



SWEETWATER CHAPTER MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

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THE MARINERS LOG

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August 2026

FUTURE HAPPENINGS

****First Monday, August 3, 2026: Chapter Board meeting at 9:00 A.M.** at Bonita Golf Club Lounge, 5540 Sweetwater Road, Bonita, CA 91902.

****Second Wednesday, August 12, 2026: MOAA, Sweetwater Chapter luncheon meeting at 11:00 AM,** at IHOP Restaurant, 1430 E. Plaza Blvd., National City, CA 91950..

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

MOAA, Sweetwater Chapter celebrated the 250th Anniversary of the United States Independence on July 8, 2026 at the Liwag residence. The 250th Independence Day celebration marks the adoption of the Declaration of independence on July 4 1776. It serves as a historic milestone to honor the nation's founding principles, reflect on two and one half centuries of history , and look forward for the future.

The Sweetwater Chapter celebration was attended by more than 20 members, families and friends. It was an opportune time to show appreciation for the privilege of living in a country that is the land of the free, the home of the brave and the land of opportunity. Patriotic displays of American Flags were everywhere, the smell of barbecue permeates the air, apple pie and ice cream enjoyed by all, and traditional Filipino food like; pansit, lumpia, and lechon were served. "Proud to be an American"



HAPPY 250th BIRTHDAY UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



2026 OFFICERS

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Major VHA Reorganization Aims to Improve Veteran Care and Access

By: René Campos July 06, 2026 MOAA Newsletter

A significant ongoing reorganization of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) will improve the quality, consistency, and accessibility of care for veterans, senior VA leaders said.

VA officials recently met with veterans service organizations, including MOAA, to outline the VHA's Restructure for Impact and Sustainability Effort (RISE), which is already being implemented and reflects a broad push to modernize VA health care delivery.

Directed by Executive Order 14210, the effort streamlines VHA's structure and operations to create a more efficient, effective health care system.

RISE builds on the VHA's 80-year legacy of providing care to veterans by modernizing and realigning the system to support more uniform, coordinated, and responsive care for the veteran community, officials said.

What RISE Means for the Veteran Community

Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors who rely on VA health care should see a more predictable, reli-

able experience across the VHA as the RISE initiative rolls out.

While it will affect approximately 10% of the workforce – primarily in non-clinical and non-field roles – officials said the transition is not expected to disrupt care, but rather to reduce variation in processes and strengthen safety, quality, and outcomes over time. The focus is on making VA health care easier to navigate and more responsive while maintaining continuity throughout implementation.

At the heart of the reorganization is a clearer separation of responsibilities and fewer organizational layers.

The new model divides VHA functions into three core areas:

- Policy and oversight at VA headquarters office.
- Operations and standardization through a Medical Operations Center.
- Field execution through regional structures.

The effort aligns with recommendations and findings from the Government Accountability Office, the VA Office of Inspector General, congressional oversight, and broader health care industry trends.

(Reorganization Continued on page 3)

(Reorganization Continued from page 2)

Timeline and Implementation

The changes are already underway, with phased roll-out and continued refinement expected over the coming months. Veterans should begin to see gradual improvements in consistency and overall care delivery as the new structure takes hold, VA officials said, with frontline staff also expected to see operational improvements, particularly in processes and care delivery.

While the reorganization is significant, the effort is designed to strengthen care delivery so the veteran community experiences a more dependable and better-coordinated system, according to VA leaders.

For ongoing updates on VHA reorganization and its impact on the veteran community, visit MOAA.org/news.

Senators Question Whether Military Pharmacy Program Is the Best Deal for Beneficiaries

July 17, 2026 MOAA Newsletter



Photo by Airman 1st Class Alystria Maurer/Air Force

This article by Karen Jowers originally appeared on Military Times, the nation's largest independent newsroom dedicated to covering the military and veteran community.

Senators questioned July 16 whether the financial details of the military's Tricare pharmacy program benefit the contractor, Express Scripts, more than military beneficiaries.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., raised concerns about anti-competitive tactics, questioning the practice of allowing Express Scripts — the largest pharmacy benefit manager in the United States — to have the contract as exclusive administrator of the Tricare pharmacy program, while owning and operating two mail-order pharmacies, Express Scripts Pharmacy and Accredo Specialty Pharmacy.

She questioned whether Express Scripts drives more business to itself, pushing local pharmacies out of the Tricare network and limiting beneficiaries' access to more

personalized local care.

