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Mike Stevens
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Our Advantage at Sea is Built on People

BY MCPON (RET.) MIKE STEVENS, NAVY LEAGUE CEO

America's maritime strength has always rested on more than ships, aircraft and advanced technology. At its core, our advantage at sea is built on people, well-trained, well-led, and ready to answer the call. Personnel, training and readiness are not separate priorities; they are a unified foundation that determines whether our sea services can deter conflict, respond in crisis and prevail in war.

The strategic environment we face today is complex and increasingly contested. Our Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine operate across vast distances, often under pressure, and always with the expectation of excellence. Meeting that expectation begins with recruiting and retaining talented individuals who are committed to service. It continues with deliberate, high-quality training that builds competence, confidence and cohesion. And it is sustained through a relentless focus on readiness, ensuring our forces are equipped, maintained and prepared to deploy at a moment's notice.

Training is where potential is transformed into capability. From the first day of boot camp to advanced fleet exercises, our sea services invest in developing warfighters who can think critically, operate effectively in complex environments and lead under pressure. Realistic training, modernized systems and experienced mentorship are essential to building teams that can adapt and win.

Readiness, in turn, is the measure of our commitment. It reflects not only the condition of our platforms, but also the proficiency of our people and the resilience of their families. True readiness requires sustained investment, disciplined execution and an unwavering focus on standards. It is not something we surge to achieve; it must be built and maintained every day.

As we look to the future, we must continue to prioritize the men and women who serve. Technology will evolve but the human element will remain decisive. Our ability to compete and win at sea will always depend on the strength of our people, the rigor of our training and the credibility of our readiness.

In this effort, the Navy League and its members play a vital role. Through informed advocacy, council engagement and steadfast support of our sea services, they help ensure that personnel, training and readiness remain at the forefront of our national priorities. ■

Investing in Personnel, Training and Readiness Pays Off



BY BRETT DAVIS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Sure, capable and expensive weapon systems are nice to have, but the core strength of America's maritime services is in its people, and those people become a capable fighting force through training and maintaining readiness.

In this issue, writer Dan Taylor takes a look at a couple of aspects of this, such as a story on the return of RIMPAC, the biennial Rim of the Pacific exercise, which has grown steadily in size and ambition as the stakes rise in the Indo-Pacific region. Fun fact: China's military used to participate in the multi-nation exercise, but now just closely watches the event that helps prove out interoperability and weapons that may one day be used against it.

Taylor also reports on the use of virtual reality headsets and gaming computers to augment training, which enables Sailors to train where they are, on ships or submarines or in maintenance facilities, rather than moving them to fixed facilities to train. An added benefit is the tools are already familiar to a generation of Sailors who grew up playing video games.

Contributor Erika Fitzpatrick looks at how the Navy is tackling quality of life issues — accessible childcare, recreation and wellness options — that can be as critical to military readiness as training, equipment and munitions.

As housing is as basic a need as any, writer Jamie Pfeiffer takes a look at efforts to modernize the Navy's unaccompanied housing via two pilot projects to collaborate with private developers to deliver better housing for junior Sailors.

These and other developments recounted in this issue may be paying off — Taylor also reports that Navy recruiting in fiscal 2025 gave the service its strongest recruiting year since 2002. ■

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A Sailor participates in a flight quarter evolution aboard the USS Delbert D. Black in support of Operation Epic Fury in the U.S. Central

Command area of responsibility, March 9, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Navy.

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Caught in the Net

DHS Shutdown Fight Entangles Coast Guard as Well

BY MATT REISNER

One of 2026's biggest political stories has been the shutdowns of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the first of which began in late January as part of the debate surrounding the funding of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Largely lost in this debate, however, is the impact of DHS shutdowns on the Coast Guard, which has been housed under DHS since 2003. In testimony to the House Homeland Security Committee in

March 2026, Coast Guard Vice Commandant Admiral Thomas Allan noted the DHS shutdown has put an "unacceptable financial strain" on the Coast Guard and broadly put the branch's critical infrastructure in "imminent danger" of utility shutoffs. While the Coast Guard drew on the \$10 billion in supplemental funding it received from the One Big Beautiful Bill to sustain operations during the shutdown, such funds cannot be used to pay the Coast Guard's

over 9,000 civilian employees, nor can they be used to pay vendors whose contracts are dependent on lapsed funds. The Coast Guard's leadership has also warned that long-lasting government shutdowns could risk delayed payments for servicemembers.

The Coast Guard is unique among the six branches of the U.S. military because it also serves as a law enforcement and regulatory body in addition to its important role in securing national defense.

Its location at the intersection of these three responsibilities has long contributed to the agency's budgetary and organizational uncertainty.

The Coast Guard was originally housed under Department of the Treasury, reflecting its inception as the "Revenue Cutter Service" which was created in 1790 (eight years before the founding of the U.S. Navy) to enforce American tariffs. Under Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, this service expanded its law enforcement and regulatory purview by merging with other government agencies focused on search and rescue, marine inspection and infrastructure maintenance. In 1967, the Coast Guard was brought under the control of the newly created Department of Transportation, owing to its focus on maritime safety enforcement. However, this proved to be an uncomfortable fit as the Department of Transportation largely marginalized the agency and deemphasized its military role, which contributed to the Coast Guard being absorbed by the DHS as part of the government's post-9/11 focus on maritime security.

While the Coast Guard is the only military branch not funded by the Department of Defense, the Pentagon can nonetheless take control of it under certain

Heavy use, old age, maintenance problems, and lack of funds continue to undermine USCG capabilities.

– Heritage Foundation

circumstances. According to 14 U.S. Code § 101, the Navy can assume authority over the Coast Guard or any of its individual units during a war or when directed by Congress or the president during times of peace. Although this has happened several times during the Coast Guard's history (including during the Civil and Vietnam Wars), the last time the entire Coast Guard was brought under naval control was World War II. Still, the specter of a potentially disruptive transfer of the Coast Guard to the Defense Department's control looms large over the branch, underscoring its divided mandate between a warfighting service and its broader day-to-day duties, such as anti-trafficking enforcement, port security, marine safety, search-and-rescue, and preventing illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

The Coast Guard's diverse portfolio and frequent organizational restructuring have contributed to it often getting lost in the bureaucratic shuffle and being underfunded relative to the other branches of America's military.

During the 1990s, the Coast Guard saw its budget shrink relative to inflation while simultaneously being asked to shoulder a larger burden in migrant and drug interdictions. Last May, former Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem testified to Congress the Coast Guard was underfunded by roughly \$21 billion.

The Coast Guard's leadership has been sounding the alarm on fleet readiness for years. In August 2024, then-Vice Commandant Admiral Kevin Lunday described how the Coast Guard frequently removes functioning parts from one ship to replace defective ones on another, functionally taking one ship out of service to ensure that another can sail. The Coast Guard also has only three active icebreakers currently capable of operating in the Arctic, despite needing as many as nine. These difficulties led the Heritage Foundation to conclude in its March 2026 assessment of the Coast Guard, "In the face of competition from near-peer and peer competitors, especially the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Coast Guard remains at a severe disadvantage."

The Coast Guard faces these challenges at a time when it is

The crew of USCGC Seneca (WMEC 906) stand for a photo during a drug offload at Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Sept. 30, 2025. The crew offloaded more than 12,750 pounds of cocaine and marijuana with an approximate street value of \$94.5 million. Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Petty Officer 1st Class Diana Sherbs.



Left: Crews from USCGC Stone (WMSL-758), USCGC Seneca (WMEC-906), USCGC Venturous (WMEC-625) and USS Sampson (DDG-102), along with a Coast Guard helicopter from Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron and an Air Force C-130 work together to combat the illicit flow of drugs and contraband to the United States in the Eastern Pacific Ocean as part of Operation Pacific Viper. Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Ensign Sarah Pearson.

poised to assume an even more important role in America’s national security. The melting of Arctic ice has led to a significant increase in maritime traffic through the region, with 40% more ships entering the Arctic in 2025 compared to 2013. With the Arctic likely to become a hotspot for maritime transit, resource extraction, and geopolitical competition, the Coast Guard will play a leading role in protecting America’s security interests in the region.

Additionally, the Trump administration’s increased focus on counter-

ing drug trafficking in the Western Hemisphere will require the Coast Guard to play an even more active law enforcement role in the region, as evidenced by the branch seizing more than 200,000 pounds of cocaine between early August 2025 and early February 2026 as part of Operation Pacific Viper. The Coast Guard also plays an essential and growing role in monitoring marine environments, including supporting scientific research into how climate change affects the oceans. Finally, with countries like China becoming more expansive in their maritime surveillance operations, the Coast

Guard will play an increasingly critical role in monitoring foreign vessels operating in and near America’s territorial waters.

In recognition of the Coast Guard’s growing importance, the government has already taken several important steps to address its current challenges. In 2025, the branch received a nearly \$25 billion budget investment designed to address its infrastructure and force modernization issues and help implement the Coast Guard’s Force Design 2028 blueprint.

Additionally, the trilateral ICE Pact

agreement between the U.S., Canada and Finland will help address America's icebreaker shortage and result in the Coast Guard acquiring 11 of these invaluable vessels. However, these investments will take time to bear fruit. A 2026 GAO report found the Coast Guard still suffers from significant workforce and vessel shortages which hinder maritime security operations. Similarly, the aforementioned Heritage Foundation report concluded, "Heavy use, old age, maintenance problems, and lack of funds continue to undermine USCG capabilities." Accordingly, funding

gaps caused by the DHS shutdown have only served to aggravate the Coast Guard's existing capability gaps and slow its efforts to address them.

The debate surrounding DHS' funding is an important one and part of a critical national conversation about America's immigration enforcement policies. However, essential military branches cannot be held hostage by political infighting. If Congress is unable to agree on future DHS funding bills, both parties must be proactive to ensure these disagreements do not impact the Coast Guard's important

operations. Should DHS funding be subject to future holdups, Congress should not hesitate to propose and pass a standalone appropriations bill to ensure the funding of the Coast Guard in the interim. The Coast Guard plays a critical role in keeping America's oceans safe. The least Congress can do is make sure they are properly funded while they do so. ■

Matt Reisener is the Senior National Security Advisor for the Center for Maritime Strategy. He holds a Master of Arts in International Relations from the University of Chicago's Committee on International Relations, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Rhetoric & Political Communication from William Jewell College.

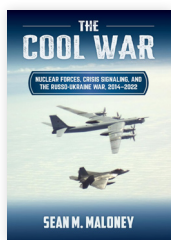
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British Subs in Cold War, Vietnam Electronic Warfare, Cool War, Kamikazes, Defense of Britain, Italian WWI Fleet, Sub vs Capital Ship

BY RICHARD R. BURGESS, SENIOR EDITOR

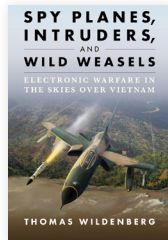
THE COOL WAR: Nuclear Forces, Crisis Signaling, and the Russo-Ukraine War



By Sean M. Maloney. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2025. 383 pages. \$44.95
ISBN: 978-1-68247-689-5

This thought-provoking book is timely, given the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, and focuses on the overshadowing nuclear warfare threat, specifically nuclear signaling, the deliberate maneuvering of nuclear-capable forces to probe, provoke reactions from and deter actions of an opponent. Probing flights of nuclear strike aircraft, surfacing submarines in or near the Arctic icepack, and drone penetrations of bordering European nations are examples. The author asserts Russia has escalated its nuclear signaling to keep off balance and to deter U.S. and European support of Ukraine and to manipulate Western policy. He argues the signaling has deterred direct intervention in Ukraine but is less effective in determining material and morale support for Ukraine.

