

# ARMED FORCES DISPATCH

San Diego Navy/Marine Corps Dispatch

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Day of the Deployed


October 26

**SIXTY-SIXTH YEAR NO. 17**  
**OCTOBER 16, 2026**


**WE ARE FAMILY** A Sailor aboard **USS Abraham Lincoln** aircraft carrier shares a smile with family at Naval Air Station North Island, Calif., Oct. 8, 2026, following the ship's return to homeport. U.S. Navy photo by MCSN Vanessa Astorga Granado

## USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN RETURNS TO SAN DIEGO AFTER 10-MONTH COMBAT DEPLOYMENT

by Chief Petty Officer  
Joseph Montemarano

USS Abraham Lincoln, Pentagon News

Aircraft carrier **USS Abraham Lincoln** departed its home port Nov. 21, 2025. In the 321 days since casting off lines from San Diego, the ship and its crew sailed across the Pacific Ocean, through the San Bernardino Strait, Surigao Strait and Strait of Malacca, and into the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.

The ship steamed more than 93,000 nautical miles, conducted 72 replenishments-at-sea and received more than 20.5 million gallons of aviation fuel during the operations. *Lincoln's* crew also supported more than 13,000 aviation sorties from Carrier Air Wing 9 aircraft, totaling 28,500 flight hours.

"[The] *USS Abraham Lincoln* and the entire carrier strike group team set a new standard of excellence

through their extraordinary conduct during this historic deployment," said Rear Adm. Robert Loughran, Carrier Strike Group 3 commander. "I am incredibly proud of each and every sailor, Marine and member of this team for what they have accomplished under the most demanding conditions. Their professionalism, resilience and combat effectiveness have been unmatched. We now look forward with great excitement to their well-earned reunion with family and loved ones."

After arriving in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in late January, the carrier and its strike group, Carrier Strike Group 3, spearheaded the Navy's involvement in Operation Epic Fury, taking the lead role on the southern Iranian coast as Commander, Task Force 50.

The strike group, with *Lincoln* at its center, supported 40 days of major combat operations, involving

nearly 4,000 combat sorties from the air wing. Task force units destroyed more than 100 Iranian drone, missile and small boat attacks against the force, with the wing delivering more than 1.5 million pounds of ordnance on thousands of targets in support of operational objectives. This concentrated firepower significantly degraded Iranian navy capabilities.

Following the April 8 ceasefire between the U.S. and Iran, the strike group shifted gears, leveraging its skill and expertise toward enforcing a maritime blockade. The strike group's ironclad blockade against Iranian-flagged vessels in the northern Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman denied the flow of Iranian oil and material, ensuring U.S. leaders could engage in diplomatic negotiations from a position of strength.

"Conducting major combat operations, enforcing two naval

blockades, and demonstrating our presence and power projection capabilities in multiple numbered fleets, all while keeping an unprecedented operational tempo for a long period of time, is truly remarkable, and demonstrates the strength and resilience of the 5,000 Sailors and Marines across this strike group," said Capt. Dan Keeler, *USS Abraham Lincoln* commanding officer. "This team is literally rewriting the book of what an aircraft carrier is capable of, and it has been awe-inspiring to watch them grow as a team through this historic deployment."

In response to Iran's attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz in July, *Lincoln* and air wing supported strikes against Iran's coastal defense systems, cruise missile storage and launch sites. The strike group then bolstered the second naval blockade of Iranian shipping and ports until

see **Lincoln**, page 4

## DPAA identifies record number of missing service members

by Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency identified the remains of 250 service members missing from past conflicts in fiscal year 2026, surpassing its previous record of 231 set last year.

The last identification was Army Capt. Albert P. Wilcox from California. He was a prisoner of war in the Philippines during World War II and was killed when the Japanese transport ship *Enoura Maru* was mistakenly sunk in 1945.

Wilcox's remains were recovered after the war but couldn't be identified. He was buried and marked as unknown at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.

In 2022, DPAA began the *Enoura Maru* Project to find unidentified remains associated with the ship and transfer them to its Hawaii laboratory for identification.

Wilcox's remains will be returned to his family, who will decide his final resting place.

"The United States of America is resolved to never forget the warriors who answered the call to duty, made the supreme sacrifice and never came home," said Secretary of War Pete Hegseth. "Through DPAA's determined efforts, all 250 of these heroes will finally be home."

DPAA searches for, recovers and identifies Americans missing from past conflicts. These 250 accounted-for service members include 198 from World War II, 51 from the Korean War and one from the Vietnam War. Distributed among the branches of service, the identified service members are: 136 Army, 76 Army Air Forces, 20 Navy, 15 Marine Corps, one Air Force and two federal civilians.