"That is a clear conflict of interest," Warren said during a hearing of the Senate Armed Services' personnel subcommittee. It's "an open invitation for Express Scripts to milk the federal government, kick out competitors, and steer big bucks to itself."

Warren, ranking member of that subcommittee, said DoD requires the Tricare pharmacy contractor to own both a pharmacy benefit manager and a pharmacy.

The contractor, Express Scripts, receives a fixed administrative fee per prescription filled at retail pharmacies or the mail order pharmacy, said Dr. David J. Smith, a retired Navy rear admiral who is deputy director of the Defense Health Agency. The contractor can't generate revenue from the prices of drugs, he said, and the DoD model eliminates common commercial industry profit mechanisms.

Under the mail-order program, the government buys the drugs, and Express Scripts dispenses the drugs and are paid that administrative fee. The amount of that fee, or other information about the contract, is not public knowledge, as DoD and Express Scripts consider it proprietary information.

Beneficiaries pay \$14 per prescription filled through the mail order pharmacy and \$16 at network retail pharmacies. That money isn't kept by Express Scripts; it goes to the Defense Health Agency, said Adam Kautzner, president of Express Scripts and Evernorth Care Management. Beneficiaries can get their prescriptions filled at military treatment facilities at no charge.

In general, DoD has been trying to move to mail order because it's cheaper, Smith said, and because of the convenience for beneficiaries.

DoD continues to find ways to deliver the benefit to make sure beneficiaries have access to their medication, in a "fiscally responsible way," he said, adding that they're also working on ways to shore up the supply chain for medications.

But as the government contractor, Express Scripts decides which pharmacies are in the Tricare retail pharmacy network and how much they are reimbursed.

Since 2022, more than 13,000 local pharmacies have left the network, leaving nearly 400,000 military families scrambling to find a new pharmacy in network, Warren said.

Currently, there are 46,000 retail pharmacies across the country that voluntarily participate in the Tricare retail pharmacy network, Kautzner said. As a result, 98% of beneficiaries have a retail option within 15 minutes of their home, he said, which exceeds the contract requirements.

Of the 46,000 pharmacies in the network, 16,000 are independent pharmacies.

Among those pharmacies that left the network was Roden-Smith Pharmacy in Clovis, N.M. Its owner, Micah Lansford, testified that the terms of the contract Express

(Pharmacy Continued on page 4)

SWEETWATER CHAPTER MOAA – BOARD MEETING MINUTES

JUNE 1, 2026

I. 10:45 A.M. – The Board meeting was called to order by President Ernie Liwag.

II. Ernie Liwag led the Pledge of Allegiance. Attendees were Ernie & Remy Liwag, Oscar & Veronica Garcia, Vivian Rinehart, Marvelyn Hoyt, Rich and Jean Wilson.

III. Secretary's Report – Submitted by Secretary, Rich Wilson. Motion made by Marvelyn Hoyt, 2nd by Vivian Rinehart, minutes approved.

IV. Treasurer's Report Submitted by treasurer, Oscar Garcia:

May 28,2026–April 30,2026 Ending Balance brought forward: \$4,232.49

INCOME 00.00 EXPENSES 00.00

Ending Balance as of May 31,2026 \$4,232.49

V. Presidents Report – Submitted by Ernie Liwag:

a. MOAA, Sweetwater Chapter luncheon meeting on Wednesday, June 10,2026, at 11:00 AM at IHOP, 1430 E Plaza Blvd, National City, CA 91950.

b. Next Board meeting: Monday, July 6,2026 at 9:00 A.M. at Bonita Golf Club Lounge,5540 Sweetwater Road, Bonita, CA 91902.

c. JROTC- 1. San Ysidro High School, JROTC Presentation: Cadet CPO Alexa Osuna – 8:30 A.M. Presented by Ernie Liwag.

2. Mt Miguel High School JROTC Presentation: CSM Edgar Zabala – 6:00 P.M. Presented by Ernie Liwag. The Drill Team performance was spectacular!

d. Independence Day Picnic to celebrate 250 years of Independence. Wednesday, July 8,2026 at Liwag Residence (1056 Fuchsia Lane, San Diego, CA 92154) RSVP.NLT Friday, July 3, 2026.

e. Newsletter advertising stipend. Nothing to report currently.

f. Legislative update.

