blood tests show promise for improving how Alzheimer’s is diagnosed. Advancements reported for the first time at AAIC 2023 demonstrate the simplicity and value to doctors of blood-based markers for Alzheimer’s.

Blood tests are already being implemented in Alzheimer’s drug trials. And they are incorporated into proposed new diagnostic criteria for the disease. Blood tests — once verified and approved by the FDA — would offer a noninvasive and cost-effective option for identifying the disease.

First-ever U.S. county-level Alzheimer’s prevalence estimates.

The first-ever county-level estimates of the prevalence of Alzheimer’s

dementia — in all 3,142 U.S. counties — were reported at AAIC 2023. For counties with a population of more than 10,000 people age 65 and older, the highest Alzheimer’s prevalence rates are in:

- Miami-Dade County, Fla. (16.6%)
- Baltimore City, Md. (16.6%)
- Bronx County, N.Y. (16.6%)
- Prince George’s County, Md. (16.1%)
- Hinds County, Miss. (15.5%)

Certain characteristics of these counties may explain the higher prevalence, including older age and a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic residents, which are communities disproportionately impacted by Alzheimer’s disease. According to the Alzheimer’s Association, these statistics can help officials determine the burden on the health care system, and pinpoint areas for culturally-sensitive caregiver training.

Chronic constipation is associated with poor cognitive function.

Approximately 16% of the world’s population struggles with constipation. This year, researchers reported that less frequent bowel movements

were associated with significantly worse cognitive function.

People in the study with bowel movements every three days or more had worse memory and thinking equal to three years of cognitive aging. These results stress the importance of clinicians discussing gut health with their older patients.

To learn more about Alzheimer’s and dementia research, plus available care and support — and to join the cause or make a donation — visit the Alzheimer’s Association at www.alz.org.

While there is still much to learn about Alzheimer’s, 2023 was a year of discovery, giving researchers and families impacted by the disease hope for the year ahead.

Hats & sunglasses: Protect your eyes from sun damage

Most of us know that too much sun can cause sunburn and skin damage. But did you know that the sun’s ultraviolet (UV) rays can also harm your eyes? UV light is invisible. It can’t be seen by the human eye. But it can still damage your vision.

Sunlight has a mixture of both visible and invisible rays, or waves. The long waves, like radio waves, are harmless to people. But shorter waves like UV light can cause problems.



There are two types of UV rays. UVA can cause wrinkles and aging of the skin. UVB is responsible for sunburns and most UV-related cancers.

Several eye problems have been linked to UV light as well. These include cataracts, which are cloudy areas in the eye’s lens. Cataracts can make vision blurry, hazy, or less colorful. Excess UV light has also been linked to cancers of the eyelid.

Wearing sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat is a safe and easy way to protect your eyes from UV light. To protect your eyes from sun damage, choose sunglasses that block at least 99% of both UVA and UVB rays. These might also be marked with a UV400 rating.

Check your local weather forecast for the UV index, which shows the intensity of UV rays. Even on cloudy days, the UV index can be high and potentially harmful to eyes.

THE ARMED SERVICES YMCA CAMP PENDLETON



OUR MISSION:

For the past 79 years, the Armed Services YMCA Camp Pendleton has enhanced the lives of military members and their families in spirit, mind, and body through programs relevant to the unique challenges of military life.

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- School of Infantry Recreation Center: Single Marine Support
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- Soup



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Questions? Email Lisi Carranza at ecarranza@asymca.org

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