

BREAKING DEFENSE

E-BOOK

AUSA 2026

The Ground Truth:

After-Action Report

UNDERWRITTEN BY:

TIBERIUS



BREAKING DEFENSE

Note from the editor:

The annual AUSA conference is not just a central hub for the US Army — it's the largest defense conference in North America every year. For industry, it's a vital check in with customers and partners; for foreign governments, a chance to take the pulse of a key ally and its industry; and for the Army itself, a chance for senior leaders to set their agenda for the next year.

And yet, when talking with attendees at the 2026 edition of AUSA, there was widespread agreement that no one was quite sure where this is all going.

A lot of that falls on the fact that the Army is currently lacking a clear leader. As of the conference, both the secretary and chief of staff are in an acting capacity, and it's widely expected that Acting Secretary Adam Telle is not on the shortlist for an actual nomination. Down the leadership chain are other acting or empty roles, both on the civilian and uniformed side.

Despite that, officials from the Army seem determined to keep modernization plans moving forward, whatever shape they ultimately take. Autonomy in particular emerged as a huge theme at the show, thanks both to industry's interest and an appearance by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to discuss the Pentagon's cutting-edge efforts.

It's a lot to keep track of, which is why this year, Breaking Defense wanted to bring you the Ground Truth about AUSA. Inside this collection you'll find four sections, one focused each on our coverage of the Army and its leaders, major competitions, drones and autonomy.

Think of this as a "best of" collection of the 30+ stories the Breaking Defense team wrote during the three-day AUSA meeting — especially if you weren't able to make it to downtown DC to take part. You'll also find a selection of photos from our team taken on the show floor spread throughout the book, in order to give a flavor of what it was like from Oct. 12-14.

We hope you'll enjoy, and then when you're done, make sure to go back to BreakingDefense.com to catch the latest defense news from the Army, Pentagon and around the world.

Thanks for reading,

Aaron Mehta

Aaron Mehta

Editor in Chief, Breaking Defense



E-BOOK

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One year in, Army's FUZE leader eyes 'bigger' acquisition challenges

The Army innovation hub's first year also revealed the challenge of making sure promising technologies don't stop at the prototype stage, FUZE Director Matt Willis told Breaking Defense

WASHINGTON — After a first year focused on adapting prototype technologies for military use, the Army's FUZE innovation hub is setting sights on more complex acquisition challenges in fiscal 2027.

"A lot of what we'll see in FY27 is leveraging mechanisms within the Army FUZE portfolio to address bigger Army acquisition problems, and I think again this demonstrates that the Army recognizes we need to diversify the defense industrial base," FUZE Director Matt Willis told Breaking Defense in an interview last month.

Established in September 2025 by then-Army Secretary Dan Driscoll, FUZE is the service's flagship venture-capital innovation engine designed to accelerate deployment of new technologies using pre-existing acquisition mechanisms. The office falls under the Army's Pathway for Innovation and Technology (PIT) portfolio, which is facilitated by the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology office.

According to Willis, the organization's overall goal is to find new tech and deliver it to the warfighter faster. But FUZE's first year also showed the challenge of making sure promising technologies don't stop at the prototype stage where they can fall into the ever-dreadful tech valley of death.



Drones synchronize before a swarm flight during the XVIII Airborne Corps' Scarlet Dragon 26-3 at Fort Bragg, N.C., Sept. 16, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Noe Cork)

That prompted the organization to focus on getting Army acquisition officials involved earlier to create a clearer path toward procurement in FY27, he said.

"We need to incentivize innovation, and we need to invest in emerging or bleeding-edge capabilities to stay ahead of the rapidly evolving threat landscape … or how fast war is changing. We can see that in Ukraine and elsewhere," Willis said.

Igniting the FUZE

Broadly, the PIT acts as a "plus one" structure in tandem with the Army's six Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs), bringing together multiple offices focused on fielding emerging capabilities. All organizations within the PIT are geared toward harnessing innovation and getting tech to the warfighter sooner, but FUZE specifically uses a venture-capital style model to do so.

FUZE is allocated $750 million in annual, "non-dilutive" research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) funds. The money is pulled together from four existing innovation efforts — xTech, Small Business Innovation Research/Small Business Technology Transfer (SBIR/STTR) Programs, the Technology Maturation Initiative and the Army Manufacturing Technology Program.

Before FUZE, the four funding streams were dispersed throughout the Army, making it difficult for companies to understand how to acquire funding for a promising capability, Willis said.

"The big piece and the power of the Army FUZE program is this sort of continuity, or seamlessness — or as seamless as we can make it in the government," Willis said.

First, companies demonstrate their capabilities during Army xTech competitions and if they are placed among the top contenders they win a cash prize. Then, the SBIR program gives those vendors additional money to develop initial prototypes, while the TMI funding helps with "scaling that prototype," Willis said. The final step is securing the ManTech investment, which vendors use to reduce manufacturing costs.

Once this process is complete, the Army's network of venture and private capital partners "inject" funding into the companies so they can eventually scale their products and get on contract with the service through the PAEs, Willis explained.

"This has really been foundational in terms of bridging the gap between [the Army's] mission needs and private sector venture capital," he said. "Rather than expecting startups to just rely solely on government R&D funding, we're actively signaling defense priorities to private markets."

But FUZE is still refining the process to ensure vendors come out with a contract instead of a box full of prototypes, he said. To achieve this, the office wants to engage with PAEs from the outset to ensure there's a clear pathway for tech to advance.

"I'd say we're doubling down or tripling down on this sort of mandate that, for all of our FUZE investments — for all the project investments that we're making — we're building in this piece where we have buy-in from the warfighting unit," Willis said.

Drones Dominate, EW Less So

FUZE held about 16 xTech competitions in fiscal 2026 focused primarily on drones, counter-drone

systems, electronic warfare and energy resiliency. Willis said the office "exceeded" its goal of getting capabilities into the field within 60 to 75 days of posting a solicitation — a process that can traditionally take several months or even years.