VI. Newsletter Editor Report – (Jean Wilson): N/A

VII Sunshine Report – (Marvelyn Hoyt) – N/A

VIII. Surviving Spouses Report – (Vivian Rinehart): N/A

IX. Old/New Business – N/A

X. Adjournment – Motion by Jean Wilson, 2nd Marvelyn Hoyt. Adjourned 10:01 AM

(Pharmacy Continued from page 3)

Scripts offered his pharmacy forced them out of the program in 2023.

Under the previous contract, the pharmacy had been reimbursed an average of about \$0.37 below their actual cost for the 6,750 prescriptions they filled, causing the pharmacy to lose nearly \$2,500 in 2022.

Under the terms of the contract Express Scripts proposed for 2023, Roden-Smith would have lost nearly \$9 on average for each prescription and \$60,000 for the same volume in 2023.

Lansford described the real-life consequences for the military community of having fewer local pharmacies.

"Community pharmacies like mine provide a higher level of personal care, easier access," he said.

He gave the example of a disabled U.S. Air Force retiree, whose caregiver relied on Lansford to review each monthly fill of medications, reconciling any changes and making sure his medications still made sense.

He also spoke of young active duty spouses who could no longer use his pharmacy drive-thru to pick up an antibiotic for their child, but are instead waiting in long

lines to get onto base, hoping the antibiotic is in stock at the military pharmacy.

Greg Reybold, vice president of the American Pharmacy Cooperative, which includes about 1,500 independent pharmacies, said while Express Scripts touts the savings of the mail order pharmacy, it's cheaper to fill prescriptions at the retail pharmacies than through Express Scripts mail order.

Filling generic drugs at Tricare retail pharmacies is cheaper for beneficiaries, and for the Defense Health Agency, he said. If for example, the drug costs the pharmacy \$3, the beneficiary pays that instead of the usual \$16 Tricare copay.

When 13,000 retail pharmacies left the network, he said, "the only winner was the Express Scripts mail order pharmacy," because beneficiaries were forced to use that pharmacy.

Reybold and Lansford both called for an independent audit of the pharmacy program.

"We have a strong desire to serve these people, and want to be there for them," Lansford said. "And we want a fair deal to provide service."

Upgrade Your Travel: How TSA Is Supporting the Military Community

By: Teal Yost July 27, 2026 MOAA Newsletter



Nashville International Airport is one of several locations featuring an Honor Lane. (Photo by Adrian White/DoW)

(This article originally appeared in the August 2026 issue of Military Officer magazine.)

Air travel can test even the most patient person.

Thinking about crowded security lines, flight delays, and lost luggage might be enough to stress you out.

For military families, the stress is often amplified.

Tight timelines, multiple bags, traveling with children, and connections can turn a routine trip into a logistical exercise worthy of a military operation.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is trying to make things easier. In July 2025, the TSA announced its “Serve with Honor, Travel with Ease” initiative, which offers benefits and services specifically designed for servicemembers, veterans, military families, and Gold Star families.

Free TSA PreCheck

Active duty servicemembers can access TSA PreCheck lanes at no cost by using their military ID number as their Known Traveler Number when booking flights. This means shorter lines, keeping shoes on, and laptops staying in their bags.

Military families benefit as well. Children 12 and under may accompany a TSA PreCheck-eligible parent. Travelers ages 13-17 can also receive expedited screening when traveling on the same airline reservation as their eligible parent or guardian.

Dedicated Honor Lanes

At select airports, travelers might also notice dedicated military screening lanes, often referred to as Honor Lanes. Unlike TSA PreCheck, which is a trusted traveler program, Honor Lanes are designated screening areas that help eligible travelers move through security more efficiently while recognizing their service to the nation.

Travelers will still undergo standard TSA screening procedures, but the dedicated lanes can help reduce wait times and streamline the checkpoint experience.

The program is designed for a broad segment of the military community, including active duty servicemembers, military retirees, veterans, military spouses, dependents, and Gold Star families.

These lanes are currently available at:

- Austin-Bergstrom International Airport
- Charlotte Douglas International Airport
- Colorado Springs Airport
- Denver International Airport
- El Paso International Airport
- Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport
- Nashville International Airport
- San Antonio International Airport
- San Diego International Airport
- Seattle-Tacoma International Airport
- Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport

Many of these airports are located near major military installations or serve large military populations. While the lanes might vary by airport, the goal is the same: to help military travelers move through security more efficiently.

Additional Support

For veterans and wounded warriors who might need additional assistance while traveling, the TSA Cares program provides personalized support through the screening process.