SPY PLANES, INTRUDERS, AND WILD WEASELS: Electronic Warfare in the Skies of Vietnam



By Thomas Wildenburg. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2025. 306 pages. \$49.95
ISBN: 978-1-68247-669-7

Part of the fascination of the air war over Vietnam is the plethora of new or refined technology deployed to increase lethality and defeat enemy defenses. The North Vietnamese use of Soviet-built SA-2 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) introduced in the war in 1965 a new threat that forced changes in the U.S. aerial bombing campaign. Electronic jamming capabilities became in much higher demand. Anti-radiation missiles were deployed on tactical jets to strike enemy radars and special units were formed to fight the SAMs. Signals intelligence aircraft discerned characteristics of enemy radars and provided strike warning. This highly detailed history will enlighten a reader of advances still in use in warfare 50 years later.

HITLER'S & HIROHITO'S 'KAMIKAZE' FLYING BOMBS: The Axis Manned Suicide Attack Aircraft of WW2

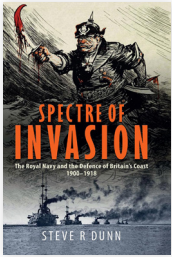


By William Wolf. Yorkshire, U.K. and Philadelphia, 2025: Air World (Pen & Sword Books), 2025. 222 pages. \$39.95

ISBN: 978-1-03611-927-0

As the U.S. Navy and Royal Navy fleets were attacked by Japanese kamikaze aircraft during the last year of World War II, specialized aircraft designed for the role were produced and participated in the strikes. The Yokosuka MXY-7 Ohka was one of these, a manned flying bomb guided by a pilot and carried to a launch point by a G4M bomber. The Ohkas sank or damaged several ships. Less well-known is that Germany also developed a manned flying bomb, the Fieseler 103R, carried aloft by a Heinkel 111 bomber, and placed it in production; it was canceled before it could be used in combat. This highly detailed and illustrated book tells the history of these two bombs.

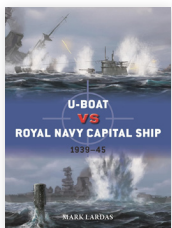
SPECTRE OF INVASION: The Royal Navy and the Defense of Britain's Coast 1900-1918



By Steve R. Dunn. Barnsley, U.K.: Seaforth Publishing (Pen & Sword Books), 2025. 352 pages. \$44.95
ISBN: 978-1-3990-3990-1

Great Britain, which had not been successfully invaded since 1066 A.D., became fearful in the beginning of the 20th century of invasion with the rise of Imperial Germany and especially the growth of the German navy. The fear began even before World War I and grew with the outbreak of the war that raged just across the English Channel. Britain mobilized its subjects to take measures to oppose a prospective invasion and actual naval raids and aerial bombardment. This book broadly covers the measures that Britain, its subjects, and especially the Royal Navy took to defend the nation.

U-BOAT VS ROYAL NAVY CAPITAL SHIP, 1939-45

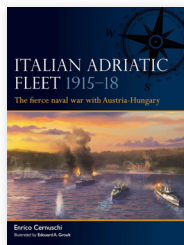


By Mark Lardas. Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2026. 80 pages. \$23.00
ISBN: 978-1-4728-6606-6

Most of the Royal Navy's losses of capital ships during World War II occurred in the first three years of the war, and German submarines

were responsible for five of them — three aircraft carriers and two battleships. The battleship Royal Oak and carrier Courageous were sunk by U-boats soon after the war began. The battleship Barham and the carrier Ark Royal were both torpedoed in the Mediterranean in November 1941, followed by the Eagle in August 1942. Two of the attacking U-boats also were lost in the action. This well-illustrated book covers the ships, submarines and weapons and analyzes the attacks and their impact on the war.

ITALIAN ADRIATIC FLEET 1915-18: The fierce naval war with Austria-Hungary



By Enrica Cernuschi. Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2026. 80 pages. \$23.00 | ISBN: 978-1-4728-7136-7

This book is the first English-language history of the Italian navy in the World War I theater of the Adriatic Sea involving combat with the Austro-Hungarian navy, giving long-deserved attention to this neglected campaign. This theater involved intensive combat with variety of forces, from battleships to patrol craft, with action that included coastal bombardment, coastal raids, blockades, convoys and amphibious operations, and involved use of torpedoes, mines and aircraft as well. This book covers the Italian fleet organization, order of battle and detailed analysis of the naval actions. The reader is given a greater appreciation of this major combat theater.

SECRET WARRIORS: British Submarines in the Cold War



By Paul Brown. Oxford, U.K. and New York: Osprey Publishing, 2026.

272 pages. \$60.00

ISBN: 978-1-68247-6512-0

While its number of submarines was far less than that of the U.S. Navy, the Royal Navy's submarine force was a critical force in the Cold War, both as a national nuclear deterrent force and as a highly professional and capable attack and reconnaissance force for NATO. Operating in conjunction with allied submarines, the RN's submarines were key counters to the large Soviet submarine force and undertook many hazardous missions to understand that force. This superbly illustrated book is organized with a chapter on each class of submarine the RN operated in the Cold War. ■

Please note: Navy League does not distribute books in Ship's Library. Please contact your local bookstore or go online to purchase. Seapower does not review works of fiction or self-published books.



'Be an Officer the Holloway'

NROTC at 100

BY DAVID F. WINKLER

This fall will mark the centennial of the inauguration of the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC) program at Harvard, Yale, Northwestern, Georgia Tech, the University of Washington and the University of California at Berkeley. This initiative occurred thanks to the passage of the Naval Reserve Act of Feb. 28, 1925, which aimed to create a pipeline for junior officer billets that needed to be filled at the various Naval Reserve Centers around the nation.

To provide instruction for the incoming freshmen who applied for the program at those six universities, the Navy assigned officers of "suitable rank" to teach courses in navigation, gunnery and engineering. With the agreement of the hosting universities, these instructors would be given faculty rank and NROTC midshipmen would receive credits for their Navy

Vice Admiral James L. Holloway Jr., chief of naval personnel and deputy chief of naval operations addressing Naval Supply Corps School, Athens, Georgia, graduates, Oct. 11, 1956. Photo credit: Naval History and Heritage Command.

coursework that would count toward graduation.

Students enrolled in those first and subsequent classes received a stipend plus pay during summer training cruises. For the first summer cruise of 1927, third-class midshipmen deployed aboard such battleships as Wyoming and Pennsylvania. Once commissioned into the Naval Reserve beginning in 1930, these junior officers would continue to go to sea with the reserve units they were assigned with, gaining valuable experience that would serve the nation well during World War II.

"Marine Option" midshipmen came into existence in 1932 as the Marines saw the program as an excellent way to commission second lieutenants into their reserve units. One of the first Marines to be commissioned through the program was Leonard F. Chapman Jr. He eventually became the 24th commandant of the Marines from January 1968 to December 1971 during the climactic years of the Vietnam War.

With the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the Navy rapidly expanded the number of NROTC units. At the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 27 NROTC units were spread out at universities across the country. Yet this expansion of the program, along with the decision to commission U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen after three years at Annapolis, would hardly meet the needs of a naval service that was rapidly expanding.

However, the presence of the NROTC units throughout the American academic landscape facilitated the creation of shorter-term officer commissioning programs, such as the V-7 program, in which students with two years of college academic credit could enroll, participate in an indoctrination cruise, and, if deemed worthy, attend "Midshipman School" at Northwestern and Columbia. Harvard, host of one of the first six NROTC units, provided officer indoctrination for doctors, lawyers, accountants, scientists and other professionals who were receiving direct commissions to fill non-line officer billet needs. (A future chief of naval operations, just-commissioned Ensign James L. Holloway III, found himself as a Harvard company instructor where each member of the company outranked him. He survived.)

In the immediate postwar period, despite the rapid demobilization, there was recognition the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Naval Academy would not have the capacity to provide for the needs of the Army, Navy and soon-to-be-formed Air Force. Holloway's

father, having had command of the battleship Iowa, had been promoted to rear admiral and chosen to head Fleet Training Command, Pacific. Had the war continued into 1946 as anticipated, Holloway's mission would have been essential. However, with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrender, Holloway "realized people were about as interested in training as they were in getting a hole in their head because everybody was going to be thinking about getting home."

Holloway was then summoned to come to Washington:

I got back there [and] I found they were in quite a swivet because [former Chief of Naval Personnel, Vice] Admiral [Randall] Jacobs and Jo[seph Warren] Barker, the Dean of Engineering at Columbia University, had sent a proposal to Mr. [James V.] Forrestal that the Naval Academy be converted into a two-year school and accept people at the junior college year level.

Expanding NROTC

Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Admiral Louis Denfeld accepted the proposal could meet the projected Navy and Marine Corps officer requirements for the ensuing years but had concerns. Thus, Holloway was picked to chair a board of leading academics and senior naval officers to review how the Navy procured and educated its officers. This group, "the Holloway Board," recommended expanding the prewar NROTC program to more than 50 colleges and universities.



Marine Corps Commandant General Leonard F. Chapman Jr. at the Christening ceremony for USS Portland (LSD-37) in December 1969. Chapman was one of the first Marines to be commissioned through the NROTC's Marine Option. Photo credit: Naval History and Heritage Command.

Under the Holloway Plan, NROTC units would now cover tuition in addition to a stipend, and graduating NROTC midshipmen would be commissioned into the fleet alongside Naval Academy graduates where they initially incurred a three-year obligation.

In his unpublished memoir, Holloway credited Commandant of Midshipmen Captain Stuart H. "Slim" Ingersoll, who expressed concern the conversion of the Naval Academy into a semi-postgraduate institution would wreck the esprit de corps of the midshipmen and the young officer product: "I think in retrospect it was absolutely right and he really swayed us into that premise almost at once."

Supported by Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, the Holloway Plan also needed legislative support as tuition and other aspects of the program

cost money. With the backing of House Naval Affairs Committee Chair Carl Vinson, the legislation passed through both chambers and on to the White House for President Harry Truman's signature. Worried Truman might veto the legislation as the Army had other ideas about officer procurement, Vice Admiral Denfeld reached out to Truman's legal counsel, Clark Clifford. The brilliant St. Louis attorney had received a direct commission to serve in the Navy during the war as a captain. Clifford arranged for Forrestal and Denfeld to meet with the president and Truman signed the legislation into law.

Not appreciating the backstory, midshipmen attending the Naval Academy at the time, and some alumni, resented the Holloway Plan. They argued midshipmen attending NROTC units would not have the rigors of discipline instilled during plebe year and throughout the four years at Annapolis. One dismissive chant went: "Keep your car, keep your gal, keep your pay — be an officer the 'Holloway'!" Naval Academy graduates in the fleet would quip: "Did you get your commission the hard way or the Holloway?"

How would the Navy seek to quell the resentment? On Jan. 15, 1947, Rear Admiral James L. Holloway Jr. became the 35th Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy. In contrast to the thundering roar after Holloway's predecessor read his orders, Holloway received complete silence after he read his appointing orders. Though still resented by some for his creation of a competing officer



Then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Lisa Franchetti attended the Armed Forces Bowl at Amon G. Carter Stadium in Fort Worth, Texas, in December 2024, to watch the U.S. Naval Academy Midshipmen play the University of Oklahoma Sooners. Franchetti was the first NROTC graduate to hold the Navy's top job. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Lt. Jarred Reid-Dixon.

commissioning program, Holloway would overcome the resentment due to his passion about the institution that once nurtured him. Reflecting a quarter century later, Holloway stated: "I don't think I ever worked any harder at a job." By the time he departed the Naval Academy he had earned the moniker "Lord Jim" from the brigade of midshipmen.