In some cases, the organization was able to go from a solicitation to contracts in less than five days. All four technology areas have made it into the field in some capacity, meaning the tech was either delivered to a unit for permanent use or as part of a "soldier experimentation event," Willis said.

Vendors were more receptive to some capabilities than others, with drone and counter-drone tech being the most popular among industry, Willis said.

"The commercial sector is already mass producing these platforms at high volume, and what we're looking for in the Army is not starting with basic research and matriculating all the way up through a prototype," he said. "Then a big piece for us from an adaptation perspective is — how can we make them military grade?"

By contrast, electronic warfare drew less industry interest because "it has the least overlap with commercial applications," Willis said. As for energy resiliency capabilities, FUZE has provided some solutions to the field, but it's still "definitely the latest push," he added.

FUZE now wants to tackle more challenging acquisition problems, including low-cost interceptors. While these systems are not considered widely commercially available or affordable, they can be built using off-the-shelf, inexpensive components, Willis explained.

To kickstart the effort, FUZE launched the xTech Disrupt Fires competition to search for a second low-cost interceptor for the Army's Indirect Fire Protection Capability (IFPC) Increment 2 program specifically designed to hit low-flying and supersonic targets.

During the annual AUSA conference this year, FUZE will award up to four companies a $1 million cash prize each for the program, "which is intended to jumpstart capability development for the second interceptor," Willis said.

The prize pool is far smaller than the funding required to build the IFPC Increment 2 interceptors currently being developed. Lockheed Martin and a Boeing-Anduril team were recently selected to move onto the second phase of the initial competition, but Willis clarified that while FUZE tech could feed into the larger Army IFPC Inc 2 program, the two are separate for now.

"We're executing this [FUZE] competition to see if we can incentivize or identify novel technology approaches to meet this mission. So this is in parallel," he said. "If successful at the end, there will be an opportunity to integrate within the broader program of record, but the vendors that were selected for IFPC Inc 2 second interceptor are moving along their way."

Apart from the low-cost interceptor competition, Willis said there are other larger acquisition issues FUZE plans to tackle in FY27, but declined to share them as he said they are "not fully baked."

"I'd say we've moved away from the prior acquisition methodology of spending years, if not decades, developing some bespoke, eloquent solution that really didn't work in the field to recognizing that we need to move quickly and take risks to make sure that our soldiers have access to the best technology," Willis said.

LaNeve 'redesignates' Army's Futures and Concepts Command as new FASCOM autonomy command

The new US Army Futures and Autonomous Systems Command, "will pioneer operational concepts that harness autonomous capabilities across all warfighting functions," Gen. Christopher LaNeve said today.

WASHINGTON — The Army's top officer revealed today that the service has "redesignated" its Futures and Concepts Command (FCC) as the new Army Futures and Autonomous Systems Command (FASCOM).

"We are incorporating autonomous and unmanned systems at every single echelon across the formation … with the force structure to match … including introducing UAS [unmanned aerial systems] and robotics military specialties to integrate these technologies at the point of need," Acting Chief of Staff Gen. Christopher LaNeve said at the annual AUSA conference.

"With [Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's] announcement establishing Autonomous Warfare Command, Acting Secretary [Adam] Telle and I have redesignated Futures and Concepts Command to serve as US Army Futures and Autonomous Systems Command … FASCOM," he said.

Earlier this month the Army announced the establishment of FASCOM along with a handful of other related organizational changes, but at the time did not note FCC's role. LaNeve didn't specifically say why Army leaders decided to make the move, but he said it signals that the service is "moving with focus and intention."

"[As] Acting Secretary Telle likes to say, we are gaining velocity," he added.



U.S. Army Acting Chief of Staff, Gen. Christopher LaNeve, speaks at the 2026 AUSA Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, D.C., Oct. 12, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Alexander Nieves)

LaNeve said in a press release prior to his remarks today that FASCOM will be led by a three-star general officer. It will "integrate and ultimately accelerate" the work of the Combat Capabilities Development Command, Medical Research and Development Command, 75th Innovation Command, Joint Modernization Command and the Transformation Decision Analysis Center, he said.

On Sept. 30 Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the Pentagon would create a new four-star command, called Autonomous Warfare Command (AUTOWARCOM), centered on drones and similar technology as well as a new working group on the future of defense.

Today's move makes the FCC a short-lived organization, at least in name. It was activated at the beginning of this year by then-Secretary Dan Driscoll as a subordinate command under the service's four-star Transformation and Training Command, or T2COM.

T2COM was established as a result of the service's sprawling Army Transformation Initiative, which aimed to bolster the service's modernization and consolidate some of the service's leadership. It combined the service's two four-star commands, Training and Doctrine Command and Army Futures Command.

"This goes beyond drones," LaNeve said in the release today. "FASCOM will pioneer operational concepts that harness autonomous capabilities across all warfighting functions."

> *We are incorporating autonomous and unmanned systems at every single echelon across the formation ... with the force structure to match ... including introducing UAS [unmanned aerial systems] and robotics military specialties to integrate these technologies at the point of need.*
>
> **— Gen. Christopher LaNeve**
> *U.S. Army Acting Chief of Staff*

Acting army secretary announces 'manufacturing rodeo' to tackle 'weak links' in supply chain

"The magic is that this is an early indicator that we're acquiring a new system of seamless, frictionless symbiosis between the Army and American commercial excellence," said Acting Army Secretary Adam Telle.

WASHINGTON — Acting Army Secretary Adam Telle today announced the service will hold an event aimed at finding weak spots in the service's supply chain, which the service is calling a "manufacturing rodeo."

"We need to make the things we need here in America, and to keep making them when demand surges. That's why I'm announcing today that the US Army is going to do something we've never done before," Telle said today at the annual AUSA conference, marking his largest address to soldiers and industry since taking on the acting secretary role.