The program is designed to help travelers with disabilities, injuries, medical conditions, or other circumstances requiring additional support. If interested, contact the TSA at least 72 hours prior to travel by going online or calling (855) 787-2227.

While these programs won’t completely eliminate the chaos that can come with air travel, they can make it a little more manageable. For a community that spends a lifetime answering the call to go wherever they’re needed, these are small benefits worth knowing before your next trip.

The Dawn of the Drone Wars

July 27, 2026 MOAA Newsletter

(This article by Hope Hodge Seck originally appeared in the August 2026 issue of Military Officer magazine.)

The Pentagon has recently requested \$53.6 billion for its “drone dominance” initiative, aimed at purchasing unmanned systems and boosting their domestic production in FY 2027. In addition, the department asked for \$20.6 billion to counter adversaries’ drone technology. But having the systems in stock is half the battle; training warfighters on how to use them is the other half.

Already, tens of thousands of small attack drones,

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loitering munitions, and counter-drone weapons are making their way to Army and Marine Corps ground units. These soldiers and Marines understand the technology will feature prominently in the next big fight and might even determine tactical advantage.

Even as they train, decision-makers are working out how to employ and assign the new tech, which comes with a heavy complement of batteries and spares, and then determine which of the available systems are worthy to remain in the services' arsenals for the long term.

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth first announced the drone dominance effort last year. An initial \$1.1 billion was allocated for the purchase of about 300,000 small attack drones by the end of 2027, per the Army, and to train "senior officers to overcome bureaucratic risk-aversion culture in drone procurement and training," according to the Pentagon.

Indeed, the initiative has helped accelerate ongoing drone acquisition programs, Marine Corps Col. Jeremie Hester told Military Officer. An AH-1 Cobra helicopter pilot by trade, Hester leads the Corps' aviation combat element for the Combat Development Directorate.

"We were moving in that direction," he said in regard to bolstering the military's drone inventory. "Now we're getting more funding. Now we're getting assets to really just help us move faster."

Shortly after the Pentagon announced the drone dominance program, Hester began, as he put it, "moon-lighting" as head of the Marine Corps' newly minted Drone Dominance Task Force, charged with sorting out the thorniest problems for employing small drones and counter-drone weapons.

Among those issues are the development of a handbook of best practices for using the technology; a list identifying acceptable drones for purchase; and signature management training to help troops avoid detection from adversarial drones.

Hester dates the Corps' interest in developing surveillance and beyond-line-of-sight attack capabilities to counterinsurgency operations in Iraq in the early 2000s, well before the service got its first eye-in-the-sky drones. The Russia-Ukraine war, featuring both sides' canny use of unmanned platforms to cripple or destroy exquisite legacy systems, has pushed drone skeptics to get on board.

"It's the level of asymmetry that drone technology has brought," Hester said. "If you look at what Ukraine did ... they're flying these attack drones, they're giving them 150-kilometer legs and dropping them from weather balloons, right?"

"So I think that was recognized by our service," he added, "and it wasn't received with open arms initially, but people started seeing the light."

The Corps' vision, as articulated by leaders including

the head of Training and Education Command, Lt. Gen. Benjamin Watson, is to see every Marine as a competent small-drone operator capable of making a kill shot at 500 meters, similar to how the service has long called every Marine a rifleman.

And the Marine Corps is well on its way: As of the end of May, Hester said, every infantry battalion in the service had received 80 to 90 Neros Archer first-person-view attack drones. Each quadcopter can carry a 4.5-pound lethal payload and, given its reportedly low cost, get lost or destroyed without causing too much heartburn.

Hitting the Books

Meanwhile, another program is delivering a different kind of drone capability to the same ground units. Organic Precision Fires-Light (OPF-L) is now sending three different kinds of loitering munitions — drones that crash into targets and explode upon impact — to two West Coast-based infantry battalions as an early proof of concept before distributing them Corps-wide.

The Department of the Navy is requesting nearly \$99 million to buy OPF-L systems in FY 2027. One budget document says the funds would "provide operational and engagement options for the employing units, inert rounds for new system operator training, annual training, and Fleet exercises, and ancillary equipment for fielding to additional battalions beginning in late 2027 based on production lead times." The document specifically cites Teledyne's Rogue 1 and Anduril's Bolt systems as notable options.

So far, multiphase evaluations in which grunts were "left to their own devices" to stress test the technology have been successful, said Travis Bowden, the Corps' capabilities integration officer for precision fires.