With the Secretary of the Navy authorizing the enrollment of 16 women in 1972, NROTC offered a commissioning option for women that would not be feasible at the U.S. Naval Academy until 1976. In 1992, the program began offering a pipeline for students interested in receiving commissions in the Nurse Corps. Presently midshipmen are enrolled at more than 160 colleges and universities, a logistical feat made possible due to the creation of administrative consortia in metropolitan areas hosting

numerous schools such as Boston, Houston and Atlanta.

Over the decades, the program has produced numerous general officers for the Marine Corps and flag officers for the Navy with a number of NROTC graduates — starting with Chapman — serving as commandant. However, with the Navy, it took much longer to promote an NROTC graduate into its top job with the selection of Northwestern's Lisa M. Franchetti, who relieved Admiral Michael M. Gilday as the Chief of Naval Operations on Aug. 14, 2023. She was officially confirmed by the Senate on Nov. 2, 2023.

Perhaps with NROTC serving as the largest source for commissioned officers for both the Marines and Navy, some rebranding may be in order. Should it be Naval Regular Officers Training Corps? ■

Commander Winkler is the Historian General of the Naval Order of the United States.

Chinese Navy replenishment ship Gaoyouhu departs Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam following the conclusion of Rim of the Pacific 2016. RIMPAC 2016 was the 25th exercise in the series that began in 1971. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Rebecca Wolfbrandt.



All Eyes on RIMPAC

RIMPAC 2026 Arrives as Geopolitical Tensions Grow in Pacific

BY DAN TAYLOR

This summer, more than 30 nations will send warships, aircraft and thousands of Sailors to waters around Hawaii for the 30th iteration of the biennial Rim of the Pacific exercise — the largest RIMPAC in the event's history, and one that arrives at a moment when the geopolitical stakes in the Indo-Pacific have rarely felt higher.

The numbers alone tell part of the story. RIMPAC 2024 brought together 29 nations, 40 surface ships, three submarines, 14 national land forces, more than 150 aircraft and 25,000 personnel. RIMPAC 2026 is expected to exceed that. After the December 2025 mid-planning conference at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, U.S. 3rd Fleet confirmed that 32 nations attended the planning sessions and 37 had been invited, a new record. Asked about final participation, a Navy spokesperson said only that "over 30 partner nations are scheduled to participate" and a final list would follow the Final Planning Conference scheduled for April.

"RIMPAC 2026 is focused on strengthening integra-

tion, interoperability, and coordination among allies and partners," the spokesperson said. "Key objectives include combined command-and-control integration, cross-domain coordination and humanitarian assistance and disaster response collaboration. We will continue to work with all participants and stakeholders to plan an exercise that meets our combined objectives and look forward to sharing more about the exercise as details are finalized following the Final Planning Conference scheduled for April 2026."

RIMPAC has been running since 1971, when the United States, Australia and Canada launched it as a Cold War-era exercise to build maritime solidarity among Pacific allies against a Soviet threat. While the focus has changed, what has remained constant is the logic: gather allied navies in the Pacific, train them to operate together, and demonstrate in practical terms that the United States can assemble and lead a large maritime coalition.

The exercise runs every two years in and around the Hawaiian Islands, hosted by U.S. 3rd Fleet, and has grown steadily in size and ambition as the Indo-Pacific has become the central theater of great-power competition. Today it encompasses not just ship-driving and missile drills but amphibious operations, humanitarian assistance exercises, unmanned systems integration and coalition command-and-control testing — essentially a compressed rehearsal for the full

spectrum of what a Pacific conflict might demand.

Chinese Expansion

The elephant in the room is China, whose naval expansion has reshaped the Indo-Pacific security environment in the 21st century. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has grown into the world's largest navy by hull count, has steadily extended its operational reach and become more assertive near Taiwan and in the South China Sea. With the Pacific becoming an increasing source of geopolitical tension, it's no surprise to see an exercise like RIMPAC continuing to grow.

Beijing's own history with RIMPAC provides a subtext of sorts to the exercise. China first participated in 2014, joining with four ships in what was framed at the time as a gesture toward engagement and a potential step toward reduced regional tension. It returned in 2016. Then, in 2018, the Pentagon revoked Beijing's invitation.

The fracture was not surprising given growing confrontation between the United States and China in the South China Sea. China argues the South China Sea and the islands in it are its territory; the United States disagrees and frequently operates there, conducting exercises and patrols with China's regional rivals. This has led to numerous confrontations in recent years. In 2022 and 2023 there were several significant incidents of Chinese and American aircraft nearly colliding, and in 2024 two Chinese navy vessels report-

edly shadowed U.S. and Philippine ships patrolling the South China Sea.

China's move to assert greater control over its backyard with the deployment of anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic jammers has roiled the Pentagon and appears to have made Chinese participation in RIMPAC unlikely for the foreseeable future. When asked whether China is invited, excluded or simply not under consideration for RIMPAC 2026 — and what would have to change for that to be reconsidered — the spokesperson referred the question to the Office of the Secretary of War Public Affairs, which did not respond to a request for comment.

Meanwhile, RIMPAC 2026 planning is still underway, but if previous exercises are any indication, it will include testing new weapons. The last edition of the exercise in 2024 involved a U.S.-Republic of Korea team firing guided rockets from a Common Unmanned Surface Vehicle against a target ship, a demonstration of how low-cost unmanned platforms might extend strike reach while keeping sailors out of harm's way. The Air Force-Navy Quicksink weapon was used during a sinking exercise, showing cross-domain fires that don't treat maritime strike as the Navy's problem alone. Allied ships from multiple nations also fired live missiles.

Until the Final Planning Conference takes place in April, details on the actual activities during RIMPAC

2026 will remain sparse. However, live-fire sinking exercises have been a staple of RIMPAC for years. Unmanned surface vehicle integration is likely to expand, as the Navy has been accelerating these capabilities across the fleet. Coalition networking under Project Overmatch, which embedded Five Eyes partners into its development ahead of 2026, is likely to have a presence at the event.

Regardless of what activities take place, China will most certainly be watching with interest. It has sent ships in the past to monitor RIMPAC. In 2014, when China did participate with four ships, they also sent an additional ship that was not invited with the possible purpose of monitoring ship signals from the edges of the exercise. In 2018, after China had been dis-invited, it reportedly once again sent a ship to monitor the event. It happened again in 2022.

With RIMPAC continuing to grow and involving not just the United States but key regional rivals, it is a highly relevant event for the Far East superpower, which continues to warily monitor U.S. activities in the Pacific. The biennial geopolitical drama that follows RIMPAC reflects the fact that tension in the Pacific isn't likely to subside anytime soon. ■

Dan Taylor has covered the U.S. Navy and the Pentagon since 2007 for a wide range of publications, focusing particularly on Pentagon acquisition and the latest in defense technology. Currently, he is technology editor for Military Embedded Systems.



A U.S. Marine Corps logistics specialist observes a CH-53K King Stallion lift a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle during an Air Logistics Course as part of Service Level Training Exercise 1-26 at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, California, Jan. 19, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Marine Corps | Cpl. Connor Webb.

Project Eagle

2026 Marine Corps Aviation Plan Lays Out Strategy to 2040 and Beyond

BY RICHARD R. BURGESS, SENIOR EDITOR

Distributed aviation operations (DAO) is named as the central warfighting concept in the latest Marine Corps Aviation Plan published by Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. The plan, released in February 2026, also provides a long-term vision for the next-generation air combat element for Marine Corps forces.

"This strategy ensures Marine Aviation remains combat-credible today, while preparing for the fight tomorrow," Lieutenant General William H. Swan, deputy commandant for aviation, said in his introductory remarks in the AvPlan. "We will continue to modernize our fixed-wing, tilt-rotor, rotary-wing, AGS [aviation ground systems], C2 [command and control], and unmanned systems ensuring their sustained lethality, survivability, and global reach exceed what our Combatant Commanders demand. These efforts are

designed with one purpose: to ensure Marines on the ground have the aviation support they need, when and where they need it, to seize their objectives — and win."

The AvPlan, called Project Eagle, "is a living strategy designed to adapt as new threats emerge, ensuring Marine Aviation can persist, sustain, and prevail in contested environments," the plan says. "It continuously refines assumptions, incorporates operational feedback, and aligns our modernization pathway with service-wide priorities. This plan reflects the current state of that evolution and sets conditions for the capabilities, investments, and modernization decisions that follow in subsequent sections."

Project Eagle "is our living strategy," Lieutenant Colonel Marianne Carlson, a UH-1Y helicopter pilot and now Aviation Vision and Strategy Action Officer for Headquarters Marine Corps Aviation, said in an interview with *Seapower*. "What we say, it's not an end

state but it is a waypoint in time, and it is continuously adapting to the operational environment and anticipates ... the future threat environment."

Project Eagle involves five lines of effort, or LOEs. The first of these, DAO, is aviation's "contribution to Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and the Corps' ability to operate inside contested maritime spaces," the plan says. "DAO disperses aviation assets across multiple expeditionary sites to increase survivability, complicate adversary targeting, and provide persistent, lethal support to the Stand-In Force (SIF).

LOE 2 elevates Aviation Ground Systems as a function of Marine Corps aviation, "accompanied by a recapitalization strategy to enhance AGS capabilities and enable distributed and expeditionary operations," the plan says. "Modernizing AGS ensures the ACE can generate fuel, power, maintenance, mobility, air-field services, and expeditionary infrastructure from austere and rapidly shifting locations." AGS includes ground support equipment, air-defense systems and C2 systems.

LOE 3 involves "AI/ML [artificial intelligence/machine learning] initiatives — predictive maintenance, dynamic aviation supply, and optimized operations ... transitioning from conceptual discussion in 2025 to active modernization efforts," said Captain Jacob M. Sugg, a spokesman for Swan, the deputy commandant for aviation. "Data architecture, kill-web integration, Digital Interoperability [DI], and sensing networks receive significantly greater depth in 2026, reflecting an increased emphasis on decision advantage and networked warfighting."

LOE 4 involves planning over the future years defense plans to ensure adequate financial resourcing, while LOE 5 provides a roadmap for modernization of platforms and capabilities.

Modernizing the Force

The AvPlan discusses each aircraft type in the Corps and the force structure and modernization plan for each. Transition of Marine fighter attack squadrons (VMFAs) to the F-35 Lightning II strike fighter is well underway. The Corps plans to procure a total of 280 F-35B short-takeoff/vertical landing versions and 140

F-35C carrier-capable versions, ultimately fielding 12 F-35B and eight F-35C squadrons. Fleet F-35 squadrons are equipped with 10 aircraft each but will be equipped with 12 aircraft each beginning in 2030 with completion by 2035. The Corps also will increase the number of F-35C squadrons detailed to aircraft carriers from one to two.

"The USMC is committed to maintaining our roots in Naval Aviation," Carlson said. "VMFA- 314 will continue to be the primary West Coast USMC squadron to integrate with the United States Navy aboard carrier strike groups. VMFA 251, currently IOC [at initial operational capability], will be the next squadron to integrate with East Coast carrier strike groups. The USMC will maintain flexibility with F-35Bs and F-35Cs to provide long-range manned fires to the Joint Force."

The increase in F-35 inventory will allow retirement of the last two F/A-18C/D active component squadrons and single F/A-18C reserve VMFA squadron by 2030. The Corps also will retire its last AV-8B Harrier II aircraft in June 2026 after nearly 42 years of service.