Every unaccounted-for service member or department civilian/contractor is entitled to one certainty: that he or she will not be forgotten. Operating in 54 countries around the world, the military and civilian professionals of DPAA are steadfastly committed to providing the fullest possible accounting of Americans missing from past conflicts to their families and the nation.

"This is a deeply personal priority for me," said Anthony J. Tata, undersecretary of war for personnel and readiness. "The Department of War will not rest in its efforts to bring home our unaccounted-for service members and provide the fullest possible accounting of all mission personnel."

## Philippine and Chinese incidents spike in South China Sea, Luzon Strait

Incidents between Chinese and Philippine forces across the South China Sea and Luzon Strait have spiked in recent weeks as the two countries attempt to enforce their territorial claims with small boats, cutters and aircraft, the U.S. Naval Institute reported Oct. 8. Philippine and Chinese forces have dangerously engaged each other at least six times at several disputed areas, including Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal and the Spratly Islands, since the beginning of October. Located closer to Taipei than Manila, these islands overlook a strategic chokepoint used by commercial and military vessels to transit the First Island Chain.

## Air Force certifies first drone operator-instructor cadre ahead of X10D fielding

QUANTICO, Va. - For the first time, the Air Force Office of Special Investigations has certified a cadre of special agents to both operate and instruct others on the Skydio X10D as part of a broader effort to expand small unmanned aircraft system operations across the agency. Last month, six personnel completed a weeklong course at AFOSI headquarters here, creating the first group of instructors positioned to bring the capability back to technical operations units in the field.

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# TRUMP, HEGSETH ANNOUNCE NEW MARYLAND SHIPYARD

by C. Todd Lopez  
Pentagon News  
President Donald J. Trump and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth recently announced the development of a new shipyard, to be called “Arsenal-2,” during a ceremony at the future site in Sparrows Point, Md. The project will include a

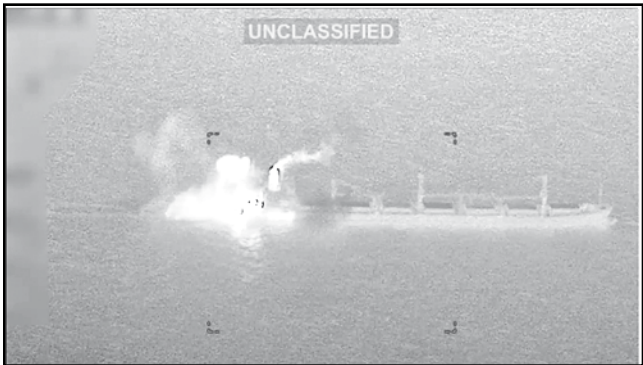
\$6.6 billion investment from the Navy and Anduril Industries, which will build and operate the facility. The shipyard is expected to be the largest of its kind in the U.S. and will be designed to produce submarines, submarine components and autonomous underwater vessels.



War Secretary Pete Hegseth at an Oct. 6 ceremony announcing new shipyard in Maryland. DOW photo

“Today, we’re officially launching the construction of the largest new shipyard in the United States,” Trump said. “Since World War II, there’s been nothing like what we’re doing today.” The new shipyard, made possible by both private and public investment, will provide great value to Baltimore, the president said, especially with the number of jobs it brings. “In a tremendous victory for our country and for the city of Baltimore, Anduril is investing \$3.7 billion in a state-of-the-art shipyard that will be known forever as Arsenal-2,” he said. The president said the shipyard will build next-generation American submarines on the site, including autonomous submarines, torpedo tubes and critical components for the Virginia-class attack subs. The Navy is also contributing \$2.9 billion to

help develop the shipyard. “This massive project will create over 3,100 new jobs right here in Maryland and will support an additional 11,000 jobs across the nation,” he said. The president said workers at Sparrows Point will lead the way into a “golden age of shipbuilding” for the United States. “When you come back [here] in two years, you’re not going to believe what you see,” he said. “Generations ago, these grounds hummed with the sound of hammers and saws carving out some of the most beautiful wooden ships. ... Now, with the men and women of Anduril, the workers of Maryland and the warriors of the U.S. Navy ... this place will roar with the sound of high-tech manufacturing, building ships and submarines.” Read the full story at <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4620633/>.



In this screenshot on Oct. 10, a U.S. military fighter jet strikes the stern of the Panama-flagged M/V Ocean Molica. Courtesy photo

## Centcom forces disable cargo vessel attempting to violate blockade

by U.S. Central Command Public Affairs  
Service members operating in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility disabled a commercial cargo vessel in the Gulf of Oman Oct. 10, after the ship’s crew ignored repeated warnings and attempted to run the ongoing naval blockade against Iran.