Like attack drones, OPF-L loitering munitions are light enough to carry and are considered attritable — meaning their cost justifies their expendability.

However, they function more like autonomous missiles, as they can wait for extended periods at a programmed location before hurtling toward an identified target. In the early days of the Iran war, loitering munitions made headlines when the Pentagon acknowledged it attacked Iran with the weapon type reverse-engineered from the Iranian Shahed-136 drone.

Layered together, the first-person-view (FPV) attack drones and the loitering munitions make for a powerful force capable of identifying and targeting the enemy at both close range and at distances of 10 miles or more. The combination also adds significant cognitive load to rifle squadrons and platoons in the form of technical operations, logistics, and radio-frequency spectrum management, among other skills.

While Army and Marine Corps basic training courses on the systems are at least a week long, officials have said basic operational understanding can be achieved in a

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(Drone Continued from page 6)

few hours. But Army veteran Jake Steckler questions the effectiveness of that timeline.

Steckler is a former AH-64 Apache helicopter pilot who observed drone operations in Ukraine while volunteering with front-line organizations there. In an article published on the analysis and op-ed site War on the Rocks, he noted that Ukraine's military places special emphasis on the development of drone operators' skills.

"Ukraine has over 30 schools and centers training drone operators, with the head of one school calling it 'impossible' to teach certain skills in as short as a month," Steckler wrote. "Meanwhile, the Army's Unmanned Advanced Lethality Course is only three weeks long, and its class size last August was just 28 soldiers."

Bowden partly acknowledged the validity of this school of thought.

"Here's a 20-year-old lance corporal just out of high school [or] boot camp, and we're asking them to do all the things that a Marine Corps rifleman does, and learn and master those skills, and then we're going to give them this flying robot bomb and say: 'Hey, just go for it, bro,'" he said. "That's not always a recipe for success."

Still, he added, the early rollout of the systems showed Marines were game for the challenge, finding the controller interfaces intuitive and the workload manageable.

"That was good to see, that the time and the money we invested into making these systems easy to use has kind of paid off," he said.

Army Lt. Col. Wolf Amacker, who leads the Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Tactics Branch at the Army's Aviation Center of Excellence and helped last year create the service's three-week advanced lethality drone course, said he sees benefits to the tight timeline of training. The short window to complete the course and the drills involved in the training replicate real-world pressures drone operators will face.

"[B]ecause that time is so truncated and so shortened that they have to get the reps in, it is more beneficial than if we extended that course out and gave them longer periods of time to actually do the planning," Amacker said.

Ever since the course kicked off in September, three classes of students graduated, with between 20 and 28 soldiers in each.

Deliberate Redundancy

The Army's journey to acquire and field small drones has mirrored the Marine Corps' in many ways; they've even made separate purchases of some of the same systems, such as the Archer and Rogue 1.

The Army's loitering munitions acquisition program, known as Low Altitude Stalking and Strike Ordnance, trails the Marine Corps' OPF-L fielding timeline. But the Army's FPV fielding goals are aggressive, with Secretary

Daniel Driscoll last year announcing the service plans to buy a million attack drones by 2028 — more than two for every active duty soldier now serving.

Both services are also buying a range of makes and models that perform the way they want, rather than selecting a single design that meets precise specifications — an approach they historically took for everything from aircraft to rifles. This is reflective of Hegseth's acceleration push toward dominating future drone wars. It also gives the services the opportunity to discard systems and add more without losing momentum, Bowden noted.

"If we're trying to move fast, you don't want to tie the rope to a single horse, right? So if something happens and that thing falls out, you want to have multiple vendors to fall back on to ensure that you find something that works," he said. "It also spurs some competition with all those vendors, too, and kind of keeps that whole ecosystem alive."

Amacker said the Army has taken a page from the Ukrainian military on how best to conduct small drone operations. For the advanced lethality course's central event, instructors form students into four-person teams comprising an FPV operator, a navigator, a medium-range reconnaissance operator, and an engineer tasked with designing and building strike packages. Students are briefed on their mission and given a strike list of targets, then offered their choice of any small drone model and payloads for which they've so far received training.

With their equipment secured, the soldiers virtually play out their planned mission in a simulator.

Afterward, Amacker added, they're given the chance to execute the mission live on a range complex, where they must maneuver into a protected position and then complete the strike. If they take too long, he said, instructors will add hostile drones to the mix.