The Marine Corps' program of record for the KC-130J Super Hercules tanker/transport aircraft has grown to 95 aircraft with four active-component and one reserve squadron. The newest squadron, VMGR-153, is slated to achieve full operational capability by September 2026. The Corps has retired the KC-130J's Harvest HAWK (Hercules Airborne Weapons Kit) air-to-ground fires capability used in combat in Afghanistan.

The only helicopter in production for the Marine Corps is the CH-53K King Stallion heavy-lift helicopter, replacing the CH-53E Super Stallion. The program of record is 200 CH-53Ks. The first fleet CH-53K squadron, Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 461 (HMH-461), is slated to deploy in fiscal 2027 and a second squadron, HMH-464, is slated to begin conversion from the CH-53E in fiscal 2027. The Corps plans to phase out the CH-53E completely by fiscal 2033 and field a total of six active-component and one reserve CH-53K squadrons.

The Corps has a program of record of 359 MV-22B Osprey tilt-rotor medium-lift assault aircraft, with transition now complete, most of which equip 16 active-component and two reserve Marine medium tilt-rotor squad-

rons (VMMs). The most recently activated squadron, VMM-264, is expected to achieve full operational capability in fiscal 2027. The Corps is working to standardize the configurations of its V-22 fleet.

Sugg said the “V-22 Fleet Optimization and Reduction in Configuration Effort [VFORCE] initiative will convert Block B airframes to the Block C-Mission Computer Obsolescence Initiative [MCOI] configuration, reducing the number of unique configurations and standardizing aircraft capabilities across the fleet.”

The Corps has completed procurement of 349 UH-1Y Venom and AH-1Z Viper light helicopters and fields 5.5 fleet squadrons, with an increase to six full squadrons by the end of 2031. The H-1 fleet will go through a mid-life modernization to be completed by 2035 and serve through the 2040s.

The Cunningham Group

Carlson is a member of the Cunningham Group, which she described as a “futures-focused, capability-based, and threat-informed group within Headquarters Marine Corps Aviation” that is looking at capabilities needed to pace the threats.

The Corps is “exploring what will eventually come to replace the H-1, which is the future attack strike capability [FASt],” Carlson said. “Right now, we’re in our initial research phases for that capability of what will replace the H-1. And then further down the road, we’re going to be looking at next-generation assault support which will be the eventual replacement for the V-22.

“The Future Attack Strike initiative is designed to ensure the continued lethality and survivability of Marine Aviation in the second half of the 21st Century,” she said. “This advanced platform will augment our F-35B/C Lightning II force and usher in a new generation of capabilities to support the MAGTF and eventually replace our AH-1Z and UH-1Y squadrons. FASt will not merely be an incremental improvement of legacy capabilities, hence the name change from H-1 Next to Future Attack Strike.

“FASt will transform how traditional mission sets are executed, such as armed escort and maritime strike,” she said. “To maintain and expand the MAGTF’s decisive edge, FASt will incorporate advanced tech-

nologies to operate in contested environments while employing a diverse array of both kinetic and non-kinetic weapon systems against ever-more capable adversary threat systems.” FASt will also be fully integrated into Marine Aviation’s emerging Artificial Intelligence / Machine Learning architecture to enable predictive maintenance, optimize supply chains, and improve training.

Carlson said the Corps is working closely with the U.S. Army to understand the technology maturation of the MV-75, the tiltrotor assault transport of the Army’s Future Vertical Lift program, “and to support its fielding, given our lengthy experience with tilt-rotor technology. We have invested research and development funds in risk-reduction efforts with multiple vendors to inform us of our own requirements.”

The Corps has accepted all 18 of its planned MQ-9A Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles which equip two fleet squadrons. The service is incorporating sensor and communications upgrades into the aircraft. The fixed-wing Reaper requires a runway.

“Currently, there are no plans to develop a purely VTOL MUX [MAGTF unmanned expeditionary family of systems] capability to replace the MQ-9As for Expeditionary Advanced Base operations,” Sugg said “However, as we continue to evaluate a range of options for next-generation platforms within the MUX family of systems, we are prioritizing runway independence as a critical feature for the Group 3 MUX Organic Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance platform, designed to provide persistent support to formations such as Marine Expeditionary Units and Marine Littoral Regiments.”

The Cunningham Group also is looking at the Aerial Logistics Connector, part of the unmanned logistics air family of systems, ALC being the large air vehicle of that plan that directly contributes to sustainment of the forces within distributed aviation operations, Carlson said.

Regarding a future sixth-generation strike fighter, the Cunningham Group is keeping an eye on sixth-generation tactical air capabilities, including the Navy’s planned NGEN, or next-generation, strike fighter. ■

Virtual Decks

VR Headsets, Gaming PCs Supplementing Schoolhouses as Navy Modernizes Training

BY DAN TAYLOR

The U.S. Navy's training problem is, in many ways, a geography problem.

Sailors often need to learn on one coast, report on another, and qualify on equipment that may be unavailable because a ship is in maintenance, a submarine is stuck pier side or a schoolhouse pipeline is backed up. The result is a system that spends money moving people to training and then loses time waiting for access to gear, instructors and underway platforms.

As a result, the Navy has taken a growing interest in virtual reality (VR) headsets and handheld gaming PCs. After all, if the Navy can train Sailors where they already are — aboard ship, on the pier, in a maintenance facility, or in a berthing compartment between watches — it can attack one of the most expensive sources of inefficiency in the force, with some estimates putting training pipeline congestion costs in the Navy at roughly \$400 million annually. At the same time, submarine and surface crews often cannot get enough repetitions on real equipment because platforms are in maintenance or unavailable for training.

The promise of software-defined training is simple: move realistic repetition to the fleet, shrink

dependence on scarce physical infrastructure and give Sailors more chances to build proficiency before they ever touch the real system.

This shift is already underway. A spokesperson for Naval Education and Training Command (NETC) pointed to one example already in use at the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Pensacola, Florida, where Aviation Boatswain's Mate instructors and students are using VR headsets to modernize the curriculum. Specifically, Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Handling) students "don a headset and are positioned on a virtual aircraft carrier deck where they learn how to launch and recover naval aircraft," the spokesperson said, giving them familiarity with carrier environments before they do the work for real.

That example captures the attraction of VR for naval training. Some environments are expensive to access, difficult to replicate and unforgiving of mistakes. A virtual flight deck lets Sailors rehearse procedures, spatial awareness and deck choreography without tying up a carrier or exposing trainees to real-world risk.

There are a wide range of potential applications for the technology, and the Navy has experimented

in several areas. In 2023, Afloat Training Group Pacific introduced a VR-based suicide and sexual assault prevention program, one of the earlier efforts to apply immersive technology to the human side of fleet readiness. The scenario-based training put Sailors face-to-face with a virtual shipmate in crisis, walking them through intervention conversations in a way that lecture-style courses couldn't replicate. After a pilot aboard USS Daniel Inouye, the ship's then-commanding officer said the training engaged junior Sailors "at a much deeper and more individual level than your standard Navy GMT PowerPoint or lecture."

But it's the technical side where the Navy has been particularly ambitious with the technology in recent years. For example, at Naval Undersea Warfare Center Keyport Division in Washington state, engineers are using commercial gaming technology to produce augmented reality (AR) and VR simulations that teach Sailors how to maintain the fleet, tools that are, as the Navy has noted, already familiar to a generation of Sailors who grew up playing video games.

The logic is that a Sailor walking through a virtual engine room, manipulating valves and controls in sequence, is building the kind of physical and procedural memory that no slide deck can deliver.

VIBRaNT Demonstration

The most prominent recent demonstration came aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt in Janu-

ary 2026, when the Office of Naval Research and Naval Information Warfare Center Pacific brought the Virtual Bridge and Nautical Trainer — VIBRaNT — to the flight deck carrier pier side in San Diego. Using commercial off-the-shelf VR headsets, laptops and wireless routers, the portable system created a realistic virtual bridge environment where watch teams could practice rules of the road, rehearse navigation in unfamiliar waterways and maintain proficiency without leaving the ship or traveling to a shore-based simulator.

“Currently, we rely on off-ship simulators in order to train our watch teams in foreign ports and waterways,” Senior Chief Quartermaster Tom Salvatore said in a Navy statement. “This system will greatly increase our capacity for training to real-life scenarios that cannot be easily simulated otherwise.”

Bridge-team proficiency depends on repetition and scenario exposure, but access to sophisticated shore simulators is finite, often requires travel and competes with every other training demand on a crew’s schedule. A system that sets up aboard the ship itself changes that calculus entirely.

Still, there are challenges to address. For example, Sailors who process simulated motion while the ship itself moves are at risk of “simulator sickness,” something that wouldn’t be a concern in a classroom. Hardware durability is another issue. Consumer electronics don’t automatically survive salt air, vibration and the general



U.S. Navy Quartermaster 3rd Class Zinnia Bank participates in a virtual navigation demonstration using Virtual Bridge and Nautical Trainer (VIBRaNT) held in the pilot house of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71), Jan. 8, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Alexia Mezick.

punishment of shipboard life. Then there’s cybersecurity, which adds further complexity since many commercial VR platforms rely on wireless connectivity and update habits that don’t fit neatly with Navy information security requirements.

The deeper challenge is institutional. A training technology only changes outcomes if it is integrated into qualification standards, instructor practices and command expectations. Without that, even well-received pilot programs risk staying pilots indefinitely.

But the early results are promising, and there are certainly signs the long-term evolution of Navy training is headed in this direction. The

Navy’s bet is that repetition delivered early, often and close to the fleet can build competence faster than waiting for the perfect training venue. If that proves out across hull types and rating communities — not just in promising one-ship demos — the most important naval schoolhouse of the next few years may not be a building at all. It may be a headset in a berthing compartment or a gaming PC on a submarine that hasn’t left the pier. ■

Dan Taylor has covered the U.S. Navy and the Pentagon since 2007 for a wide range of publications, focusing particularly on Pentagon acquisition and the latest in defense technology. Currently, he is technology editor for Military Embedded Systems.

Sailors conduct a routine ordnance inspection aboard the USS Gerald R. Ford during Operation Epic Fury in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, March 17, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Navy.





Navy Addresses Quality-of-Service Issues Even As Problems Persist

BY ERIKA FITZPATRICK

Adequate housing and rest. Accessible child care. Additional recreation and wellness options. For service members and their families, these and other “quality of service” programs are as critical to military readiness as battlefield training, equipment, munitions and navigation.

“The well-being of our Sailors and their families is paramount,” Admiral James W. Kilby, the vice chief of naval operations, said in testimony prepared for the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 4, five days after the start of the Operation Epic Fury

Logistics Specialist 2nd Class Douglas Conejomurillo, from Costa Rica, assigned to Supply Department aboard Pre-Commissioning Unit John F. Kennedy (CVN 79), performs a lateral abdominal stretch during a Morale, Wellness, and Recreation (MWR) led fitness class in the ship’s forward gym during Builder’s Trials, Jan. 30, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Theoplis Stewart.

action against Iran, “and a Sailor who is prioritized and supported can stay focused on the mission.”

In peacetime and wartime, there is a well-documented history of the Navy struggling to improve poor living and working conditions for single Sailors and families alike. Left unaddressed, these issues can harm Sailors’ health and wellness, worsen mental health and even lead to deaths by suicide. Potential service members who view military life as unappealing or even harmful are less likely to sign up to serve or stay for multiple tours of duty. This undermines the readiness of the all-volunteer military.

Navy officials say they’re addressing longstanding quality-of-service concerns.