"Early next year, we will conduct what I'm calling a manufacturing rodeo, a race between our industrial base partners."

Telle did not divulge many details about the upcoming event, but said since the Army has invested "a lot in our organic industrial base," the service will now hold a competition of sorts between industry where they will "strain" and "stress test" the supply chain to "see where it breaks."

"The magic is that this is an early indicator that we're acquiring a new system of seamless, frictionless symbiosis between the Army and American commercial excellence," Telle said. "We built those muscles in World War II, but we haven't flexed them since the Cold War, and as I said, the script has flipped. Take a basic attack drone. We need to be able to make millions of these. It may look simple, but it's a flying supply



Acting Secretary of the Army Adam Telle speaks during the Opening Ceremony of the 2026 Association of the United States Army. (U.S. Army photo by Christopher Kaufmann)

chain we don't control enough of."

Though Telle said the Army is focused on modernization efforts such as bolstering its supply chain, he also wants to put an increased emphasis on getting "back to the basics."

"I'm going to take it back to the basics, back to the dirt that lies beneath that foundation, because government agencies are in such a race trying to one up each other on the path to technocratic superiority that we often blow right past the fundamentals," Telle said. "We're so eager to talk about how we're playing with the shiniest, newest, most headline-worthy gadgets that we forget what we were trying to do in the first place."

Getting back to the basics includes focusing on "controlling and securing land," Telle said.

"[C]ontrolling land is fundamental to humanity. The Army does it better than anyone, and it's on us, the people in this room, to keep it that way. Humanity's connection to the land is biblical, and it even transcends faith."

> *Early next year, we will conduct what I'm calling a manufacturing rodeo, a race between our industrial base partners.*
>
> **— Adam Telle**
> *Acting Army Secretary*



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Didn't get picked for IFPC interceptor competition? Army says come demo anyway

The service will continue working with the Lockheed Martin and Boeing-Anduril teams but also hosting "shoot-off opportunity" for additional vendors, explained Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano.

WASHINGTON — After tapping two teams to continue development for a second interceptor for its Indirect Fire Protection Capability (IFPC) Increment 2 launcher, the Army is creating a way for other vendors to keep competing, according to a three-star general.

Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano the Portfolio Acquisition Executive for Fires described the effort as an "off-shoot opportunity" that the service will pursue even as it works with competition winners Lockheed Martin and a team-up from Boeing and Anduril. The opportunity would allow for another competition planned for the fourth quarter of 2027.

"We wanted to turn up the heat on that program," Lozano told an audience Tuesday at the annual Association of the US Army conference. "I want to run an in parallel, what I call an in-strike competition."

"We basically just said, 'Hey, if there's any other company who didn't make the first cut … but oh by the way, [if] you continue to invest in its second interceptor capability, we'd love for you to come out to the range,'" he later added. "We'll give you range time. We'll present targets and will allow you to recompete with an opportunity to get back into the program fold."



A Heavy Expanded Mobility Tactical Truck and one of the launchers assigned to 1st Battalion, 51st Air Defense Artillery, 1st Multi-Domain Task Force, participates in new equipment fielding, training, and gunnery certification of the Integrated Fires Protection Capability (IFPC) on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., Nov. 20, 2025. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Brandon Rickert)

Further, Brig. Gen. Guy Yelverton, the program manager executive for defensive fires within PAE Fires, told Breaking Defense in an interview today that with lessons learned from conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, Army senior leaders "were curious about what else is out there" besides the Lockheed and Boeing-Anduril teams.

He also said he thinks opening up the competition will further "incentivize" industry to go faster and put additional internal research and development dollars into the program.

"Is there someone that could be ready to go into production today that could be part of that second interceptor program? So it was more or less an opportunity to see what else is out there," Yelverton said of the decision to re-open the competition. "It's motivating both sides. It's letting new entrants know that we really are interested in what they can do and we want to go see what they're doing."

He added that the Army could possibly select two vendors, one from the original path between Lockheed and the Anduril-Boeing team and another from the new, re-opened path.

"I always say that my competitions are not about finding one vendor. I need many vendors so I can produce many things simultaneously and outfit the entire United States Army," Yelverton said.

The service is using the same set up for the next generation short-range interceptor program, allowing other companies to compete against Lockheed and Raytheon who are under contracts with the Army and competing for a production deal.

The move comes as the Pentagon looks for ways to ramp up critical munition production and refill its stockpiles. In recent months the department has inked a series of framework agreements designed to pave the path of multi-year contracts.

A Question Of Budgets

When it comes to Army programs, acquisition czar Brent Ingraham told the same audience that the service will need to see where the 2027 defense budget lands and make sure these munition deals are a funding priority.

The challenge for the Army and other services is, in part, centered on the administration's decision to place a large swath of the munition buy inside a reconciliation request instead of the base budget. Lawmakers are not yet moving forward with that reconciliation request and defense officials may reshuffle the base budget request.

"Depending on where a budget lands, what a top line looks like, whether there's a reconciliation or not … all those things will drive us to figure out how we ensure that we continue to give the right demand signal to industry" on critical munitions, Ingraham said.

Despite the rash of framework agreements, he acknowledged, "I can't expect industry to sort of invest like we've been asking them to invest on a wish list or a dream."

Should the CR run for a full year, the Army may need to "reprioritize" funds to make sure the dollars are there to support the multi-year buys, he said.

Army sent balloon swarms to Middle East to support CENTCOM operations

The Army gleaned a trio of observations about how those balloons operated, but it is not yet clear what path the service will pursue when it comes to stratospheric sensing capabilities, Andrew Evans said.

WASHINGTON — After scrubbing a large-scale, high-altitude balloon demonstration in the Indo-Pacific last year to send the assets over to the Middle East, the US Army has gleaned a series of observations for future use, according to a senior service official.