Soldiers are graded not only on whether they successfully strike the target, he said, but also on how well they camouflaged themselves from enemy surveillance; their selection of an operating position; and their choice of platform and payload.

He also stressed that drones will remain just one component of an infantry unit's battlefield responsibilities.

"Just because we had mounted cavalry didn't mean the infantry went away," he said. "So we're trying to augment it and make that balance and come together, so that again we can be a maneuver force that has all the right capabilities to win the next conflict."

Playing Keep Up

Likewise, offensive drones are not the only — or even most significant — capability joining the ground arsenal.

"For every minute I think about solving an offensive drone problem, I spend five or six minutes trying to figure out how to counter that offensive drone and what the adversary would do with that offensive drone," said Hes-

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(Drone Continued from page 7)

ter, head of the Marine Corps' aviation combat element.

In August 2025, the Pentagon launched Joint Interagency Task Force 401 (JIATF 401), an Army-led unit tasked with working to "better align authorities" to quickly deliver to the armed services weapons capable of defeating small drones.

The arsenal of technologies under development for this purpose includes kinetic weapons that can be carried by troops or mounted on vehicles, electronic warfare tools that spoof or disrupt radio-frequency signals, and energy weapons such as high-powered microwaves and lasers.

In its early months, JIATF 401 worked to deploy millions of dollars' worth of counter-drone tech to the U.S.-Mexico border and to identify regulations and hurdles that hindered domestic base commanders from employing effective drone defense.

The task force also inked a \$5.2 million contract with Perennial Autonomy for Bumblebee V2, an FPV quadcopter that destroys hostile drones via "drone-on-drone collision," according to the Army. The service said Bumblebee will undergo an operational assessment before heading to ground forces.

More recently, the Pentagon announced May 18 it awarded Perennial Autonomy a contract with a \$500 million ceiling, under which the company would provide "a range of artificial intelligence-enabled counter-UAS," including Bumblebee quadcopters.

"The Bumblebee is a remarkable tool, and for the first time ever, we will be able to give our troops a dual-purpose, low-cost attritable ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] platform designed to be used at the tactical edge," Brig. Gen. Matthew Ross, the commander of JIATF 401, told Military Officer in a statement.

"There is no 100% solution to counter every drone — a silver bullet doesn't exist. What we need is a layered defense: awareness, different capabilities, and an ecosystem that works together so that we can defeat threats consistently."

With the addition of each of these weapons comes more training. The Marine Corps rolled out a counter-drone training element for its pre-deployment exercise this spring, and leaders have discussed developing a counter-drone schoolhouse.

JIATF 401, which oversees the Joint Counter- Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems University at Fort Sill, Okla., is seeking an updated doctrine and a new training road map to be put in place by October, said Sgt. Maj. Kellen Rowley, senior enlisted advisor to the task force.

Rowley, who also oversees the development of Bumblebee, said he continually feels tension between the process of updating doctrine and keeping up with a constantly changing battlefield.

"There's never going to be a day where we like to

spike the football and say: 'That's it, we've reached the doctrinal solution, we're done,'" he said.

"We don't want to have half-baked solutions to problems, but there's a middle where we have to move quickly, and we have to adapt with [tactics, techniques, and procedures]. So a lot of what we train and a lot of what we do doesn't necessarily nest in with formal doctrine, but we just have to change at the speed of need."

Hope Hodge Seck is a writer in Massachusetts.

Legacy of the Purple Heart Hits the Road

By: Chris Martin July 27, 2026 MOAA Newsletter



Photo by Senior Airman Dennis Sloan/Air Force

(This article originally appeared in the August 2026 issue of Military Officer magazine.)

The conflict in Vietnam had been raging for about a decade when George Stavropoulos enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He deployed to the war zone on April 23, 1967, and set out on his first patrol the next day.

"I was getting ready to go out on a search of a village," Stavropoulos said. "I was scared to death, like anybody else was. I went out on that patrol, did the village sweep, didn't see anything, didn't find anything, went back to the landing zone to wait for the helicopters to ... take us back to base camp.

"And that's when a sniper fired one round, and it went through my leg."

The military found Stavropoulos, eligible for the Purple Heart award, but he turned it down.

"I refused it — the reason being my mother didn't even know I was in Vietnam yet, let alone wounded, and I didn't want her to find out that way," he said.

But this wouldn't be the first time the military offered him the award. Stavropoulos would become a recipient of four Purple Hearts — a medal with a history dating back to the Revolutionary War.