“For a long time, the installations have been neglected with funding, and that touches on infrastructure,

quality of life programs, and facilities," acknowledged Destiny Sibert, chief of Enterprise Media Operations with Commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC). "In the past several years, the Navy in general has had a huge push to turn that around."

Kilby told Congress the Navy is investing in upgrades to housing, child care and learning, and programs to reduce Sailor isolation. Sibert sent *Seapower* additional updates on these and other quality-of-life initiatives.

But is it enough? Below is how the Navy describes progress across several key areas, and how experts, lawmakers, researchers and media reports characterize the challenges that remain.

Housing

Since 2019, Congress has directed the Department of Defense to fix myriad problems with military housing, from lack of oversight over repair needs to mold- and pest-infested barracks.

These problems are present in military housing owned or controlled by the government — that is, dorms and barracks where single service members typically reside (unaccompanied housing, or UH) — and in public and private military housing, where more families tend to reside.

Led by Vice Admiral Christopher "Scotty" Gray, CNIC says it is addressing housing across the board, boosting the quality and availability of housing, renovating and restoring barracks, expanding temporary housing and partnering with the private sector to build and modernize housing.

Barracks housing. In spring, as part of the Pentagon's Barracks Task Force initiative, Gray ordered commanders to inspect and identify priority issues with unaccompanied housing facilities to fix with a \$375 million infusion of funding.

"Quality of service is inseparable from readiness," Gray said in a Dec. 18, 2025, news release allocating the money for living condition upgrades. "Providing safe, comfortable and clean housing is not optional.

Having a space to call your own is just huge for quality of life in general.

- Destiny Sibert, chief of Enterprise Media Operations with Commander, Navy Installations Command

It is a responsibility we owe to every Sailor who volunteers to serve."

Of the \$375 million, the Navy directed \$300 million to six sustainment, restoration and modernization projects. Officials pushed another \$75 million to 50 installations for 95 tailored projects, such as renovating kitchens and bathrooms, installing new flooring or replacing furniture.

Issues That Remain

"There has been a lot of progress from the department in addressing these [housing] issues," Alissa H. Czyz, director of Defense Capabilities and Management at the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), told *Seapower*. She praised the "attention on it now," and welcomed the move to create a Barracks Task Force.

And, Czyz said, DoD has addressed 19 of 31 corrective actions GAO identified in its 2023 publication, "Military Barracks: Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness." That report documented a wide range of problematic conditions at military barracks and training facilities in the Navy and other service branches.

But the department still hasn't addressed some big issues, Czyz said, including recommendations to institute broader oversight over barracks management and issue regular reports on the state of barracks.

"Also, we found that the funding picture was pretty confusing," Czyz said. The services lack methods to track and account for funding requirements and expenditures. "And nobody at the department really had a picture of how much money was being spent on the barracks overall."

Community housing. Improving housing also means ensuring Sailors don't have to live on ships for lack of housing ashore. That's the impetus of the "No Sailor



Cmdr. Craig Culbertson, Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story's Public Works Officer, served as master of ceremonies during a groundbreaking ceremony, Jan. 6, 2026. The center will provide care for children from infancy through age five, offering developmentally appropriate programs that support early learning, social emotional development, and continuity for families navigating frequent military moves. The facility is expected to be completed in 2028. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | David Todd.

Lives Afloat" initiative, which as of February 2026 had moved more than 4,500 Sailors from living on ships to living ashore.

"Living aboard is for operational necessity, not day-to-day life," Gray said in a Feb. 19, 2026, news release. "We're committed to giving every Sailor access to clean, safe, and comfortable housing when their ship is in port."

Sailors who can live away from work can sleep, rest and recharge. "Having a space to call your own is just huge for quality of life in general," Sibert said.

The Navy is also increasing UH beds through expansions of existing public-private projects, including adding barrack beds in Hampton Roads, Virginia, by more than 8,000 (for a total of 11,760 beds) and in San Diego by 3,435 (for a total of 5,833 beds).

Issues That Remain

About 2,000 Sailors remain in housing afloat, the Navy said. Sibert said some in this group are awaiting Navy accommodations; others are ineligible because their duties require them to stay on ships.

Overall, it's still too hard for many of the two-thirds of service members receiving housing allowances to live off base to locate and pay for housing in the community, according to Diana Maurer, director of Defense Capabilities and Management for GAO. In her March 4 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, she updated lawmakers on a host of military readiness issues being reviewed by GAO, including housing.

"For example," Maurer said, "in some cases service members may be unable to get to work if they have to commute long distances in dangerous weather due to the availability of nearby housing." Some personnel take second jobs to afford rent, Czyz added.

"We found these challenges can negatively affect service member quality of life, as well as performance and mission," Maurer said. "We found DoD does not routinely assess or respond to these negative effects."

Child Care

The shortage of child care options also undermines military readiness.

The Navy says it's taking a multipronged approach to reduce the waiting list for high-quality child care through the Child Development Centers (CDCs) and School Age Care (SAC) program. The Navy has:

- Addressed shortages and increased capacity by providing salary increases, recruitment incentives and child care discounts for caregivers.
- Added capacity by repurposing underused installation spaces and building new facilities.
- Increased funding for the community-based fee assistance program to provide military families with more off-base child care options.

Issues That Remain

Although these efforts cut the waiting list in half, about 2,500 children were still in need as of October 2024, said Maryann Coutino, director of Navy Child and Youth Program, in a Feb. 19, 2025, news release.

“Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive strategy that includes staffing improvements, new facilities, and leveraging community resources,” Coutino said. “We are committed to steadily increasing child care capacity to better support our service members and their families.”

Recruiting more military caregivers requires paying them a higher wage, said Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts) at a Feb. 11, 2026, hearing.

“One of the key problems is that DoD can’t attract and retain child care providers with its decades-old pay scale,” Warren said.

She added the Navy and other service branches “all blew the deadline” set by Congress in the FY 2025 National Defense Authorization Act to update their child development program compensation models.

“That’s making it harder for moms and dads in the military to do their jobs,” Warren said.

Expanding Other Quality-of-Life Services

The Navy has moved to improve the living and working conditions of Sailors in other ways. These include:

- Allowing use of small appliances in barracks and dorm housing.
- Relaxing the clothing policy for Sailors dining in shore galleys and piloting naval base programs that offer more diverse food options.
- Giving Sailors the flexibility to live in recreational vehicles for longer periods of time.

Issues That Remain

But other Pentagon policies are undermining readiness, Warren and a group of Democratic lawmakers argued in a December 2025 report. The lawmakers accused the department of diverting \$2 billion to immigration enforcement at the expense of military readiness and service members’ quality of life.

“As a result of these unauthorized expenditures,” the report said, “DoD is diverting funds from important military needs, including training programs, barracks repairs, and even repairs for elementary schools attended by the children of our service members.”

Health, Wellness, and Recreation

The Navy has taken steps to improve quality of life by expanding Sailors’ health, wellness and recreation options.

This includes giving Sailors more time to exercise by keeping Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) gyms open 24 hours, seven days a week. In addition, the Navy upped the recreation fund allocation for active-duty Sailors, from \$10 to \$25 per day.

It’s also extending free, high-speed Wi-Fi to all Navy-owned and operated UH, through a partnership with CNIC’s MWR program and the Navy Exchange Service Command.

In addition, CNIC is piloting a “human performance optimization” program at Naval Base San Diego. Participating Sailors can receive a comprehensive assessment of their physical, mental and nutritional well-being toward achieving peak performance.

Virtual clinical counseling also remains an option for Sailors and fleet families in need of mental health support under an initiative launched worldwide in 2024. This free, confidential and remote service is available without a referral.

Issues That Remain

The White House and Pentagon have de-emphasized the importance of mental health among service personnel, with unclear effects on the future of military readiness.

The Military Health System (MHS) estimated that from 2020 to 2024, a total of 560,035 service members received at least one mental health diagnosis.

MHS found that 60% to 70% of service personnel experiencing mental health problems do not seek help.

A Feb. 19, 2025, report by the publication “Task and Purpose” cited experts who said the wording of a White House executive order on Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness could further discourage

service members to seek help.

The order read, in part: “many mental and physical health conditions are incompatible with active duty, from conditions that require substantial medication or medical treatment to bipolar and related disorders, eating disorders, suicidality, and prior psychiatric hospitalization.”

Delaying treatment for mental health issues is the wrong approach, Dr. Harold Kudler told Task and Purpose. Kudler served for over four decades as a psychiatrist for the Department of Veterans Affairs and formerly led VA mental health programs.

“Our entire suicide prevention campaign, both in the military and the VA, is predicated on the idea that when you have a problem early on, it’s essential to talk about it and to get help for it,” he said in the article. “The one

thing that everyone agrees on is that if you can’t talk about a problem, you can’t deal with the problem.”

Amid continued U.S. Navy deaths by suicides — including media reports of six deaths last year from one unit at Oklahoma’s Tinker Air Force Base — it’s hard to assess whether the military is making progress in curbing suicides and improving mental health.

That’s in part because the DoD had yet to release its Annual Report on Suicide in the Military, typically announced every fall, according to a Business Insider report on Jan. 9, 2026. As of March 2026, the Pentagon still hadn’t released the data. ■

Erika Fitzpatrick is an award-winning writer living in Washington, D.C. With more than 20 years of experience in public policy journalism and communications, she specializes in covering issues affecting service members, veterans, and military families.

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A Recruiting Turnaround

The Navy Had its Biggest Recruiting Year in Two Decades — Can it Last?

BY DAN TAYLOR

Two years ago, the Navy's recruiting future looked dim. In fiscal 2023, the service missed its enlisted goal, struggled through a depleted Delayed Entry Program and faced the same bleak math confronting the rest of the armed forces: a smaller share of young Americans eligible to serve, a smaller share inclined to do so and a hot labor market offering alternatives.

Now the Navy is telling a very different story.

In fiscal 2025, the service brought in 44,096 active-duty enlisted Sailors against a goal of 40,600, producing its strongest enlisted recruiting year since 2002. And that headline number was only part of a broader across-the-board overperformance: the service says it also recruited 2,579 active-component officers against a goal of 2,574, 1,587 reserve-component officers against 1,515, 5,735 reserve enlisted prior-service Sailors against 5,729, and 2,443 reserve enlisted non-prior service Sailors against 2,420.

That kind of rebound does not happen by accident. The Navy's turnaround was driven by a focused campaign to remove friction from the recruiting process, put more support behind recruiters and make it easier for qualified applicants to move from interest to contract before life intervened.

The service achieved this through a mix of creative measures designed to cut red tape. Some were more conventional, such as tripling medical waiver staffing or reducing administrative complexity so recruiters could spend less time on paperwork and more time talking to prospects. Others methods were a bit unorthodox: for example, tattoo approval timelines that once stretched roughly 30 days were cut to 2.7 days.

These do not sound like dramatic reforms, but in practice they were. Recruiting often fails in the margins, when a candidate who is interested enough today becomes unreachable next month, or

Sailors stand at attention in Midway Ceremonial Drill Hall during pass-in-review onboard U.S. Navy Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Mar. 12, 2026. Training is approximately nine weeks and all enlistees in the U.S. Navy begin their career at the command. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Suits.

when a recruiter loses hours to a process bottleneck that should have taken minutes. The Navy decided focusing on improving the process may be just as important as offering strong incentives.

The Navy is very careful to say it is seeking to move applicants through the process faster, not lowering the bar. Commander Stephanie Turo, a spokesperson for Navy Recruiting Command, told *Seapower* the current approach is "a combination of operational improvements, smart policy adjustments and modernized outreach." Turo said the service had "significantly improved the speed and efficiency of our medical waiver review process — without relaxing standards — allowing qualified applicants to move through the system faster."

