

Eight aviators earn ‘Wings of Gold’ in February ceremonies

There were naval aviator designation ceremonies on Feb. 18 and Feb. 24 onboard Naval Air Station Meridian. Eight aviators received their “Wings of Gold” during the ceremonies. The naval aviator designation ceremony is not prescribed specifically by U.S. Navy regulations, but has emerged as an honored product of the rich heritage of naval tradition. It marks the culmination of nearly two years of specialized training, which has prepared these officers for the rigorous demands of aerial combat and carrier operations -- earning each the title of “Naval Aviator” and the right to wear the coveted “Wings of Gold.”

Feb. 18 Winging



ENS Thibaut Morel



ENS Guillaume Wyny

Feb. 24 Winging



LTJG John Gasper



1stLT Matthew Hundt



1stLT Heath Lents



LT Grant Mason



LT Matt Nightingale



LT Jake Robertson

Feb. 18 Golden Stick



Photo by MC1 Krystina Coffey

CDR Gregory Enzinger, commanding officer of VT-7, presents ENS Thibaut J.J. Morel, French navy, with the Golden Stick during a ceremony in the chapel, Feb. 18. The award is sponsored by the Mississippi Council of the Navy League and is given to the top aviator in each winging class.

Feb. 24 Golden Stick



Photo by Adam Prince

CDR Jared Thomas, commanding officer of VT-9, presents 1stLT Matthew Hundt with the Golden Stick during a ceremony at the chapel, Feb. 24. The award is sponsored by the Mississippi Council of the Navy League and is given to the top aviator in each winging class.

● Changes

Tied to it is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff publication “Enlisted Professional Military Education.” Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Kristofer Reyes, the manager for enlisted joint professional military education on the Joint Staff, worked with Colón-López to see the project to fruition.

The idea of “joint” has grown over the years. In the 1960s, it meant two or more services worked together – mostly at the senior levels.

Military leaders saw the advantages of the services working together, and the move since then has been to plan together and fight together. What started with senior officers has pushed down the ranks – officer and enlisted – with the realization that even entry-level service members need to know something about the capabilities provided by members of other services.

In Iraq, it was not unusual for an Army patrol to go outside the wire, with Air Force and Navy personnel helping defend against the improvised explosive device threat. Air Force, Army, Marine or Navy aircraft may have provided the close-air support needed. Persistent observation may have come from any of the services; overarching everything would be satellite communications and surveillance – usually run by the Air Force, but not always.

Service members still have to know the procedures and capabilities of their own services first, but they also need to understand the advantages that working as a joint force team provides.

But it now goes even beyond that. The military works as part of a whole-of-government team. The civilian agencies – the departments of State, Treasury, Justice, Agriculture and more – provide capabilities that can be crucial to success of U.S. security efforts.

The place to learn about the joint force concept can’t be on the battlefield, on the fly, Colón-López said. This is why he oversaw a revision of the enlisted professional military education effort – emphasizing the joint nature of operations and the responsibilities of noncommissioned officers and petty officers to lead the way.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave Colón-López his marching orders soon after taking office in October 2019. “He asked me to look at the way that we were professionally educating our enlisted force, specifically, on the joint enterprise and how we need to go ahead and start shaping it for strategic competition,” the SEAC said in an interview.

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Local Happenings

MARCH

5: Redd Hot Steam at Soule' at 6-9 p.m. at the Soule Steam Feed Works. Experience a night under the stars strolling along the hidden cobblestone alleyways of Meridian's historic Soule' Steam Works while enjoying exquisite cocktails and small bites. Tickets are \$35 single/\$60 couples; call 601-693-2224.

10: Brown Bag Lunch Performance: Irish Step Dancing from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. at the Mississippi Arts + Entertainment Experience. Catherine Bishop leads this educational talk about Irish dance with a demonstration by performers from St. Andrew's Episcopal School. Free and open to the public; call 601-581-1550.

26: 5th Annual Allie Cat Run & Festival from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. at City Hall Lawn. Join the 5K run; 2 mile run/walk and kids fun run. All proceeds benefit MORA, Allie Carruth Scholarship and Allie Carruth Grant. For info, visit <http://time2run.net>.