A U.S. military fighter jet struck the stern of the Panama-flagged M/V Ocean Molica with a precision munition, fully crippling the ship’s propulsion without harming the crew. The large cargo vessel was attempting to transit regional waters after departing an Iranian port.

The Centcom forces resumed America’s blockade of all ships entering or departing Iranian ports. During three months of strict enforcement, four commercial vessels have been disabled, and 135 ships have been turned around. Additionally, U.S. forces have destroyed 10 tankers linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ multibillion-dollar shadow network over the same period.

All mariners are advised to heed blockade warnings from Centcom forces. Crews should also continue to monitor Notice to Mariners broadcasts and contact U.S. naval forces on bridge-to-bridge channel 16 when operating in the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz approaches.



### RESILIENT RUN

Marines assigned to the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit run together at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C., Oct. 6, 2026. The purpose of the run was to build camaraderie, resilience and esprit de corps among the unit’s Marines and Sailors.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Matthew Williams

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Top 5

- USS Abraham Lincoln Strike Group receives Presidential Unit Citation
- Pentagon barred Qatar base access to hide Iran war damage, U.S. senator claims
- U.S. to livestream Army execution of Fort Hood shooter, Pentagon official says
- Readiness bill coming due for Navy after marathon carrier deployment, No. 2 admiral says
- Army report cites systematic failures in 2025 helicopter and jet collision that killed 67

Your Military

- Pentagon recruits drone pilots from across services for upcoming competition
- What is the U.S. Public Health Service's Commissioned Corps? Its top leader wants you to know
- Planned DEERS outage could affect Tricare beneficiaries, DOD says

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- Official poster depicts the U.S. Army's newest threat: The Iranian soldier

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- 4 Marines 'receiving medal care' after hard landing of MV-22B Osprey in North Carolina
- Future cost, use of Marine Corps ACVs scrutinized in congressional report

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- Coast Guard reports major recruiting success for 2026 Veterans

- New VA dental patients face waits of 2 months for appointments
- VA rolls out CLEAR login option and in-person identity verification pilot

Defense Industry

- U.S. Air Force, Army eye industry access on test ranges
- Dutch firm uses AI to help drone systems 'talk' on

SECARMY: Army drives the success of the joint force

by Joe Lacdan,  
War Media Activity

WASHINGTON - The Army's top civilian leader said the service remains central to the success of the joint force during the opening ceremony of the Association of the United States Army's annual meeting and exposition on Oct. 12.

Under the theme, "America's Army: The Foundation of the Joint Force," Acting Secretary of the Army Adam R. Telle said the service must return to its original purpose: controlling and securing land, which he said is fundamental to human fulfillment. Telle's insight comes less than a week after the Army published new operational warfighting guidance.

The acting secretary also announced that the Army will host its first "Manufacturing Rodeo" in early 2027, including a competition among industrial base partners. He added that the Army will test and evaluate manufacturing processes for weaknesses.

"We're going to stress test the supply chain, the manufacturing processes, and see where it breaks," Telle said. "We're going to learn by doing, not by sitting around postulating at the Pentagon; we're going to find the weak links. We're going to make them stronger, and we're

going to keep iterating."

To reiterate the importance of the American Soldier's role in U.S. conflicts, Telle was joined on stage by Soldiers in uniforms from different eras, including World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Global War on Terror – highlighting the accelerating pace of military innovation over time.

To ensure our Soldiers have every competitive advantage on the battlefield, Telle said the Army must leverage "America's greatest strategic advantages."

The first advantage is the "radical notion, embedded in the American DNA, that human greatness and fulfillment are proportional to human freedom." The second is America's unparalleled spirit of innovation, "forged into the hearts of our people as they conquered the punishing dirt of the American frontier." The third advantage is the nation's deep and efficient capital markets, where resources naturally rush to fund the next big idea.

Telle said the service needs to build adaptable and symbiotic relationships with both industry and service partners to maintain a strategic advantage over the nation's adversaries.

Read the story in its entirety at <https://www.army.mil/article/296068/>.

Medical supply company owner sentenced for \$30M Medicare, TRICARE, and CHAMPVA fraud

from Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs

An Oklahoma business owner and chiropractor was sentenced in early October to 14 years in prison for his role in a years-long scheme that attempted to bilk Medicare, TRICARE, and the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) out of over \$30 million for orthotics braces, continuous glucose monitors, and other durable medical equipment, or DME, that beneficiaries didn't want or need.

"The 14-year sentence shows that health care fraud does not pay," said Assistant Attorney General Colin M. McDonald of the Department of Justice's National Fraud Enforcement Division. "The Department is committed to bringing to justice those who deceive programs that serve our seniors, service members, and veterans."