The Navy's recruiting recovery is easiest to understand as a funnel, similar to the world of sales. At the top of the funnel, the service had to generate more interest. In the middle, it had to convert prospects more efficiently. At the bottom, it had to actually ship people to training without losing them to delay, disqualification or drift. The Navy wanted to attack all three.

On outreach, the service leaned harder into modern advertising, data-driven media buys, digital lead generation and event-based engagement designed to resonate with Gen Z. Turo said newer campaigns are presenting "an authentic Navy story aligned with service, purpose and career opportunity," while digital tools on Navy.com and immersive engagements such as "The Strike Group" mixed-reality activation are intended to improve awareness and conversion.

On recruiter productivity, the Navy says it has tried to reduce administrative burden and spread best practices through its Recruiting Operations Center. That approach reflects an important institutional lesson: recruiting is not just a national marketing challenge, it is a local sales and relationship business.

"Recruiting is fundamentally a human endeavor, and trust remains the decisive factor in a young person's decision to serve," Turo said.

That emphasis on trust helps explain why seemingly bureaucratic improvements mattered so much. A recruiter who can answer a waiver question quickly,



Seaman Spencer Silva greets his family after pass-in-review onboard U.S. Navy Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Mar. 12, 2026. More than 40,000 recruits train annually at the Navy's only boot camp. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John Suits.

move an application efficiently and stay in contact with a candidate is better positioned to sustain the relationship through a long decision process.

On the back end, the service rebuilt the Delayed Entry Program pipeline. That may be one of the strongest indicators the 2025 surge could be more than a one-year spike. Instead of ending the year with an empty bench, the Navy now has roughly one-fourth of its next year mission already in DEP, giving it a cushion it lacked when the recruiting environment was at its worst.

Repeatable Formula?

For fiscal 2026, the Navy has set a goal of 45,000 new Sailors. "After the momentum achieved over the past two years, our focus is on sustaining that success and building a stable, predictable accession pipeline that

supports long-term fleet readiness," Turo said.

The central question is whether the Navy has discovered a repeatable formula or simply benefited from a favorable convergence of factors.

The optimistic case says that many of the reforms behind the 2025 rebound are durable management fixes, not one-time gimmicks. Faster waivers, less paperwork, better analytics, more effective advertising and a replenished DEP are all advantages that can carry into future years. Even if the labor market tightens further, the Navy should at least be competing from a better starting position than it was in 2023.

There is also a broader readiness payoff. The Navy says its biggest manpower gaps remain at sea, especially in apprentice-level billets. According to Turo, recruiting gains paired with targeted distribution have



Navy recruiters assigned to Navy Talent Acquisition Group Ohio River Valley brought the Navy experience to the Cleveland Auto Show, Feb. 20 to March 1, 2026. The Strike Group, a relatively new recruiting tool for the Navy, provides users with a hands-on mixed-reality experience showcasing technology used by the Navy. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Charlotte C. Oliver.

reduced sea duty gaps by more than 300 per month since May 2025, and operational sea duty billets are now filled at more than 90%.

But recruiting conditions are never fully under military control, as civilian wages, unemployment, college costs, public confidence in national institutions and regional labor-market conditions all shape the willingness of young people to sign up. The Navy can improve its process but it cannot set the economy.

The service itself acknowledges that reality. Turo called the “highly competitive labor market combined with historically low propensity to serve among eligible youth” the most persistent risk to future success. Today’s young Americans, Turo said, simply have “more career pathways available to them than ever before.”

Recruiting Quality

The Navy is also trying to shape the debate about what counts as recruiting success. Big numbers alone are not enough, especially if critics suspect they were produced by widening the gate too far.

Turo said recruiting quality is measured through “a combination of aptitude, eligibility, long-term potential and alignment with fleet requirements,” including Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery scores, qualification for high-demand ratings, education credentials, medical and moral screening standards and eventual retention and performance outcomes.

A more political question hanging over the recruiting outlook is whether the Trump administration’s dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs will affect the Navy’s ability to sustain momentum. Repealing DEI may signal an unwelcoming environment to minorities or may cause the Navy to be less competitive with companies that do offer DEI policies. Those on

the anti-DEI side may claim it will attract enough individuals who disliked the policy to more than offset any losses. However, since the policy is brand new, it is impossible to know at this point what — if any — impact the Department of Defense’s anti-DEI stance will have on future recruiting.

Regardless, 2025 was a positive year for Navy recruiting. However, there are still questions to be answered. While the boom was likely not a fluke, that doesn’t mean it’s a problem that has been permanently solved. The Navy showed recruiting performance could improve sharply when the institution treated friction as an operational problem, resourced the recruiting force, and modernized how it reaches young Americans. Now, the service must show it can maintain that momentum. ■

Dan Taylor has covered the U.S. Navy and the Pentagon since 2007 for a wide range of publications, focusing particularly on Pentagon acquisition and the latest in defense technology. Currently, he is technology editor for Military Embedded Systems.



After Successful Pilot Projects, Planned Improvements to UH Sail Forward

BY JAMIE L. PFEIFFER

For most of its history, the U.S. Navy has housed junior enlisted Sailors in traditional barracks ashore or aboard ships. These accommodations generally meet the basic, bare minimum requirements but offer minimal privacy or comfort. Investigations have revealed chronically unsafe living conditions in many aging barracks facilities, threatening the health, safety, and well-being of young Sailors.

In response, the Navy developed the “Forging Communities of Excellence” plan. Its three-pronged approach aims to build and renovate better living spaces, improve customer service and management at

those facilities and provide high-quality services and comfortable living environments.

To accomplish these ambitious goals, the Navy began exploring the use of the Military Housing Privatization Initiative framework to improve housing for unaccompanied Sailors. Public-private partnership models have been used since the 1990s to build and maintain 99% of military family housing, but Congress did not authorize this type of construction funding for UH until 2002.

The Navy chose two barracks community pilot projects to test the viability of this approach: Homeport Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Virginia, and Pacific Beacon in San Diego, California. Both projects are now complete. Their success supports the Navy’s belief that collaboration with private developers can deliver

Left: Naval Base San Diego Pacific Beacon military housing at 32nd Street “dry side.” The Department of Defense is committed to providing quality living conditions to service members and their families. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kyle Carlstrom.

modern housing for junior Sailors more efficiently and effectively than traditional military construction programs. Now, the Navy has opened the door to more public-private UH collaborations.

Unaccompanied housing primarily serves single Sailors in pay grades E-1 through E-4, and some E-4s with limited time in service. These junior personnel typically are required to live in installation-provided housing. Historically, this housing consisted of aging barracks complexes or shipboard berthing spaces.

In many fleet concentration areas, including Hampton Roads, decades-old residential buildings have developed serious maintenance and environmental safety issues. These include failing, inadequate and outdated climate control systems, structural deterioration, mold, rot, chemical and environmental contaminants, fire safety issues and many other health hazards.

In some cases, housing shortages have forced junior Sailors to live aboard ships in port. Officials at one installation told the Government Accountability Office they consistently housed around 500 service members on aircraft carriers or berthing barges due to insufficient onshore UH. These residents lived in cramped quarters with limited phone or internet connectivity. Basic conveniences, such as shared washing machines, were regularly broken.

The Navy’s focus on improving unaccompanied housing reflects a broader understanding of how quality of life affects operational readiness. Junior enlisted Sailors perform critical maintenance, engineering, logistics and operational roles aboard ships and submarines. Living in unsafe, uncomfortable and unhealthy housing undermines morale, hurts retention and reduces Sailors’ capacities to focus on

demanding missions.

In addition to supporting operational readiness, better housing conditions can improve the fleet’s overall physical and mental health. These infrastructure projects can also provide significant economic benefit to the surrounding civilian communities, improve public perception of the naval services and increase recruitment and retention.

A Novel Public-Private Model

Federal laws and regulations governing military funding and oversight contribute significantly to substandard living conditions and the general shortage of habitable UH units on U.S. military installations. Obtaining funding for construction, renovation and non-routing maintenance involves multiple review

By focusing our efforts on key areas of need, we can effectively and efficiently improve facility condition and improve resident satisfaction.

- Vice Admiral Scott Gray, commander, Navy Installations Command

boards, committees, approval hearings and other administrative hurdles. Requests and proposals can languish for years, even decades, before being approved and funded.

The Department of Defense houses hundreds of thousands of servicemembers worldwide in UH units, which have frequent turnover and pose unique property management challenges. It simply does not have enough resources (personnel, funding and management) to inspect, maintain and update its current residential units.

Obviously, this is because “building and managing housing” isn’t one of the DoD’s primary objectives. However, effectively accomplishing this goal is critical to mission success. Partnering with companies that

specialize in constructing, managing and maintaining high-turnover residential property may be the answer.

The Navy's two pilot projects relied on a new Public-Private Venture (PPV) structure to finance construction and ongoing maintenance. Under this approach:

- A private developer finances, builds, renovates and manages the housing community.
- The Navy contributes land, existing facilities or initial capital support.
- The Navy provides Sailors with a housing allowance or service allotment to lease the apartments from the private partner.
- The private partner assumes responsibility for and handles maintenance, upkeep and other day-to-day property management operations.

This blended funding approach combines federal resources with private capital, speeding construction and limiting the immediate burden on federal budgets. Ideally, this will enable communities of modern, safe, up-to-date UH units to be completed and ready for occupancy in a fraction of the time.

Pilot Programs Prove Successful

The earliest collaboration between the Navy and a private real estate consortium was greenlit in 2006 and completed in the late 2000s. Pacific Beacon at Naval Base San Diego, the Navy's first privatized housing community for single enlisted Sailors, consists of high-rise residential towers overlooking San Diego Bay. It provides approximately 2,398 beds in shared apartment-style units.

Pacific Beacon resembles multi-resident civilian apartments rather than traditional barracks. Each suite has private bedrooms, shared living spaces, kitchens, laundry facilities, full bathrooms, furnishings and utilities. The development also provides on-site resident amenities, including fitness centers, recreational areas and community gathering spaces.

The second pilot project, Homeport Hampton Roads in southeastern Virginia, tackled the needs of the Navy's largest single concentration of forces. Beginning in 2007, this project included both new construction and the renovation of existing barracks

across the region. It now provides more than 3,600 bed spaces across roughly 1,800 housing units in Norfolk and Newport News.

Like Pacific Beacon, the Homeport community evokes apartment-style living rather than traditional barracks. Units feature private bedrooms and bathrooms with shared kitchens and living rooms. Community amenities include fitness centers, recreational spaces, a large community center and other facilities intended to foster a sense of camaraderie among junior Sailors.

The successful completion of both pilot projects shows the Navy's public-private venture strategy can rapidly provide high-quality UH efficiently and effectively in regions where demand has long exceeded supply.

Encouraged by the success of the original Homeport development, the Navy is now preparing a much larger second phase of privatization in the Hampton Roads region. The scale of the project reflects the scope of the housing deficit around this area and the amount of Navy personnel in the region.

Under the current proposals, a private contractor will construct several new large housing complexes, including a 1,500-bed facility in Newport News and a 4,000-bed facility at Naval Station Norfolk. They will renovate 14 existing barracks and demolish other complexes that are not suitable for renovation.

The Navy will finance these planned construction, demolition and renovation projects using the same public-private venture financing structure used in the pilot projects. Current proposals anticipate the DoD will secure \$380 million in federal funding as seed capital for private developers, in addition to providing the land. The developers would obtain additional construction financing from private investors or by issuing bonds. The total value of the projects is expected to be nearly \$1.3 billion.

Construction Success, Maintenance Mess?