26: MCM-Meridian's 1st Birthday! from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Mississippi Children's Museum - Meridian. Come celebrate our first birthday. Tickets are \$10; call 601-512-0278.



Service Academies directed to build up Sexual Assault Prevention Programs

The U.S. military service academies are doing a good job taking care of victims of sexual assault, but they can do more in the way of preventing those assaults from happening in the first place, the acting director of the Defense Department's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office said.

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partment's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office said.

During a virtual briefing February 17, following the release of DOD's Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at the Military Service Academies, Nate Galbreath said academy programs are "heavily response-oriented," noting that they're good at taking care of victims once they report, ensuring they're given proper support, and following through with criminal investigations.

-- From C. Todd Lopez, DoD News

[Read more, click here](#)

F-35C brings advanced strike capabilities to jungle warfare exercise

As 3rd Marine Division commences Jungle Warfare Exercise 22, a large-scale, joint force exercise, Marine Wing Fighter Attack Squadron 314 is integrating the capabilities of the F-35C Lightning II. VMFA-314 will be supporting ground operations from their position deployed onboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, displaying their ability to deliver long-range strike capabilities and close air support from an aircraft carrier...

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VMFA-314, the first Marine squadron to deploy the F-35C, continues to demonstrate its proficiencies during JWX 22 by conducting simulated offensive and defensive air support, as well as air to ground support training missions alongside the Marines of 1st Marine Air Wing, Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces and the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group in support of Expeditionary Advance Base Operations.

-- From Capt. Charles Allen

[Read more, click here](#)

U.S. Navy ships participate in bilateral drills with Italian navy

The Blue Ridge-class command and control ship USS Mount Whitney (LCC 20) and guided-missile destroyers USS Forest Sherman (DDG 98) and USS Roosevelt (DDG 80) conducted bilateral maneuvering and communication exercises with Italian Navy aircraft carrier ITS Giuseppe Garibaldi (C551), Feb. 22.

Bilateral ship maneuvering drills, communication tests and other simulated tactical exercises ensure the navies are able to effectively communicate and work seamlessly together during real-world operations.

Giuseppe Garibaldi is an anti-submarine warfare (ASW) carrier and based in Taranto, Italy. The ship is equipped with surface-to-air missiles, torpedo tube launchers and defensive close-in weapons system (CIWS) mounts and has the capability to launch and recover AV-8B Harrier II jump jets

and a variety of helicopters.

"Garibaldi is a veteran ship and is one of the most important in the Italian Navy, being the first aircraft carrier Italy has had post-WWII," said Lt. j.g. Gianmatteo Francavilla, an Italian naval officer participating in a one-year foreign exchange program and currently serving as assistant navigator aboard Forrest Sherman.

The maneuvers, executed in accordance with international law, highlight the professionalism and skillful seamanship of the navies involved.

"We are grateful for this opportunity to practice operating together with our Italian counterparts," said U.S. Navy Capt. Milciades "Tony" Then, commander of Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 22.

-- From Lt. Cmdr. Fernando Rivero and Lt. j.g. Kathleen Barrios, U.S. 6th Fleet Public Affairs

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To submit an item to the "Sale...Or" column, e-mail adam.prince@navy.mil. Deadline is the Thursday prior to publication.

Listings in the "Sale...Or" column are free for anyone who works at NAS Meridian. To include your announcement, email adam.prince@navy.mil

House to vote on bill to help veterans exposed to burn pits

By Kevin Freking
AP News

The House is poised to pass legislation that would dramatically boost health care services and disability benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The bill set for a vote Thursday has the backing of the nation’s major veterans groups and underscores the continued cost of war years after the fighting has stopped. If passed into law, it would increase spending by more than \$300 billion over the next decade, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

“If we’re not willing to pay the price of war, we shouldn’t go,” said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

The bill would open up Department of Veterans Affairs health care to millions of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service even if they don’t have a service-connected disability.

The bill also would provide new or increased disability benefits to thousands of veterans who have become ill with cancer or respiratory conditions such as bronchitis or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD. The VA would presume that veterans developed their illness as a result of exposure to toxic substances during their service.