Military Merit

Nearly a year after Britain surrendered and American

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independence was achieved, Gen. George Washington issued his general orders for Aug. 7, 1782, that would lead to the creation of the Badge of Military Merit — known today as the Purple Heart.

Negotiations toward a peace treaty would follow. In the meantime, Congress was struggling to meet the financial demands of war, including paying troops. Washington's decision to award the Badge of Military Merit was a way of recognizing soldiers for their heroism without breaking the bank.

Records show only three noncommissioned officers from Connecticut — Sgts. William Brown, Elijah Churchill, and Daniel Bissel — received the Badge of Military Merit, although some historians believe there could have been more.

It wasn't until 1932 when this award in its modern form would again see the light of day.

A Modern Approach

The Badge of Military Merit was a heart-shaped purple cloth with stitching that spelled out "merit" in all caps. Today, the Purple Heart is made up of a purple ribbon from which a bronze and purple heart-shaped medallion hangs.

The part metal, part plastic honorific features a left-facing profile of Washington as well as the shield from his coat of arms flanked by sprays of green leaves. The bronze-colored reverse side features the words "For Military Merit," with space for the recipient's name.

Recipients also receive a horizontal purple ribbon with white edges on both the left and right.

In October 1927, then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Pelot Summerall attempted to revive the Badge of Military Merit through a congressional bill. Three months later, the effort was considered dead. But in January 1931, revival efforts gained momentum, albeit secretly.

Summerall's successor, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, began working behind the scenes to redesign the badge with the help of Elizabeth Will, a heraldic specialist with the Army's Office of the Quartermaster General. This time, they were successful.

"By order of the President of the United States, the Purple Heart established by General George Washington at Newburgh, August 7, 1782, during the War of the Revolution, is hereby revived out of respect to his memory and military achievements," MacArthur wrote in a February 1932 order.

There have since been updates to eligibility. For example, in September 1942, in the early stages of World War II, the War Department declared the Purple Heart would be exclusively used for wounds or deaths in combat. This move was partly driven by the creation of the Legion of Merit a few months earlier, awarded for meritori-

ous service. In December that year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt expanded the Purple Heart medal — which had been awarded solely to soldiers — to all branches of the armed forces.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy ordered that any member of the armed forces or American civilian serving under those branches who is wounded or killed "while serving with friendly forces" or "as the result of an act of any hostile foreign force" shall be eligible for a Purple Heart. The wording was deliberate, given U.S. presence in Vietnam, where North Vietnamese troops were not officially considered enemies — not until American forces officially took on a combat role in the war in 1965, shortly before Stavropoulos deployed there

Recipients' Recollections

On May 14, about three weeks after the sniper incident, Stavropoulos was on patrol when his unit entered combat with North Vietnamese troops, during which he was hit by mortar shrapnel. Still, as a hospital corpsman, he attended to others' wounds until medevac arrived and took him to a field hospital.

About a month later, on July 2, his unit moved to reinforce a sister company under ambush. While flying in by helicopter, "all I could see were dead bodies — dead Marines for probably a hundred yards," he recalled.

About an hour into the firefight, he was hit in the left shoulder by an AK-47 round. "That was a devastating injury for me in particular because I'm trying to take care of other Marines and I just got shot in my dominant arm," he said. "I had a couple Marines help me finish bandaging up that one Marine, and then we set about taking care of my wound."

A couple hours later, he was shot again, this time through the knee. "That put me down. Now I can't walk or use my arm very effectively."

Shortly after, he was hit by shrapnel from enemy artillery, which entered the back of his legs and his lower back. (This time, his mother did find out about the injuries via telegram.)

As is typical of other Purple Heart recipients, Stavropoulos is humble in the way he sees himself.

"I see someone who did their job," he said. "I am grateful for what I received, but I would not have — I didn't ever expect four Purple Hearts."

Lt. Col. Ed O'Neal, USAF (Ret), feels the same way about his Purple Heart. The MOAA Life member served 21 years in the Air Force and three in the Army. During a May 2004 attack by militants on a compound in Saudi Arabia, he helped lead a group to safety, despite being unarmed. But as he tried to open a gate — unaware it was locked — an insurgent opened fire with an AK-47.

Bullets ricocheted around O'Neal, with three hitting his hand, his arm, and his back. A fellow officer also

(Purple Heart Continued on page 10)

((Purple Heart Continued from page 9))

assisting that day was also shot. About two hours later, they were rescued.