Although the pilot projects have led to the successful construction of many new units, one significant concern is maintenance and upkeep. Keeping UH clean, safe and habitable will be challenging, and private companies have a disappointing track record of properly maintaining military family housing. Exposés



Undersecretary of the Navy Hung Cao tours Pacific Beacon military housing onboard Naval Base San Diego, Feb. 20, 2026. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communications Specialist 2nd Class Nettie Mae Manfull.

about crumbling base housing, contaminated water and mold-infested barracks have splashed across the front pages, bringing civilian attention to issues well known in military communities.

According to the terms of the pilot project contracts, the private partners are responsible for operating and maintaining the housing communities. The long-term agreements provide a steady stream of income to the private partners through Sailor housing allowances. This ongoing compensation also provides the Navy with some recourse: if the companies aren't holding up their end of the deal, the Navy may be entitled to withhold these payments. Including private equity financing in these projects may give developers an additional incentive to properly maintain their investments, thereby protecting the value of their holdings.

Improving the Fleet's Readiness

The reports that led to the Navy's "Forging Communities of Excellence" initiatives warned that failing to improve housing conditions would directly affect mission readiness and decrease overall fleet effectiveness. The Navy now publicly acknowledges improving UH is an

integral component of combat readiness and a priority for sustaining a capable and motivated force.

"Navy unaccompanied housing hasn't consistently hit the mark in taking care of Sailors' needs, but we're making significant strides towards improving barracks facilities and Sailors' overall residential experience," said Vice Admiral Scott Gray, commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC), the department that oversees Navy Housing. "By focusing our efforts on key areas of need, we can effectively and efficiently improve facility condition and improve resident satisfaction."

The Pacific Beacon and Homeport Hampton Roads projects show that public-private partnerships can deliver modern UH more quickly and efficiently than traditional military-directed construction programs. Although long-term oversight, financing, maintenance and upkeep may pose challenges, this new public-private partnership model could serve as a template for future upgrades to Navy housing. ■

Jamie L. Pfeiffer practiced in Illinois, Oregon and Washington states before retiring from active law practice. She is currently based in Chicago.

SHARPENING THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

Guam's Expanding Role in U.S. Naval Strategy

BY JAMIE L. PFEIFFER





The Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Jefferson City (SSN 759) moors at Naval Base Guam, Feb. 11, 2025. Assigned to Commander, Submarine Squadron 15, based at Polaris Point, Naval Base Guam, Jefferson City is one of five forward-deployed fast-attack submarines. Photo Credit: U.S. Navy | Lt. James Caliva.

Shifting global power dynamics have propelled the Indo-Pacific theater into the thick of critical U.S. security concerns. Besides fortifying the country's defensive position against potential aggressors, creating and maintaining a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific Command region provides strategic and commercial advantages.

In June 2025, Brenda Johnson-Turner, who was then performing the duties of the assistant secretary of the Navy for Energy, Installations, and Environment, testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee's Readiness subcommittee about the "unprecedented pace of mission growth" on the island of Guam. Currently, about 17,000 active-duty servicemembers are stationed there; by 2033, the Department of Defense anticipates this number to be between 24,000 and 34,500.

This growth requires a major expansion of infrastructure and facilities. \$4.7 billion in projects are underway, and over \$46 billion is planned for future developments. To understand why the government is investing so heavily in Guam's future, it's helpful to learn about its past.

Where America's Day Begins

Guam is located around 1,500 miles east of the Philippines and about 2,000 miles south of Japan. At 210 square miles, it is the largest and southernmost of the Mariana Islands and the largest island in Micronesia. Based on 2020 Census data, approximately 21,500 military personnel and their dependents share the island with around 132,500 civilians.

Spanish explorers colonized Guam during the 16th and 17th centuries but ceded the island to the U.S. in 1898 following the Spanish-American War. Japanese forces captured the island on Dec. 8, 1941, hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor. American forces recaptured it on July 21, 1944, then took advantage of its strategic and operational value to turn the tide in the Pacific theater and bring WWII to a close. In 1950, Congress established a civilian government on the island and gave U.S. citizenship to Guamanians.



U.S. Navy explosive ordnance disposal technicians assigned to Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 5 compete in the Coconut Crab Competition at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, June 4, 2025. The combat-focused skills competition challenges the physical and mental endurance of EODMU-5 personnel, with top performers advancing to the King Crab Competition in Virginia Beach, Va. Photo credit: U.S. Navy | William J. Busby III.

As a U.S. territory, Guam elects one non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives. It has no Electoral College votes, meaning its residents have no representation in electing the U.S. president. However, residents are protected by and subject to U.S. federal laws, including those relating to citizenship, taxes and federal funding.

Guam's government includes an elected governor, a 15-member legislature and a judiciary led by the Supreme Court of Guam. The U.S. federal government controls Guam's land and waters, making it a key military base in the Indo-Pacific.

In 2009, the United States combined Andersen Air Force Base and Naval Base Guam into Joint Base Marianas. Together, these facilities support a wide range of operations across the Indo-Pacific, including submarine patrols, bomber deployments, humanitarian assistance and disaster response efforts.

Naval Base Guam, on the island's south side, is home to a forward-deployed squadron of Los Angeles-class and Virginia-class nuclear-powered fast attack submarines. Stationing these submarines in Guam reduces the time it takes to reach potential operational areas. It also enables the Navy to maintain a constant undersea presence in the region and conduct regular patrols across the Pacific.

On the north side of the island, Andersen Air Force Base supports long-range bomber deployments, aerial refueling aircraft and other flight missions. It also hosts reconnaissance platforms that monitor maritime activity across thousands of miles of ocean.

Joint Base Marianas also serves as a logistical hub for naval task forces operating in other locations around the Pacific rim, including the Philippine Sea and South China Sea. Its location is ideal for enabling ships to replenish fuel, conduct repairs and rearm before returning to sea. These capabilities are increasingly vital as operational tempos in the INDOPACOM continue to rise.

In September 2025, the U.S. Department of Defense awarded a \$15-billion, eight-year infrastructure contract to a consortium of 10 construction firms to expand Guam's military facilities. The projects include new construction and upgrades to existing facilities. New missile defenses, expanded housing, modernized ship maintenance infrastructure and upgraded logistics facilities are part of the package.

These projects mark the launch of one of the most significant military construction programs in the region since the end of the Cold War. They are designed to sustain a larger permanent U.S. military presence in the western Pacific and strengthen the island's defensive capabilities.

Defending U.S. Assets and Territory

Protecting Guam has become a top priority for U.S. defense planners because the island serves as a forward logistics hub for operations throughout the Pacific. A successful strike against its infrastructure could disrupt regional operations and destroy billions of dollars of military assets.

In the past few years, North Korean missile tests have established that Guam is well within its reach. Wargames simulations regularly identify Guam as a primary target. In 2019, China unveiled a ballistic missile nicknamed the "Guam killer." In May 2023, a Chinese government-sponsored hacking group launched a cyber-malware attack on Guam's critical infrastructure, maritime operations and transportation.

Other real-world threats will no doubt emerge as

global conflicts continue to evolve. The U.S. Defense Department's 2022 National Defense Strategy said Guam is absolutely central to U.S. strategic deterrence in the Indo-Pacific theater.

Effective defenses are more important than ever to protect U.S. assets and personnel in Guam. The DoD plans to spend \$182 million on an integrated air and missile defense system. This system will use sensors, command networks, and interceptor missiles to create a multi-layered defense.

Expanding the U.S. military footprint on Guam requires housing, services and community support for thousands of service members and their families. As these plans begin, the DoD is relocating about 4,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam under a planned realignment agreement with Japan.

A \$297-million project at Andersen Air Force Base will construct 2,400 new housing units to accommodate the increasing number of on-island personnel. They will provide modern living conditions for service members and their families, ensuring incoming personnel can live on or near base and reducing pressure on Guam's civilian housing market.

The Navy expects 917 family units and 400 unaccompanied units to be ready for occupancy by June 2028, with the remaining units to be available by June 2032.

Improving the quality of life for servicemembers and their families impacts readiness and retention in other, indirect ways. Modern housing, reliable utilities, healthcare facilities, childcare and other community support services help maintain morale and improve retention. This is especially true for servicemembers assigned to remote locations.

Another critical area of investment involved improving Guam's aging maritime infrastructure. Its outdated facilities can't support the number of ships and submarines currently operating in the region, much less the DoD's planned escalation.

Several projects will focus on expanding and modernizing wharves at Naval Base Guam. This will eliminate the need for most ships to return to Hawaii or the U.S. mainland for routine maintenance and repairs.

With improved maintenance capacity on Guam, ships can return to sea faster and sustain a higher operational tempo.

Guam is a hub for coordination, communication and strategic cooperation between the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. As new facilities become operational, Guam's integrated operational platform will provide better support for joint operations between multiple branches of the U.S. military and allied forces.

Improved logistics infrastructure will improve our ability to rapidly move equipment, supplies, and personnel across the Indo-Pacific. New storage facilities, expanded airfields, and improved port infrastructure will enable the U.S. military to respond quickly and efficiently to crises and regional contingencies. These improvements will also strengthen Guam's role in multinational exercises with regional partners and allies.

Strengthening the Indo-Pacific Posture

Improving and expanding Guam's military infrastructure is part of a broader shift in the U.S. INDOPACOM defense strategy. As regional maritime competition and security challenges intensify, maintaining naval superiority depends on supporting forward basing and developing resilient logistics networks.

The island's upgraded missile defenses will help protect critical assets. Expanded housing will support a growing military population. Improved ship maintenance infrastructure will keep the fleet operating closer to potential mission areas. Together, these investments publicly and pointedly reinforce the United States' intention to maintain its seat at the INDOPACOM table. They promise to transform Guam into an even more capable forward operating hub and ensure U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific remain ready to meet the challenges ahead. ■

Jamie L. Pfeffer practiced in Illinois, Oregon and Washington states before retiring from active law practice. She is currently based in Chicago.



Navy League STEM Grant Supports Launch of New Biomedical Science Program

The Hillmen Foundation is proud to announce the receipt of its second consecutive STEM grant from the Navy League STEM Institute, in partnership with the Placer County Council of the Navy League.

The \$2,000 grant, consisting of \$1,000 from the Navy League STEM Institute, \$800 from the Placer County Council of the Navy League and \$200 from the Hillmen Foundation, will help fund critical laboratory equipment for Placer High’s new multi-year Biomedical Science Program, launching in the 2026–2027 school year.

The Biomedical Science Program is part of the nationally recognized Project Lead The Way curriculum and will begin with Principles of Biomedical Science before expanding into advanced coursework in human body systems, medical interventions and biomedical innovations. Over three years, students will build knowledge and hands-on skills in biology, anatomy and physiology, genetics, microbiology, and epidemiology, while applying those concepts to real-world medical challenges and career pathways.