"We were asked to pivot and do some experimentation in combination with operations, and we pivoted and supported operations in CENTCOM [US Central Command]," Andrew Evans, the director for the Strategy & Transformation Office inside the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence shop (G-2), told Breaking Defense today.

"They were effective for the mission that they were assigned," he added, though he was not able to disclose the exact location and operational scenarios in which they were used.



The 3D Multi-Domain Task Force, in conjunction with the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, launched High-Altitude Balloons (HABs) from Won Pat International Airport in Guam on June 10, 2024. T (US Army/ Sgt. Perla Alfaro)

The Army has tested out high-altitude balloons multiple times in the last few decades, and the service has revived the push to deploy them in recent years for added battlefield sensing and communications. Testing has typically included one or two balloons at a time, but the Army was looking to experiment with over a hundred high-altitude balloons in the skies over waters in the Indo-Pacific in 2026. While that didn't come to fruition, smaller balloon swarms were used in CENTCOM.

"From a scale perspective, we went from one to two to dozens simultaneously," Evans said on the sidelines of the Annual Association of the US Army conference. The smaller

swarms were enough to highlight a trio of challenges associated with operating those autonomous balloons inside a theater with active military operations.

First, there were logistical challenges tied to transporting the balloons into the Middle East and then storing them.

"Balloons can be a little finicky in terms of temperature, and you have to contend with environmental characteristics," Evans said.

Then, there were questions about how to support and operate the balloons — something the Army and joint force will need to do "a little bit of additional thinking" about regarding what force structure will need to look like, Evans said.

"We had a lot of help from vendors in this space, but as you think about employing your systems and going from something like a Pacific [theater] to something like a CENTCOM [theater], you learn where those friction points might exist between what the military might need to inherently own, and … what a vendor could help provide in terms of the service," Evens said.

Given the ongoing regional options, industry had to put the military in "driver's seat" to ensure everything was in accordance with the proper authorities the US military had.

Balloons can be a little finicky in terms of temperature, and you have to contend with environmental characteristics.

— Andrew Evans
Director for the Strategy & Transformation Office inside the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence shop (G-2)

"And there's just not a lot of folks that are trained on how to operate it, so we've learned some things along the way and we're going to take those back," Evans said.

Another challenge, albeit one expected, was related to airspace control. While Evans did not expand on this point, airspace control has been a point of contention as the military seeks to add aerial drones into airspace that also includes manned military aircraft and commercials planes.

"There were some challenges. … That was not a new finding, [but] a consistent observation," Evans said.

As for what's next for balloon experiments and buys, Evans said Army leaders are pretty certain that they need stratospheric sensing capabilities, but it is "unclear" how they will be delivered.

"Would it be a balloon? Would it be a solar glider? Would it be some sort of pseudo satellite?" he said. "It's unclear. No decision has been made."

Army looks to add third CAML system, Lozano says

A request for information will be coming out in the near future, and the service is looking to make some "early selections" in the March to April timeframe for the CAML-light, Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano, PAE for Fires, said.

WASHINGTON — The Army is looking to expand its Common Autonomous Multi-Domain Launcher (CAML) program by adding a third, light variant in partnership with the Australian military.

"I've been asked by the vice [chief of staff] and our acting chief to execute in conjunction with the Australians a CAML-light sprint to help the Australians meet some of their capability requirements," Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano, the Portfolio Acquisition Executive for Fires, told an audience at the annual AUSA conference Wednesday.

He added that a request for information (RFI) will be coming out in the near future, and the service is looking to make some "early selections" in the March to April timeframe that could result in a a "potential" live-fire demo in either June or July, later leading to a down select.

Lozano did not disclose details on why the Army is looking for a light variant — the Army has previously stated it was looking for just medium and heavy variants — nor did he share details on the Australian military's role in the program.

The CAML program is set to serve as a replacement for the Army's Typhon — its Mid-Range Capability (MRC) long-range launcher — after the service discovered it was too large to op-



Soldiers fired an earlier iteration of the Autonomous Multi-domain Launcher in June of 2025. On Aug. 21, 2026, the Army announced the award of a prototype Other Transaction Agreement to the Georgia Tech Research Institute, Atlanta, Georgia, to serve as the Weapon Systems Integrator. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Grayson Cavaliere)

erate on the battlefield. The new launchers will be an autonomous, optionally crewed, "highly mobile" cross-domain fires launcher designed to be air transportable.

The announcement of the light variant comes after the service awarded Georgia Tech Research Institute in September up to $33.4 million to be the lead weapons systems integrator for the medium variant of CAML. Lozano said Wednesday that a munitions palette provider and the autonomous platform provider for the medium program should be awarded in the next 30 days.

As for the heavy variant, Lozano said Wednesday that his office is "starting to look" at the 2028-2029 timeframe for the launcher.

"We're looking at a strategy here where we take a scenario where we don't have every missile having its own unique launcher and [we're] trying to collapse down [to] a maximum of three," Lozano said. "But that generically is the timeline, and we massage and adjust that timeline as we learn more about industry's capabilities to deliver what we need."

Similar to the medium CAML variant, Lozano emphasized that there will be more than one vendor working on the light variant to avoid "manufacturing constraint" on the defense industrial base.

"We have to break the old tradition of doing a competition and going down to one vendor, and then going all in on one single vendor, because then you just created a sole source environment, a choke point, and a manufacturing constraint," Lozano said. "The intent is we want to be able to have multiple different missile and munition solutions for every type of capability requirement we're trying to develop."

> *We have to break the old tradition of doing a competition and going down to one vendor, and then going all in on one single vendor, because then you just created a sole source environment, a choke point, and a manufacturing constraint.*
>
> **— Lt. Gen. Frank Lozano**
> *Portfolio Acquisition Executive for Fires*

Open system architecture will be 'hyper important' in downselect of Army's XM30: Senior official

An open systems architecture allows the Army and its industry partners to plug new and different software and hardware capabilities into the platform.