"It's quite an experience — quite a terrifying experience to be in a situation like that," he said. "My being here, receiving this Purple Heart, it was really evidence of God's grace because that guy should've killed me."

Both of these Purple Heart recipients attended an event last year at the White House, where President Donald Trump proclaimed Aug. 7 to be National Purple Heart Day.

"We like to say, relative to the Purple Heart, 'All gave some, some gave all,'" said Col. Russell Vernon, USA (Ret), the executive director of the National Purple Heart Honor Mission, which helped organize the event. "And I think it's important for Americans to understand that when we talk about the price of our freedoms, [it] wasn't free."

The New York-based nonprofit is contributing to that understanding by launching its Mobile Tribute and Education Center, which will collect and share stories like those of Stavropoulos and O'Neal.

Honoring Heroes

The organization's original goal was to establish a museum dedicated to honoring Purple Heart recipients by highlighting their courage and sacrifices. In 1997, it began raising funds to build the museum in New Windsor, N.Y.

"In 2006, the Hall of Honor was open. In 2019, the hall underwent a major renovation to ensure all the services are properly represented," Vernon said.

It's now taking this mission on the road with the Mobile Tribute and Education Center. Housed in an expandable tractor-trailer, the center will feature exhibits and video testimonials from Purple Heart recipients across conflicts and generations.

"We bring every year one Purple Heart recipient and their guest from each state to New York to visit the museum, and we found out most of them had never been to New York, let alone being able to visit the museum," Vernon said. "So we realized that in order to pay proper honor to Purple Heart recipients around the nation, to have the ability to record their stories, and to also educate the nation, we needed to bring the museum to them."

The traveling museum is expected to visit 35-40 cities per year, with its first stop set for TotalForce+, MOAA's annual conference next taking place Feb. 1-3, 2027, in National Harbor, Md.

The center will include a studio where Purple Heart recipients can record their stories to be preserved in perpetuity. Although recipients "are by and large very humble," they deserve our attention, Vernon said. "All living Purple Heart recipients would tell you they're not heroes — it's those that didn't make it home."

Why I Serve: How a Navy Career Took Her Healing Skills Across the Globe

By: Teal Yost July 27, 2026 MOAA Newsletter

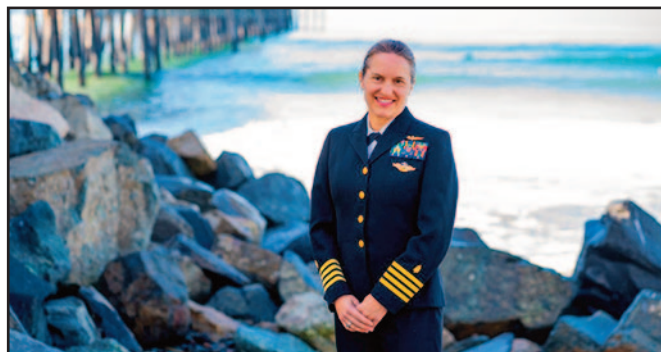


Photo by Bryan Caplis/TruVUE Productions

(This article originally appeared in the August 2026 issue of Military Officer magazine.)

Capt. M.J. Hessert serves in the Operational Readiness Directorate at the Naval Health Research Center, supporting research focused on physiology, human performance, and medical modeling of conflict and operational health care.

Her Navy career has taken her around the world — from combat zones to aircraft carriers — caring for servicemembers and leading under pressure.

An Unexpected Path

"I joined the Navy through the Health Professions Scholarship Program, which paid for medical school," Hessert said. "I was commissioned in 2001 and entered active duty in 2005. My initial motivation was pragmatic. The military offered strong educational benefits."

"What has surprised me the most about military service? How long I've stayed."

The Best and Worst of Times

"Much like Charles Dickens described, the highlights of my career have often been the best and worst moments simultaneously. My deployments included flying combat missions in Iraq, saving hundreds of lives in Afghanistan, working with elite units in North Africa, and serving as a senior medical officer aboard an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea. These experiences were both deeply challenging and profoundly memorable."

Leading by Example

"Like most physicians, I want to help people. My patients happen to be servicemembers and their families, and retirees. I also hope my career demonstrates that women can succeed in traditionally male institutions, even when the path includes persistent obstacles."

"People serve for many different reasons. For some, it's patriotism or family tradition. For others, it's access to health care or education. The military can be a meaningful onramp to adulthood and professional growth."

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