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Dr. Mark Loftis, 39, of Cushing, Oklahoma, and his co-conspirators did not disclose to Medicare the ownership and management of Back Pain Home Supplies. Loftis and his co-conspirators hid from Medicare that unenrolled entities were billing claims through the company. Loftis paid over a million dollars in illegal kickbacks, including through a shell marketing company, to marketers, purported telemedicine companies, and a call center that persuaded elderly and disabled Americans to disclose their personal information and receive DME they did not need. Loftis and his co-conspirators also purchased sham doctors' orders for orthotic braces, continuous glucose monitors, and DME that were generated by telemedicine doctors and nurse practitioners who never examined, and often never spoke to, the beneficiaries.

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## FRCSW hosts DoW leaders

by Michael A Furlano, Fleet Readiness Center Southwest

Department of War leaders recently visited Fleet Readiness Center Southwest (FRCSW) for an in depth look at the command's mission, capabilities, and continued success supporting the Warfighter.

Michael Powers, Deputy Undersecretary of War – Comptroller; Thomas Harker, Deputy Financial Officer, Undersecretary of War – Comptroller; and John Grabenstein, SES, NAVAIR Director of Product Support, all received a command overview highlighting FRCSW's production and financial accomplishments, including a remarkable record of meeting or surpassing aircraft production goals for 10 consecutive years. The brief underscored the command's commitment to disciplined execution, responsible stewardship of resources, and delivering combat ready aircraft and components to the Fleet.

Following the brief, the delegation received a tour of FRCSW's F/A-18, F-16, V-22, Manufacturing and Components programs from Capt. Jason Martinson, FRCSW executive officer, and David Kelly, FRCSW production director). Visitors gained firsthand insight into the skilled workforce, advanced capabilities, and complex processes that keep critical aviation assets ready and relevant.

From the production floor to financial stewardship, FRCSW continues to demonstrate what is possible when mission focused personnel, resources, and expertise come together in support of Naval Aviation.

## Lincoln continued from page 1

departing the Centcom area of responsibility, Aug. 22, to begin its return transit home.

Lincoln completed brief, overnight stops for supplies in Guam in December 2025 and just last month, as well as in Duqm, Oman, in July. The ship also conducted a port call in Pattaya, Thailand, last month. The ship's 208 uninterrupted days at sea between Guam and Oman, and its 286 consecutive days at sea

between departing San Diego and arriving in Thailand, are record-breaking marks for modern aircraft carriers.

"I could not be prouder of the group of sailors and Marines aboard this mighty warship for everything they have accomplished the last 10 1/2 months," Keeler said. "We asked a lot of these warfighters, and every time, they rose to the occasion, achieving the mission with pride, professionalism and expertise."

## Hayashi assumes command of submarine USS Springfield

by Petty Officer 2nd Class Rashan Jefferson

NAVALBASE POINTLOMA – Cmdr. John Hayashi relieved Cmdr. Greg Storer as commanding officer of Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Springfield (SSN 761) during a change of command ceremony held at the Roncador Memorial here October 9.

Capt. (ret.) Sean Fujimoto served as the guest speaker of the ceremony and Capt. Phillip Sylvia Jr., commander, Submarine Squadron (CSS) 11 served as the presiding officer.

During his remarks, Fujimoto reflected on Storer's leadership and Springfield's accomplishments over the last two years.

"You led the crew through two successful deployments to the Western Pacific, operating forward in a highly demanding strategic environment," said Fujimoto. "Springfield's contributions to the nation's security are immense. Thank you for your relentless effort and determination."

During Storer's tenure as commanding officer, Springfield completed two Pacific deployments as one of five forward-deployed fast-attack submarines assigned to Submarine Squadron 15 based in Guam. Most recently, Springfield completed a homeport shift from Guam to

Submarine Squadron 11 in San Diego in July 2026.

"When duty called, we were out there in the Pacific Ocean because the mission demanded it," said Storer. "Thank you for the incredible teamwork you showed and thank you for demonstrating an unfathomable amount of tenacity to ensure we completed our mission and brought our ship and shipmates home safely. It has truly been the honor of a lifetime to serve as your commanding officer."

Storer's next assignment will be in Washington D.C.

Prior to assuming command of Springfield, Hayashi served at the Chief Advanced Warfare Capabilities Division at U.S. Strategic Command in Bellevue, Nebraska. During his remarks, Hayashi set his expectations as the commanding officer of Springfield.

"Together, we will build readiness every day, set and uphold high standards, and learn and continuously improve," said Hayashi. "We will represent the Navy and our Nation with professionalism and pride. Springfield, when our nation calls, we will deliver excellence."