WASHINGTON — The Army will make open systems architecture a key criterion when selecting the winner for its XM30 Optionally Manned Fighting Vehicle, a top official overseeing ground vehicles told Breaking Defense this week.

During an interview at the annual AUSA conference, Brig. Gen. Troy Denomy, portfolio acquisition executive for ground maneuver, said the Army is prioritizing the ability to rapidly adapt its platforms and integrate new technologies as threats evolve — particularly in the counter-unmanned aerial aerial systems fight.



The XM30 Combat Vehicle will serve as the U.S. Army's infantry fighting vehicle to create an advantageous position and deliver a decisive strike, while also controlling maneuver robotics and semi-autonomous systems. (US Army photo by Aliyah Harrison)

"There's other aspects that we are absolutely evaluating, but that one is hyper important to me, and we are actually going to evaluate that as part of this selection process," Denomy added.

The XM30 is intended to replace the Army's Bradley Fighting Vehicle, which has served as a central component of the service's armored formations for decades. The next-generation vehicle is being designed to give soldiers improved protection and capabilities to operate against new battlefield threats.

An open systems architecture allows the Army and its industry partners to plug new and different software and hardware capabilities into the platform as emerging tech becomes available and as the threat picture changes, Denomy explained. Out of the two vendors who are competing for the program — American Rheinmetall and General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) — he said it's "too early to tell" which company has implemented a more open architecture.

Both vendors have delivered one XM30 prototype each to the Army for testing at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Denomy said. Testing has identified some software capabilities that the vendors need to "tweak," particularly involving communication between platform subsystems, he said.

"Both vendors are being very responsive to those changes that are necessary," Denomy said. He added that "it's nothing atypical for a prototype," and the open systems architectures for both platforms have allowed the changes to be made quickly.

Though the government is operating under a continuing resolution and Congress has yet to pass the fiscal 2027 budget, Denomy told Breaking Defense that he believes the XM30 program will successfully move forward. He pointed to conversations the service had with congressional staff members at the Army Modernization Days in Aberdeen two weeks ago.

"We spent the whole day with the professional staff members and felt like what we were talking about was positively received of where we are in the program, and that we will be ready based off of our plan to execute the dollars with the appropriation forthcoming," Denomy said.

The Army requested $547 million to procure 19 XM30s in FY27, as Breaking Defense previously reported. However, the House Appropriations defense subcommittee drafted a version of the FY27 spending bill that reduced the procurement line to just $33.1 million.

Separately, Denomy said that the Army is conducting experimental testing with BAE Systems' Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV) equipped with a 30mm Kongsberg turret — a platform known as the AMPV-30. The vehicle is currently "being exercised in an infantry fighting vehicle role" as part of a Transformation in Contact rotation, he said.

He said there are "significant differences between" what the AMPV-30 and XM30 can do and cautioned against conflating the two vehicles.

The AMPV-30 gives the Army an opportunity to explore an infantry fighting vehicle role for the platform, originally designed as a replacement for the M113 family of armored personnel carriers and support vehicles. Unlike the XM30, which is an Army-funded program, the AMPV-30 is self-funded by BAE Systems.

Denomy praised BAE for investing its own funding to give the Army additional options, saying the effort could allow the AMPV to conduct more types of missions.

"For me what this showcases from an AMPV perspective [are] potential opportunities in the future for other mission roles for it. They do the standard things that are part of the program of record — whether it's the general purpose, the medical variant [or] the mission command variant. Well, now they've demonstrated [a version] with a turret that could fill a role," he added.

Further, he emphasized that the "commitment behind XM30 is real and it's important, and we have two very viable offerings."

Army feels 'growing pains' as it integrates Anduril NGC2 tech with older comms

"It wasn't seamless, and we learned a lot," Brig. Gen. Shane Taylor told Breaking Defense.

WASHINGTON — When the Army for the first time attempted to integrate Next Generation Command and Control (NGC2) tech from defense firm Anduril into its existing comms systems, not everything went exactly to plan, Army and company officials revealed to Breaking Defense this week.

"It wasn't seamless, and we learned a lot," Brig. Gen. Shane Taylor, portfolio management executive for command and control information network (C2IN), said on the sidelines of the annual AUSA conference this week. "There's always growing point pains in these. I just think that a lot of the things that we saw out there were normal, like all right, we're putting … a group that hasn't necessarily worked together, so it's just that normal growing pains with that."



U.S. Army Sgt. Jeffrey Davis, an electronic warfare specialist with the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, operates a dismounted spectrum awareness system during Exercise Lightning Surge 1 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, Jan. 22, 2026. The system provides real-time situational awareness of the electromagnetic spectrum, feeding critical data into the Army's Next Generation Command and Control (NGC2) ecosystem for commanders to make more informed decisions. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Duke Edwards)

The test had come in September, when the Army's 25th Infantry Division attempted to use Anduril's Lattice platform during Lightning Surge 5 in Hawaii, which the Army described as a "multi-phase campaign to modernize its command-and-control architecture." Up until then, Anduril's NGC2 tech had been used by the 4th ID in Colorado, where it was paired with new, mostly commercial hardware and software.

Lockheed Martin, which is leading the integration on the 25th ID's portion of the NGC2 architecture, served as the integrator for Anduril's platform. Chandra Marshall, vice president of multi-domain combat solutions at the defense giant, told Breaking Defense the company expected "it would be a challenge."

"I would say outside of Lockheed Martin, yes, I think some people are surprised at how much of a challenge it has been," Marshall said in an interview at the AUSA conference.

She explained scaling with Lattice was an issue passing data through the system "just is not at the state it should be right

now with bringing in the Lattice product."

An Anduril official, for his part, acknowledged the growing pains, but noted that they discovered technical limitations with the communications architecture writ large.