The bill’s supporters say it is a clear recognition from Congress that veterans were exposed to toxic substances, they are suffering as a result and the process of proving to the VA that their illness was caused by their exposure is too burdensome.

Opponents of the legislation say it would grant health and disability benefits to many veterans whose conditions may not have anything to do with their military service. They expressed worry that the influx of cases would tax an already stressed VA system, leading to longer wait times for health care and processing disability claims.

The political dynamics surrounding the vote was evident on the House floor Wednesday as scores of Democrats, some from competitive swing districts, spoke in favor of the bill.

“This bill addresses the true cost of war



AP Photo by Simon Klingert

In this April 28, 2011, photo, an Afghan National Army pickup truck passes parked U.S. armored military vehicles, as smoke rises from a fire in a trash burn pit at Forward Operating Base Caferetta Nawzad, Helmand province south of Kabul, Afghanistan. The House is poised to pass legislation that would dramatically boost health care services and disability benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan.

and opposing it would be a vote against our servicemembers and veterans,” said Rep. Mark Takano of California, the Democratic chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

Republicans generally left it to Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks of Iowa to do all the talking Wednesday in opposition to the bill. Miller-Meeks is a U.S. Army veteran and said she hears from fellow veterans frequently in Iowa who wait months, or even years, for the benefits they earned, and that problem will only grow if the bill becomes law. She also noted that the projected cost of the bill is more than the budgets of nine Cabinet-level departments combined.

“We are not doing right by our veterans by being fiscally irresponsible in their name,” Miller-Meeks said.

The military routinely used burn pits to dispose of waste during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. A 2020 study from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine found that existing

health studies provided insufficient evidence to determine whether exposure to burn pit emissions are linked to adverse respiratory conditions such as asthma, chronic bronchitis and lung cancer. The authors of the study said the uncertainty doesn’t mean there is no association — only that there was insufficient data to draw definitive conclusions.

President Joe Biden is among those who has voiced suspicion that his son’s death from brain cancer was linked to burn pits that were in use while Maj. Beau Biden served in Iraq.

“And they come home, many of the world’s fittest and best trained warriors, never the same — headaches, numbness, dizziness, a cancer that would put them in a flag-draped coffin,” he said during Tuesday’s State of the Union address.

Biden said it’s unknown whether a burn pit caused his son’s brain cancer, or the diseases of so many others who served, “but I’m committed to finding out everything we can.”

The White House has endorsed the House bill, which goes beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. It also adds hypertension to the list of illnesses that Vietnam veterans are presumed to have developed because of exposure to Agent Orange. The CBO estimates that about 600,000 of the 1.6 million veterans who served in Vietnam and who already receive disability compensation also have hypertension, or high blood pressure. They would be eligible for increased compensation, which would depend upon the severity of the illness.

Biden called on the VA last year to examine the impact of burn pits and other airborne hazards. He has backed expanding the number of conditions that the VA would presume were caused by toxic exposure from burn pits.

In November, the White House announced that soldiers exposed to burn pits who developed any of three specific ailments — asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis — within 10 years can receive disability benefits. The House bill greatly builds on that effort with 21 additional presumptive conditions, and possibly more to come in ensuing years.

The bill also provides for retroactive benefits to veterans whose disability claims have been denied and to survivors of deceased veterans.

The sums are substantial. For example, Vietnam veterans eligible for retroactive payments due to hypertension from exposure to Agent Orange would receive retroactive payments averaging about \$13,500, while survivors would receive about \$100,000, the CBO said in a December report.

Meanwhile, some 268,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan whose claims have been denied would receive retroactive payments averaging about \$50,000. And some 5,500 survivors would receive about \$160,000, on average, CBO said.

It is unclear how the House bill will fare in an evenly divided Senate where legislation generally needs 60 votes to advance.

The Senate has unanimously passed a much narrower bill extending how long combat veterans are guaranteed VA care. But House Democrats said the Senate legislation is just a fraction of what is needed.

Too much is more than enough during winter getaway

After two years of pandemic monotony, I threw a royal hissy fit.