Commissioned Jan. 9, 1993, Springfield is the fourth U.S. Navy ship to bear the name, honoring the cities of Spring-

field, Ill., and Springfield, Mass. Springfield is one of four Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarines assigned to Commander, Submarine Squadron 11, capable of supporting various missions, including anti-submarine warfare, anti-ship warfare, strike warfare and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.



(from left) Capt. Phillip Sylvia Jr., Cmdr. Greg Storer, and Cmdr. John Hayashi, at USS Springfield's change of command. U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Rashan Jefferson

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# Naval Surface Forces boss visits newly-certified west coast dry dock

NATIONAL CITY - The Navy welcomed Vice Adm. Joseph Cahill, commander, Naval Surface Forces and commander, Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet, at the company's west coast water-

front repair and services facility here October 13.

While onsite, he engaged with the specialists and technicians performing ship maintenance on

USS *Oakland* (LCS 24) which is undergoing repairs in newly-certified Dry Dock Independence. He also met with leadership to receive an update on the activities at the facility and discuss the

dry-dock capabilities of our partners here in San Diego enable us to build and sustain our combat readiness in the Foundry."

In August, Austal USA received a contract, valued at \$10.8 million, awarded by the Navy for emergent maintenance drydocking availability of *Oakland*. This contract calls for Austal USA's repair and services team to replace the ship's main service diesel generator, a complex project requiring critical work below the waterline, making the new dry dock essential to its successful completion. This is the first ship to enter the new dry dock which received full certification from the Navy this summer.

Performing the work in a dry dock, rather than pierside, will significantly improve efficiency and will help return the ship to the fleet as quickly as possible and in peak operating condition. Providing dry dock capacity in San Diego offers crew stability by allowing them to remain in their hometown near their families, while keeping the ship close to the Navy's San Diego-based maintenance team.

The dry dock has a 9,000 light ton lifting capacity and a maximum draft of 36 feet (11 meters). The dry dock cranes have a combined lifting capacity of 16 metric tons..

## West coast vibe(s) coding

**by Brian Block**  
Portfolio Acquisition  
Executive Mission Systems  
SAN DIEGO – The Portfolio Acquisition Executive (PAE) Mission Systems Overmatch Rapid Capability Cell (RCC) hosted an artificial intelligence vibe coding demonstration at Naval Base Point Loma's Old Town campus for dozens of information technology professionals and senior leaders recently.

Vibe coding is when humans prompt an AI agent using regular, conversational English to produce working computer code. Demonstration participants, who included personnel from several offices within PAE Mission Systems, used modern agentic development tools to rapidly prototype and iterate on real-world Navy problem scenarios in a hands-on workshop environment. The demonstration showed what is capable with agentic coding tools and the value that they can bring to the development, security, and operations pipeline.

Guidance from the Department of War is clear: Organizations should leverage AI technologies to modernize software systems, enhance operational efficiency, and accelerate capability delivery. The Overmatch RCC is moving rapidly to meet that intent.

"We are working on integrating this capability enterprise-wide for our developers and sailors ashore," said Brian Rose, assistant program manager, Overmatch Digital Infrastructure and Services section. "But what's really exciting is bringing vibe coding to the edge so even the most junior Sailors and Ma-

lines can fill in capability gaps in days instead of years while deployed."

The artificial intelligence and coding agents shorten the time between identifying a requirement to fielding a solution. Results are now possible within days, or even minutes, rather than years, said Rose.

Additionally, the simplicity of the systems removes barriers for non-technical users to solve their individual problems without having to rely on professional developers. That frees up experienced personnel to focus on the really wicked problems, said Mike Lee, capability lead, Overmatch Digital Infrastructure and Services section. Leaders can use the vibe-coding tools to refine their own vision before communicating requirements to their team, added Lee.

Formerly known as Project Overmatch, the Overmatch Rapid Capability Cell delivers advanced prototype capabilities for PAE Mission Systems by partnering directly with the Fleet to meet the warfighter's immediate operational needs.



**Vice Adm. Joseph Cahill meets with drydock workers. Courtesy photo**

value the dry dock brings to the defense maritime industry in the region.

"We were honored to host Vice Admiral Cahill at Austal USA's West Coast waterfront repair and services facility and to give him the opportunity to see Dry Dock Independence supporting USS *Oakland*," said Austal's President Gene Miller. "The successful docking of *Oakland* marks an important milestone for us, our Navy customer, and the San Diego maritime community as we expand critical ship repair capacity on the West Coast."