"It was our first time with a host of technologies at the 25th [ID]," James Craven, program manager for NGC2 for Anduril, said in an interview Wednesday. "Working on TSM radios that were not the same waveform or configuration that we had used at 4th ID, and [Lightning Surge] was also several novel mission threads as well."

Getting Lattice and the older comms structure on the same page will be key to the Army's NGC2 efforts, as Army and industry officials noted that the 25th ID's architecture is largely representative of what they'll have to build on top of as they begin to baseline and field other units within I Corps throughout the upcoming fiscal year.

"The major difference between the 4th Infantry Division and the 25th, is that [25th] will continue to preserve some legacy capabilities … and we're going to make sure that we maintain seamless integrations with legacy equipment because not everybody's going to get a fresh fielding like the 4th Infantry Division," Craven said.

Lockheed's Marshall said that for its part, the company is making sure the 25th ID gets "back to working operational architecture so that we can continue to build on the capabilities."

New Environment, Different Technology

Part of the challenge, Army and company officials said, was also just the vastly different environment the tech was called to operate in and on what mobile platforms.

For example, Fort Carson, Colo., where 4th ID is based, is a much more open, plain environment as opposed to the dense jungle in Hawaii with 25th ID. Moreover, 4th ID is a heavier unit, with soldiers operating out of Strykers, while 25th ID's primary platforms are lighter Infantry Squad Vehicles.

"We don't have the same type of permissiveness from putting equipment on platforms perspective that we do with like Stryker brigades," Joseph Welch, the Army's portfolio acquisition executive for command and control (C2) and counter C2, said in an interview at AUSA. "We've had to work through what does that really mean for a mobile infantry unit in terms of what types of transport solutions and what type of compute capacity we can put at echelon. … There's probably some additional tweaks and optimizations we're going to make that's based on just the reality of the formation type."

As for working with other legacy tech, Craven said Anduril has been partnering with radio providers, C2IN and 25th ID on the operational configurations such as how big the channels are, how to separate data from voice channels on radios, how to ensure the appropriate soldiers within a unit have beyond line-of-sight communications such as Starshield, all in order to provide a "fight tonight" capability for the data layer.

One of the key lessons at Lightning Surge 5, Craven said, was filling the request to go smaller on things like edge computing capabilities. While they integrated Lattice onto the Mounted Family

of Computer Systems at 4th ID, last month was the first time they did it on tablets.

However, that integration was requested and done in the middle of the exercise, Craven said, hoping that next time, they'll have a chance to work that integration before they get out to the field.

Outfitting More Divisions With NGC2

Following the decision to field I Corps with the NGC2 architecture and associated capabilities, the Army is in the process of providing the corps headquarters capabilities and applications while looking to baseline the other divisions.

"I think the 25th one was very helpful because those ITN divisions, when we come in with the Next Gen C2 capabilities, that's the integration that we're going to do," he said.

Though, Welch said they'll continue to upgrade 4th ID with some "burn down items" that came out of Project Convergence over the summer, they need to address in terms of systems to bring forward or leave behind.

Welch noted that the importance of testing over the past year with the ITN equipment in 25th has helped ensure the baseline is solid and they have good configurations.

> *It wasn't seamless, and we learned a lot. There's always growing point pains in these. I just think that a lot of the things that we saw out there were normal, like all right, we're putting ... a group that hasn't necessarily worked together, so it's just that normal growing pains with that.*
>
> **— Brig. Gen. Shane Taylor**
> *Portfolio Management Executive for Command and Control Information Network (C2IN)*

While there is no definitive timeline in terms of when the other divisions under I Corps will get baselined, Welch said it will occur within the fiscal year. The continuing resolution is having some impact on that, he said, acknowledging they'll have to look at "pacing" some systems.

Additionally, there are logistics the Army will have to take into consideration in terms of moving systems forward to the divisions, with units spanning up to Alaska and in the Pacific.

Overall, they're trying to not overwhelm these units with new capabilities.

"We are trying not to have NGC2 coming in there as a disruptor to their mission focus, but as an enabler of it. As you know, NGC2 is a multi-layered stack capability. So our teams are in routine communications for the planning aspect of when we're going to start introducing those," he said. "It's really more aligned to the opportunities that we have when we try to align to their exercises and their training."

Weaponizing the supply chain for a liquid-fueled howitzer-fired munition that flies 150 km

The goal of such weaponization is to tie warfighter needs to the RDT&E cycle.

Recent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have exposed potential weaknesses in the munitions supply chain, and the defense industrial base is working to ramp up production to meet needs and replenish dwindling stockpiles.

Breaking Defense spoke with Tiberius Aerospace Co-Founder and CEO Chad Steelberg about the company's efforts to "weaponize the supply chain," speed up delivery of munitions and develop the systems needed to support the US and its allies.



Chad Steelberg, co-founder and CEO, Tiberius Aerospace

Breaking Defense: What have recent conflicts revealed about the way the US and its allies develop and replenish weapons?

Steelberg: The human tragedy in Ukraine is central to our ethos as a company, and we used it as a catalyst to understand the challenges that were unfolding in modern warfare. How do you supply weapon systems at scale? What does that network look like?

That ranges from sourcing raw materials, to relying on allies to deliver weapon systems that work, to building up your own military industrial base from scratch. And the RDT&E cycle against your enemy has changed completely. Historically it was measured in years, if not decades, and you fought wars with stockpiled weapons. Now you're in a tit-for-tat innovation cycle of less than one quarter, right? Every two months you're watching the weapon systems evolve.

If you can't iterate it, improve it and get it back in the field, it's DOA. That is probably the clearest example of how warfare has changed: the RDT&E life cycle now connects directly to the warfighter, and continuous innovation and continuous deployment have become essential to our national security and that of all our allies.