“This grant represents the kind of Navy League partnerships that ensures students have access to world-

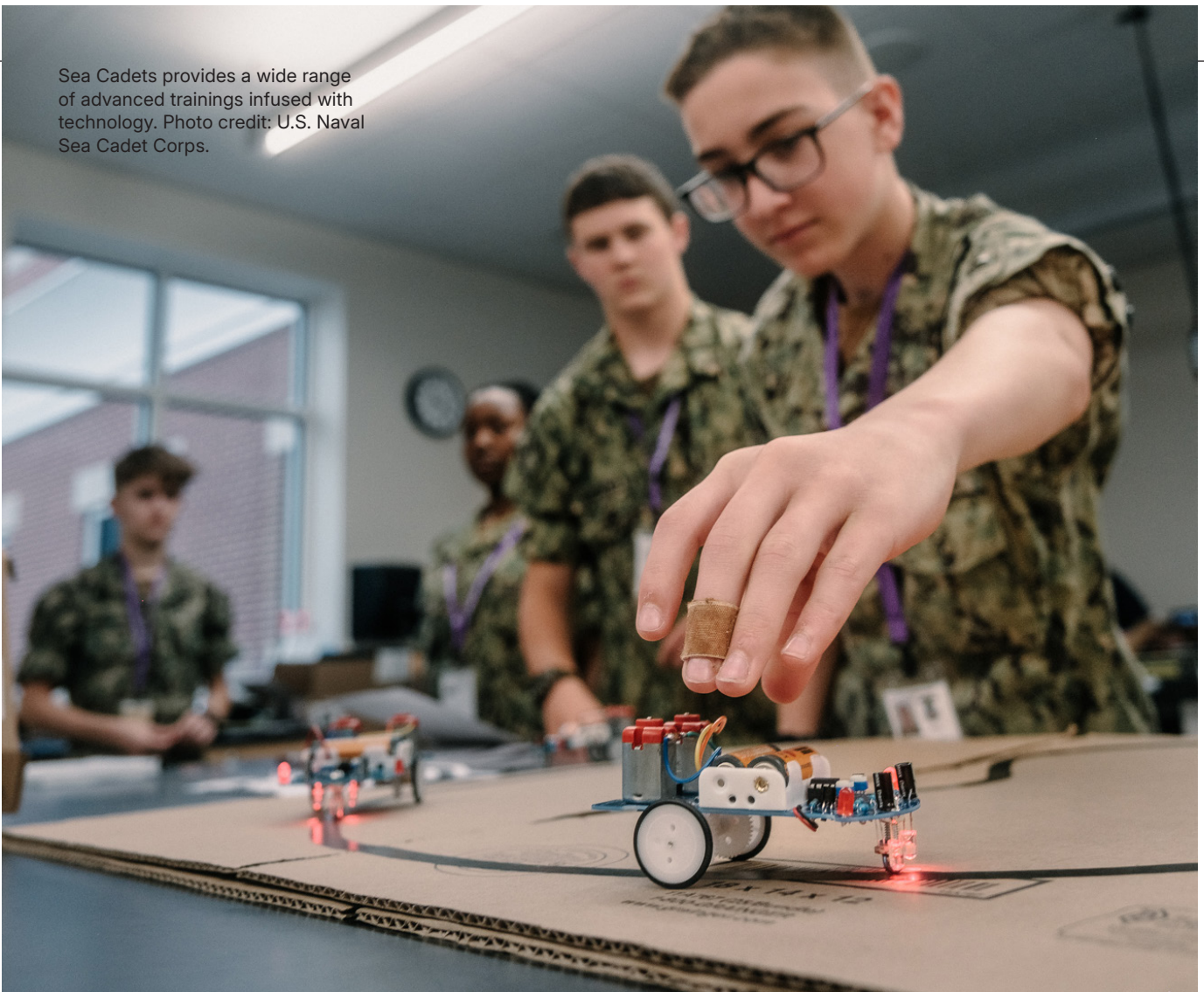
The Placer County Council of the Navy League presented a check to the Hillmen Foundation at the Placer Union High School District Board Meeting on Feb. 17, 2026. Pictured left to right: Ramona and Donald C. Anderson, Placer County Council of the Navy League; Shana McDonald, Hillmen Foundation Board; Jaime Jackson, Placer High Principal; Hillmen Foundation Board members Jennifer Russell and Erin Lee; and Hillmen Foundation Chair David Odom. Photo credit: Sarah Rath.

class STEM opportunities, including right here in Auburn,” said Donald C. Anderson, STEM Coordinator for the Placer County Council of the Navy League. “Programs like Biomedical Science at Placer High not only prepare students for meaningful careers, but also strengthen our nation’s future workforce in healthcare, medicine, and medical technology.”

The program also emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, highlighting how computer science, engineering and emerging technologies are transforming modern healthcare. These experiences align with the technical, analytical and problem-solving skills increasingly needed in fields that support the U.S. Navy, ranging from biotechnology and public health to advanced medical technologies that sustain Sailors and Marines.

This latest award follows last year’s Navy League STEM grant, which funded new carts and tracks for Placer High’s Physics program, equipment that is fundamental to learning key physics concepts and will benefit hundreds of students over its lifetime. ■

Sea Cadets provides a wide range of advanced trainings infused with technology. Photo credit: U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps.



The Effects of Technology on the Lives of Cadets

BY MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS BRAVO TEAM: PO1 RACHEL DONG (CALIFORNIA), PO3 WILLIAM CHEN (MARYLAND), CPO SEAN HOGAN (NEW YORK), PO2 KATE UNDERWOOD (MARYLAND)

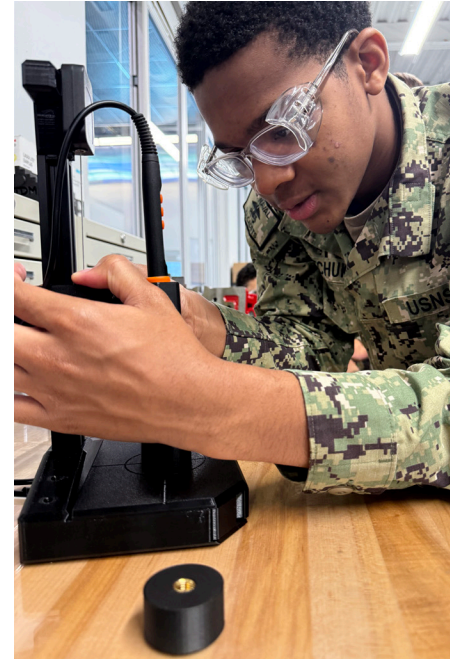
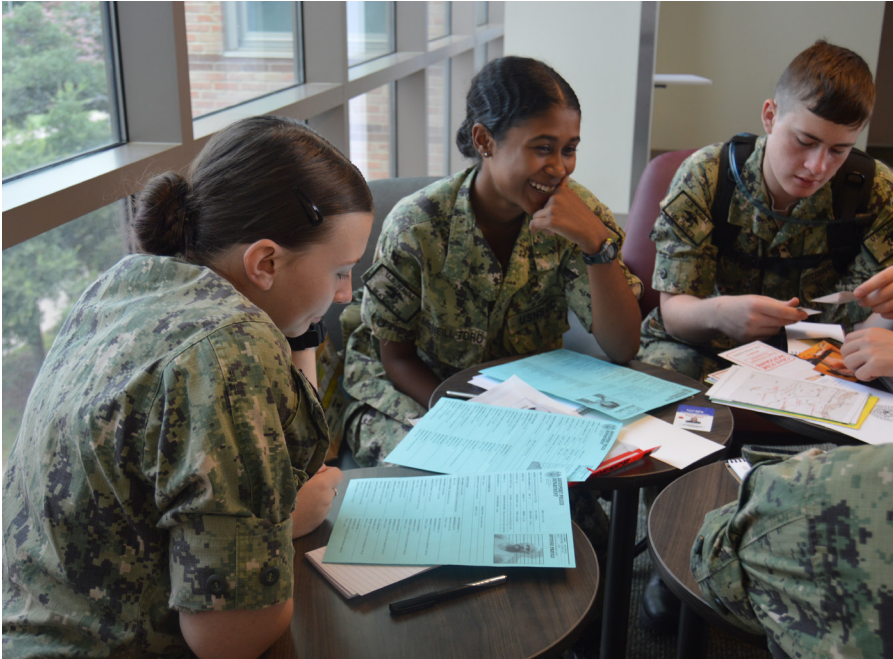
In an era where the lives of youth are dominated by artificial intelligence, social media, and online messaging apps, the Sea Cadet program promotes technological literacy while setting limits on personal use of technology.

Collaboration and teamwork are core to the Sea Cadets experience, so the program enforces a no-

cellphone policy during monthly drills, advanced trainings and other Sea Cadets events. This policy encourages cadets to communicate face-to-face, solve difficult challenges and foster genuine friendships. While this no-cellphone environment may be hard to adjust to initially, especially during a week-long overnight training, it promotes interaction and teamwork while teaching cadets vital communication and leadership skills.

Now that he is four years into the program, 17-year-old Aden Zhang of Hancock Squadron in California understands the Sea Cadets cell phone policy. He recently attended a drone training that included seven days without social media. Zhang said, "no cellphones allowed [him] to focus on building a more impactful and deep relationship with fellow shipmates."

Sea Cadet volunteer Joe Weggen agrees.



Phone-free training sessions cover topics from aircraft maintenance to cyber security, shipbuilding and beyond. Photo credit: U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps.

“A phone-free environment gives cadets space to develop confidence, communication skills, and situational awareness,” Weggen said. A former cadet now on the Sea Cadets headquarters staff, he said, “Once those foundations are in place, they’re better prepared to use technology as a tool, without letting it replace real connection.”

So how does Sea Cadets balance technology use and prepare cadets for their future? Recognizing there is a technological aspect to every career field, Sea Cadets provides a wide range of advanced trainings infused with technology. In 2025, cadets were offered trainings ranging from aircraft maintenance in Lemoore, California, to cybersecurity at Indiana University. Whether it is shipbuilding training in Danville, Virginia, ham radio training in Oregon or underwater research in Michigan, Sea Cadets get hands-on opportunities to work as a unit, solve problems and familiarize themselves with using simple and complex systems.

Fourteen-year-old League Cadet Carmine Girona of the LT Michael Murphy Division in New York has been in the program since 2023 and has already attended medical and aviation training, along with a STEM training at the US Naval Academy. The fundamentals he learned during each training emphasized balancing

technology with human interface, especially when it comes to AI. Reflecting on what he’s learned about the military while in Sea Cadets, Girona noted technological advances are “changing how missions are planned and executed.” Girona thinks Sea Cadets must be “trained on these systems [to] stay efficient, informed, and ready for the future.”

Sea Cadets headquarters agrees. As they progress in rank, Sea Cadets like Girona can expect to develop essential interpersonal and communication skills while engaging with cutting-edge technology, preparing them for leadership in both high-tech and face-to-face environments.

While others may wrongly view the Sea Cadets’ smartphone policy as anti-technology, cadets, families, and volunteers know the policy enables the program to keep the main thing the main thing — building leaders of character while exposing them to a myriad of maritime-related career opportunities. Through monthly drills and advanced training, cadets learn to make disciplined social media and technology choices.

“Just because cadets can carry the world in their pocket doesn’t mean they need to live there, Weggen said. “Stepping away from phones helps them learn when technology adds value, and when it gets in the way.” ■



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■ We of the Navy League of the United States stand for a strong America — a nation morally, economically, and internally strong.

■ We believe that the security of our nation and of the people of the world demands a well-balanced, integrated, mobile American defense team, of which a strong Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine are indispensable parts.

■ We support all Armed Services to the end that each may make its appropriate contribution to the national security.

■ We know that in a free nation an informed public is indispensable to national security and, therefore, we will strive to keep the nation alert to dangers which threaten — both from without and within.

■ We favor appropriations for each of the Armed Services, adequate for national security, economically administered.

■ We oppose any usurpation of the Congress's constitutional authority over the Armed Services.

■ We urge that our country maintain world leadership in scientific research and development.

■ We support industrial preparedness, planning, production.

■ We support efforts of our government to achieve worldwide peace through international cooperation.

■ We advocate a foreign policy which will avoid wars — if possible; if not, win them!

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Roger Olsen	Tacoma	1

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