"Our decisive combat power begins right here in the Foundry, with the Sailors and maritime and industrial workforce who are performing this vital repair effort to build the combat readiness of our warships," said Cahill. "The



**SCOPING THE SCENE** Marine Cpl. Emiliano Alzate, assigned to Battalion Landing Team 2/4, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, looks through the scope of an M107 .50-caliber Special Application Scoped Rifle aboard USS *John P. Murtha* amphibious transport dock ship, Oct. 7, 2026. U.S. Navy photo by MCSA Jadiel Santoni Martinez



**THE BAY WAY** Navy Damage Controlman 1st Class Edgar Pastrana, center, assigned to USS *Cape St. George*, gives a ship tour to Stewie, the Navy's environmental mascot, as part of San Francisco Fleet Week, Oct. 11, 2026. SFFW, now in its 45th iteration, is allows citizens of the Bay Area to witness today's maritime services firsthand. U.S. Navy Photo by MC3 Pablo Chavez



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## Surviving the middle seat: A field guide to aviation's worst conflict

by Christopher Elliott

I almost always get stuck in a middle seat, so I consider myself something of an expert when it comes to surviving aviation's worst conflict zone.

But I'm also lucky, because I usually fly with my adult sons. The boys let me use both armrests, and I can spread out and get up to stretch my legs whenever I want to, so there's practically no conflict.

That's not the usual reality of the middle seat experience.

For most travelers, the middle seat is a contact sport. As jacket weather makes already tight quarters feel even tighter, millions of passengers are about to spend hours wedged between strangers. They'll fight over plastic armrests and slowly lose their minds at 35,000 feet.

Alex Gervash, an experienced commercial airline pilot, explains that the middle seat triggers a psychological mechanism called perceived loss of control.

"When you can see the aisle or the window, your nervous system stays calmer," he says. "In the middle, both are blocked by strangers' bodies. Your brain interprets this as confinement, and your fight-or-flight system activates at a low level for the entire flight."

That doesn't have to be you. The new rules of middle-seat survival require mastering armrest diplomacy with humor, building an impenetrable personal gear bubble, applying jacket weather hacks for extra space, and using ergonomic micro-movements to avoid physical injury.

### Armrest diplomacy: Establishing the truce

Let's start with the oldest argument in commercial aviation: who owns the armrests? The answer, according to etiquette professionals, is clear.

"Both middle armrests belong to the middle-seat passenger," says Adeodata Czink, an etiquette expert with Business of Manners. The window seat gets the wall. The aisle seat gets freedom of movement.

## THE ELLIOTT REPORT

The middle seat gets both armrests — that's the deal.

Jodi RR Smith of Mannersmith Etiquette Consulting agrees, adding the nuance that consideration should temper ownership. If you're a smaller person and the person next to you is "folding themselves into an origami-yoga pose" to fit in the seat, share. Humans aren't just territorial creatures — they can also empathize. Use it.

But knowing the rule and enforcing it are two different things. Stephanie Ward, a veteran of basic economy middle seats, has a system. She introduces herself immediately, then deploys a single joke.

"The middle seat gets both armrests — that's the rule — but I promise not to get up to go to the bathroom every 30 minutes," she says.

People laugh. Then she plants her elbows, staking out her territory.

### What kind of gear do you need to survive a middle seat?

If armrest diplomacy is the offense, gear is the defense. And nobody has assembled a more complete defensive package than Katharine Nohr, a Hawaii-based attorney who travels frequently and has spent years optimizing her middle-seat survival kit.

Her setup: two inflatable lumbar pillows (one for her back, one as a footrest), a tested inflatable neck pillow, an eye mask, a hood to cover her face, special slippers in a small case, an infinity scarf that doubles as a blanket, a water bottle clipped to the seat back with a carabiner, noise-canceling headphones, a small pouch with essentials, and a jacket engineered with pockets. The whole kit compresses into a thin backpack that fits inside a larger carry-on.

"I'm the most comfortable coach passenger on the plane," she brags.

### Jacket weather hacks: The coat as a tool

Fall and winter bring a complication: bulky outerwear. Coats don't fit cleanly in overhead bins once the flight is full, and dragging a heavy jacket onto your lap in an already-compressed seat can feel like wearing a straitjacket.

Christopher Jimenez, a board-certified hip and knee surgeon, has a better idea. He doesn't wear a coat in the seat at all. Instead, he rolls it tight and uses it as a lumbar bolster at beltline height. This prevents in-flight back pain.

One underused option: Stow the coat in the overhead before your neighbors board. Flight attendants frown on this, but as former attendant Celeste Bell points out, "holding on to a big coat in a middle seat can feel claustrophobic." She doesn't wait until the flight is fully loaded and finds a slot for her winter coat.

### Don't wreck your body

Lou Ezrick, a physical therapist who sees the aftermath of holiday travel every January, has a warning: Avoid the isometric shrug.