The novelty of “staying home” had worn off long ago. I told my husband, Francis, I desperately needed to get away, or I’d lose my mind. He could see from the spittle on my chin and the crazed look in my twitching right eye, that I was serious.

A month later, Francis surprised me with tickets for a week at an “all-inclusive luxury resort” in Aruba.

Despite having traveled extensively during two overseas tours, we didn’t have much experience with Caribbean islands, much less tropical resorts. Our previous trips were on a strict military family budget, which usually involved driving our minivan, renting inexpensive accommodations, packing our own food, and rejecting pricey excursions and paid tour guides.

But as I perused the website of our

COLUMN



Molinari

Aruban all-inclusive luxury resort, we could’ve gone bankrupt for all I cared. If I didn’t have to cook, clean, or find another damned show to binge-watch on Netflix, this trip would be priceless.

Our plane left Boston late because of the extensive de-icing required for take-off, but six hours later, we stood under the blazing equatorial sun, while aqua blue waters lapped the resort’s white sand beach, and 85-degree breezes blew through palms and cacti.

We squeezed our pale, flakey, fleshy, winter bodies into bathing suits (flagrant pandemic overeating) and hit one of the resort’s many outdoor bars for our first round of all-included cocktails. “This is exactly what I needed,” I told Francis while sipping a frozen mango margarita under a palapa on the beach.

Interestingly, all of the resort’s cocktails, wine, beer, soda, apple juice and milk were served in identical, opaque plastic tumblers like the ones stacked by the buffet at Golden Corral. Drinking chardonnay out of institutional vessels wasn’t exactly glamorous, but we assumed that, with so many guests walking barefoot around pools and beaches, this was a necessary safety precaution.

Our “ocean view” fourth-floor room looked over one of the resort’s many

pools and out to the sea. “Wow, how about that view?” Francis said, sitting on our balcony, sipping bourbon from his Golden Corral tumbler while waiting for me to dress for dinner.

I stepped out onto the balcony just as someone below bellowed, “JACKPAHT!” We’d soon learn that the group in the pool had been on our flight from Boston, and were in Aruba for a wedding. Their extended family, which included aunts, uncles, grandparents and lots of kids, had rented the pool-side rooms below us. By the end of the week, we could identify them by their heavy Boston accents and poolside outbursts.

“C’mahn, Uncle Jimmy, let’s play Jackpaht!”

“Hey Bahb! I’m stahhving!”

“MAHHKO! POLO! MAHHKO POLO!”

“MA! Jayden’s diy-pah fell off in the pool!”

Our meal options included five themed restaurants (Mexican, Asian, Italian, Fine Dining, and a Tropical Grill featuring heated tables where guests grilled raw meats with a medic standing by to dress burn wounds), two buffets (nothing says “luxury” like scraping at the sides of a metal vat of macaroni and cheese), and various snacks offered at the outdoor bars (to

lessen the risk of diabetic coma from the syrupy coconut rum, amaretto, grenadine, peach schnapps and margarita mix). Determined to get everything our all-inclusive package offered, we gorged ourselves at them all.

We signed up for a snorkeling “booze cruise” where we saw more drinks than fish, and a violent off-road Jeep tour during which I nearly burst my spleen in the Arikok National Park.

“A cocktail, honey?” Francis offered on our last day under the palapa.

“Just a Diet Coke, please.” Sunburned, sore and battling diarrhea, I’d had my fill of unlimited cocktails, food, sunshine, adventure, pool patrons, and warm tropical breezes. At least that’s what I told myself.

Real life isn’t an all-inclusive tropical resort, so I thought of our charming New England house, roll-hiding wool sweaters, home-cooked meals, cozy TV nights, our kids, the dog. Turns out, the water is bluer, the breezes are warmer, the drinks are cheaper ... and the grass is always greener on the other side.

Lisa Smith Molinari’s self syndicated columns appear on her blog, www.themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and she recently co-authored *Stories Around the Table: Laughter, Wisdom, and Strength in Military Life* Follow [Lisa@MolinariWrites](mailto:Lisa@MolinariWrites.com).



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