Tiberius calls its approach Defense-as-a-Service. What does that mean in practice?

Look, we're not just building a better round. We're defining a new operating model for defense. Defense-as-a-Service means rapid iteration, sovereign scalability and continuous innovation on a global scale. It was one thing to say we're going to go build amazing products like SCEPTRE and Invictus. But what really mattered was the process behind them: the open architecture.

How do we deliver that on a global basis, and how do we weaponize the supply chain? I use that term very deliberately, because I look at how the commercial world has weaponized supply chains to its advantage. Take Apple: it rolls out hundreds of millions of 700-part iPhones every single year on a brand new design – it weaponizes its supply chain. It doesn't design its own cameras or LiDAR chips. It weaponizes an ecosystem of suppliers that are constantly innovating.

That's how we arrived at Defense-as-a-Service, and GRAIL is the software that makes it real. Over the past two and a half to three years, we've gone from a concept to saying that we're not only going to build an exquisite weapon system, we're going to use GRAIL to actually facilitate its manufacturing, delivery and financing.

Tell us about Tiberius' $500 million agreement with the UK that puts that model into practice.

This is no longer theory; it's in practice. We have signed a $500 million manufacturing contract in the UK with a private group that's building a consortium of manufacturing and RDT&E partners. Most importantly, it means SCEPTRE won't just be built there – it will be co-developed through GRAIL.



A test launch of Tiberius Aerospace's SCEPTRE missile. (Photo courtesy of Tiberius Aerospace)

This activity was authorized via a TAA, a Technical Assistance Agreement and AUKUS License Exemption under the ITAR, allowing us to share the co-development of SCEPTRE as the ballistic round moves from TRL 6 to 7 and 8 . That's federated manufacturing: you qualify the weapon once, then produce it across sovereign, in-country nodes. The UK is the first of those nodes, and the intent is to supply those weapon systems across Europe for European defense.

In my opinion, this is the most important announcement in our company's history since we first set out our vision of how we're going to attack defense differently, with Defense-as-a-Service as the business and GRAIL as the operating system that supports it. That was the vision; now it's reality. It's been written into a contract, and it's deployed in the UK.

Tiberius Aerospace's SCEPTRE missile, which is powered by a liquid-fueled ramjet engine. (Photo courtesy of Tiberius Aerospace.)

Why did Tiberius decide to build a 155mm long-range ramjet powered precision weapon as its first effort?

We started with the problem. Today you can see further than you can shoot. A drone finds a target deep behind the line, the imagery is on a screen in minutes, and nothing in range can reach it. Your options are all bad: move the guns forward into counter-battery fire, spend a scarce missile, or let the target go.

Then we went to the data. I'm a big AI guy, and we laid the foundation of GRAIL by ingesting every piece of open-source information we could find about every weapon system on Earth. In

the process, we started to define a new language for measuring a weapon's effectiveness. Not just range and accuracy, but target efficiency and the environment you're shooting in – I'm talking about GPS denial, GNSS denial.

When we ran that problem through the data, the answer that came back was a long-range precision munition designed to strike at 150 kilometers or further, at a specific price point – fired from a howitzer. We looked at that and shook our heads: 'We're going to go do what?' A cannon designed in the 1930s is going to be the best weapon we can build? But it became clear there really was method in the madness. Howitzers are already in service right across NATO. If you can turn the gun the warfighter already has into a long-range precision weapon, you close that gap without waiting for a new platform.

Why power SCEPTRE with a liquid-fueled ramjet engine, and what does that change operationally, such as its ability to throttle?

The reason is fundamental. As soon as you sit down with your engineering team and say, 'We want to build a long-range precision fires weapon that comes out of a howitzer,' you have to look at the characteristics of the gun. The gun generates 16,500 Gs. That means anything with moving parts, like a fuel pump, turns into a bag of parts on launch.



A test launch of Tiberius Aerospace's SCEPTRE missile. (Photo courtesy of Tiberius Aerospace)

Our team took a different approach. We developed a mechanism that allows the liquid fuel and the injection system in the combustor to survive 16,500 Gs, which immediately opened up the opportunity for liquid fuel.

There are three things we like about liquid fuel in our munitions. The first is cost-effectiveness and availability. If you can build a system that runs on anything from diesel and Jet A-1 all the way to JP-10, the weapon's availability and cost-effectiveness immediately go in your favor.

The second is that we can build munitions that are stored defueled. You can ship what is basically an inert device and stockpile it. Take the payload out and you have just a hunk of metal. From a maintenance standpoint, every 10 years you replace a battery and an O-ring for a couple hundred dollars, and that weapon system is ready to go.

The third is similar to the one you mentioned: not throttling but thrusting. Unlike solid-fueled weapon systems, you have the ability to adjust the thrust curve, giving you all sorts of advantages, not just in survivability, but in weapon effectiveness and terminal performance.

Where does SCEPTRE stand today?

In April we achieved a world first: liquid-fueled ramjet ignition from a NATO-standard 155mm howitzer, with stable flight. We're now at the TRL 7 tipping point, going through final live-fire

tests. To date we've been firing at short ranges, making sure we have ignition and proper gun survivability. Starting in October, we move on to longer ranges: full, live, long-distance shots of 150 km-plus, which we'll be certifying both in the US and overseas. And we film every test, including the ones that don't go to plan. That's how you iterate.

Our goal is to complete that certification as early as the end of this year and be ready to deliver final manufactured product in Q1 next year.

Invictus takes a modular approach to missiles. What problem is that intended to solve?

The conventional wisdom on missiles is that you can't build one that serves multiple missions, because then it won't serve any mission well. So missiles became so specialized and optimized that they lost the ability to be cost-effective.

The opportunity with Invictus was a strike missile designed for 200 km, with full modularity – components you can mix and match, so it isn't a do-everything missile, but a modular one. That means you can scale production and reduce operating and manufacturing costs. Suddenly you have a weapon system that can be optimized for different targets and different missions.