"The single biggest physical mistake middle seat passengers make in cold weather is that they tense

their shoulders upward against their neighbors reflexively," Ezrick says. "They essentially do an isometric shrug for three hours straight." The result: a guaranteed pain in the upper back. He recommends consciously dropping your shoulders down and back every 20 minutes. Set a phone timer if necessary.

Thomas Jeneby, a board-certified plastic surgeon who manages long operating room days, treats the middle seat like a surgical procedure: circulation and micro-movements matter more than willpower. His timed routine: every 30 to 40 minutes, do 10 ankle pumps, 5 glute squeezes, and 3 slow chin tucks. It takes about 90 seconds and dramatically reduces swelling and neck tension.

His middle-seat rule is "neutral spine, elbows in, pelvis anchored." Keep your forearms vertical rather than splayed outward. Feet flat. Don't torque your hips trying to create space that isn't there.

### Can an app get you out of the middle seat?

The best way to survive the middle seat is to never sit in it. American Airlines just made that a little easier. Last month, it added a feature to its app that watches the seat map for you. After you book, you tell the app whether you want a window, aisle or middle seat. If a matching seat opens up, the app moves you and sends a notification.

There's fine print. You have to be an AAdvantage member traveling alone with an assigned seat, and the monitoring stops 24 hours before departure.

United has offered a similar tool in its app since 2024.

### Whose fault is this?

Let's assign blame where it belongs: with the airlines.

"The middle seat is about physics, not etiquette," says Joe Cronin, president of International Citizens Group, an insurance company that works with frequent travelers.

Until they give you more room, it's up to you to figure out a solution. The travelers who handle it best treat the middle seat as a psychological challenge rather than a physical one. They come prepared. They establish their space early, through humor or gear or a well-placed coat, without starting a turf war. They protect their bodies from the slow structural damage of static posture. And they manage their expectations enough to arrive functional.

Or you could just travel with your kids, where the concept of personal space is more negotiable.

*Christopher Elliott is an author, consumer advocate, and journalist. He founded Elliott Advocacy, a non-profit organization that helps solve consumer problems. He publishes Elliott Confidential, a travel newsletter, and the Elliott Report, a news site about customer service. If you need help with a consumer problem, you can reach him here or email him at [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).*

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| EVENT                                                 | DATE           |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Navy Band Concert in Chula Vista                      | Nov 1          |
| National City's Salute to Navy Luncheon               | Nov 4          |
| STEM Day at Meet the Fleet at 32nd Street             | Nov 6          |
| Enlisted Recognition Luncheon at the San Diego Zoo    | Nov 6          |
| Navy and Marine Band Concert at Symphony Hall         | Nov 6          |
| Meet the Fleet at 32nd Street                         | Nov 7          |
| Military & Veterans Concert at Balboa Park            | Nov 8          |
| Fleet Week Community Breakfast onboard the USS Midway | Nov 10         |
| Student STEM Days at Broadway Pier                    | Nov 10, 12, 13 |
| Fleet Week Innovation Zone                            | Nov 10-15      |
| Fleet Week Veterans Day 5k                            | Nov 11         |
| Veterans & Military Boat Parade                       | Nov 11         |
| Veterans Day Concert on Broadway Pier                 | Nov 11         |
| Broadway Pier Open to the Public w/ Military Displays | Nov 11, 13-15  |
| SOSU Fleet Week Football Classic                      | Nov 14         |
| Military Family Day at Broadway Pier                  | Nov 15         |
| MRE Cooking Contest                                   | Nov 15         |

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by Jan Wagner

## Wings Over Water film at the renovated & enlarged Fleet Science Center

I have been covering the Fleet Science

Center in San Diego's Balboa Park for decades. Their films and exhibitions are always interesting, and I enjoy sharing them with you. Recently, I attended a preview screening of the nature film "Wings Over Water" there.

When I arrived, I discovered that the construction walls are finally down on the second phase of the Fleet's "Science Starts Here Capital Campaign" — a massive renovation and expansion project. The museum is truly transformed, with fresh, beautiful, reorganized spaces and a new, large exhibit gallery in the lower floor.

The first change that you will notice is the grand, spacious entrance gallery — free to the public — and a new reception area, with intricately tiled pillars and a panoramic view of El Prado, including the Bea Evenson Fountain on its eastern edge.

In the rotunda, in place of the previous reception area, is a new, large, multi-purpose exhibit gallery — currently home to an exhibit called "Mindbender Mansion," with its fascinating assortment of challenging, interactive puzzles for you to solve in the Parlor, Library, Map Room and Kitchen. In one activity, as the Fleet explains, "children frantically work together to load a tray before it reaches the end of the conveyor belt to retrieve their third clue, while adults on the other side of the mansion methodically organize color-coded puzzle pieces to gather their first. Teamwork, problem-solving, and innovation prove paramount for all visitors of the mansion, presenting San Diegans with a unique experience and unforgettable memories." A CLUE CARD is provided for you to keep track of your clues and passwords that are revealed as you solve the puzzles and unlock the vaults.

Studio X, the makerspace at the Fleet Science Center, which

provides opportunities for family-friendly STEM learning as they build projects, has moved upstairs. When you are ready for a break, Element 8 Café is new. Even more is on the way.

"Wings Over Water" is being screened in the Giant Dome Theater. As we are told on the film's website (<https://wingsoverwaterfilm.com/about-the-film>) and on the Fleet Science Center's website: the prairie wetlands in the heartland of North America were created as the glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age, over 10,000 years ago. They left behind an astounding gift of connected rivers, lakes and wetlands. Today, these water highways are home to countless species. From the herds of bison that still roam the Great Plains, to the vital honeybees that pollinate our crops and salamanders in the smallest ponds, millions of magnificent birds that rely on this pristine wilderness for survival migrate along these "flyways."

I am originally from Alberta — one of the Canadian Prairie Provinces, so it was interesting to learn how farmers are restoring the prairie wetlands to bring back needed balance in nature, and restoration of our fragile and vital ecosystems, after farmers from an earlier time had been draining them to create more farmland.

"Wings Over Water" tells the story of the epic journeys of three amazing bird families — the Sandhill Crane, the Yellow Warbler and the Mallard Duck — with extraordinary footage of their

fascinating behaviors. Audiences will be captivated by the triumphs and challenges of these remarkable creatures that defy all odds and soar across mountains, deserts, cities and forests as they head home to raise their young" in mass migration.

Birds in the air sometimes make me wary, when they pass overhead. I used to consider bird droppings as nothing more than a messy nuisance to be avoided, worthy of futile criticism. It never occurred to me that, as we learn in this film, these very same bird droppings provide the essential functions of fertilizing the soil and spreading seeds — seeds that grow into trees and all sorts of other plant life, where living beings can thrive.

I also never before realized that the thundering hooves of heavy animals on the move serve to till the soil and, by so doing, help to promote plant growth.

For more information about "Wings Over Water," visit the Fleet Science Center at: <https://www.fleetscience.org/films/wings-over-water>.

To explore a wide variety of content dating back to 2002, with the most photos and the latest text, visit "AutoMatters & More" at <https://automatters.net>. Search by title or topic in the Search Bar in the middle of the Home Page or click on the blue 'years' boxes and browse.

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## SOCIAL SECURITY MATTERS

*Dear Rusty: I'm concerned about Social Security running out of funding, since I rely on it for my income and I'm at an age where my having to go back to work is not an option I can consider. The job market for people my age is slim. I've been reading reports and it doesn't sound reassuring. Your thoughts? Signed: Concerned Senior*

**Dear Concerned Senior:** Thanks for sharing your concerns. This topic is a fairly complicated one, but I'll do my best to explain it.

Social Security income (from payroll taxes, interest on reserves, and income tax on SS benefits) has been insufficient to pay 100% of SS benefit obligations since about 2020. Since that time, SS has been drawing money from the Social Security Trust Fund reserves to pay full monthly benefits to everyone. In 2020, there was nearly \$3 trillion in SS reserves held in the SS Trust Funds, but as of the end of 2025, those reserves have dwindled to about \$2.56 trillion because they are being used to pay full SS benefits to all. Without program reform, the SS trust funds will be fully depleted in 2032, which would result in an across-the-board cut of about 22% to everyone's monthly SS payment. And that would be devastating to millions of Americans!

However, Congress is acutely

aware of this issue; they have been for years but have largely ignored previous warnings. Now, however, those predicted benefit cuts are dangerously close to becoming a reality. As a result, we are beginning to see serious (even bipartisan) discussions in Congress about reforming Social Security to restore it to solvency to avoid future benefit cuts.

For our part, AMAC and the AMAC Foundation have been working on a proposal to restore SS to full solvency for generations, and we have offered our proposal to various Congressional Representatives and to the SSA Commissioner and his executive staff. Our proposal has been well received, and we are very optimistic that Congress will finally take real action to restore SS to solvency to avoid any benefit cuts. Frankly, doing otherwise would amount to political suicide!

At AMAC, we are closely monitoring this situation and are very proactive in Washington, D.C. to ensure that benefits are not cut in 2032, and we will continue our vigorous efforts and our vigilance to avoid Social Security insolvency. We are confident that Congress will act in time to avoid any reduction in SS benefits, and you can stay informed of our efforts by watching our AMAC Social Security information website — [www.socialsecurityreport.org](http://www.socialsecurityreport.org).

## Will Social Security run out of money soon?

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