GRAIL underpins much of this. Tell us about it.

GRAIL started with GRAIL Effects, our modeling tool. It takes in all the characteristics of both offensive and defensive weapon systems, plus the environmental conditions they're operating in, and lets you run massive simulations to understand not only their effectiveness, but the cost of that weapon against those targets in those environments.

As we moved into the next phase of our business, we asked ourselves: who's actually going to help us manufacture our weapon systems? So we built GRAIL Agility, which uses AI to search for and identify vendors and match them against our designs.

The third piece is compliance – import/export rules, ITAR, DSP-5s, MLAs, TAAs. We now have AI systems that draft our manufacturing license agreements fully programmatically, based on the bill of materials and the manufacturing partners.

The final piece was financing – equipment financing and other types – not just for ourselves but for the supply chain we're now facilitating. That's where GRAIL Finance was born.

We believe GRAIL is to us what AWS (Amazon Web Services) is to Amazon. We're building our tools the way Amazon built AWS. Amazon built its cloud because it had problems that no one else had seen, and it started tackling them with software in the cloud. Once that reached a certain scale, they realized what they had built was valuable to the entire ecosystem – which is why AWS is today the most profitable part of Amazon.

We believe GRAIL will hold an equally strong position in the market down range. We're not trying to force it today; we're using it internally. But we have now signed hundreds of partners for external systems that aren't even related to our own products.

We believe that, in 2027, GRAIL will probably become one of the most valuable assets not only to our company, but to national defense.



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TIBERIUS

Lessons for CENTCOM from counter-drone experiments in the Arizona desert

Officials said the "realities of the desert" like intense heat, wind, dust and glare closely replicate the physical challenges faced by forces in CENTCOM.

YUMA PROVING GROUND, Ariz. — As American servicemembers sweated in the Arizona desert, stress testing various counter-drone technologies, some senior officials had their minds thousands of miles away — thinking about how lessons gleaned here could help protect troops under US Central Command in the Middle East.

"Operating capabilities day after day in extreme desert conditions provides invaluable data on system durability and operator usability that directly translates to contested environments like the CENTCOM AOR [area of responsibility]," Marine Col. Scott Humr, deputy director of science and technology for the Army-led Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) 401, told Breaking Defense last month shortly after the military concluded its most recent Falcon Peak exercise in Arizona desert.

He said the "realities of the desert" like intense heat, wind, dust and glare closely replicate the physical challenges faced by forces in CENTCOM in the Middle East. Handling such realities here in Yuma for Falcon Peak 26.2, put on by US Northern Command, allowed the team to "identify critical, highly practical sustainment needs that cannot be replicated in a laboratory."

Related: Battling sand and wind, Pentagon evaluates counter-drone tech at southern border exercise

For instance, Humr said the task force had to pay close attention to how often solar panels powering the tech needed to be cleaned, as they would quickly become covered in dust. Soldiers had to make other "simple physical modifications" too, like getting new display shields so operators could read their screens in the unrelenting sunlight.



A drone shot down by Genesis Arms Gen-12 SBM during exercise Falcon Peak at Cibola Site 17, Yuma Proving Ground, Arizona, Sept. 22, 2026. (Dept. of War photo by SSgt. Colten Tessness)

That information, in turn, can enable industry to better outfit troops in commands like CENTCOM.

"Passing this direct feedback from our operators back to developers ensures that counter-UAS [unmanned aerial systems] are fully ruggedized and optimized before they are deployed to forward combat environments," he said.

Mike Wior, CEO of Allen Control Systems, the company that makes the counter-drone Bullfrog system, echoed Humr's concerns over the wind. He told Breaking Defense on the sidelines of Falcon Peak that during the exercise his team had to adapt to the "gusts of wind that kind of

come out of nowhere" and the crosswinds that affect the direction of the interceptors.

"That has been kind of an eye opener," he said. "We've already been out there shooting for quite a while, and so we've been getting used to it. But it's really, really good, comparable stuff to CENTCOM."

The sentiment was echoed by Joe Cornelius, who's firm Perseus makes drone interceptors that the company says cost under $5,000 a hit.

"Some of the big takeaways we took from [the exercise] were like, we need to do more robust testing on different wind environments and things like that." Cornelius told Breaking Defense. "The winds out here at Yuma are about twice what we've ever tested with down in Texas. So that was a pretty big thing that we learned."

Regarding the lessons learned related to tech, Brig. Gen. Matt Ross, JIATF-401's commanding general, told reporters on Sept. 24 that the task force plans to inform leaders from CENTCOM of its success with constructing a "layered defense" during the exercise — using different, overlapping defensive tech in a way that offers more than one chance to neutralize a threat. CENTCOM already uses layered defenses, but Ross said that beefing it up will be vital considering the ongoing risks Iranian Shaheed drones pose to US and allied bases in the region.

"We work in support of all the COCOMs, and so we and the services receive the requirements from them, and so we have provided support to [CENTCOM commander] Adm. [Brad] Cooper and CENTCOM," Ross said. "I would say more than anything, [Falcon Peak] reinforced what we knew about the requirements for a counter-UAS ecosystem, meaning that we need a layered defense that consists of both active and passive sensing."

He added that he's seen how leaders in CENTCOM are "effectively" using the tools that are available, explaining that his task force's role is to "try to give them some additional tools" so they can "layer them together in an effective manner to protect their critical assets."

Though Ross didn't specify what kind of tools could be offered to CENTCOM, during the exercise, the task force and NORTHCOM demoed three "lanes" of capabilities: sensing, kinetic interceptors (also known as drone-on-drone take downs) and ballistic take downs, which primarily consisted of small ammunition taking down the aircraft.

The Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) also played a role in finding relevant capabilities for CENTCOM during Falcon Peak. Angela Aspito, a director with DIU's onramp hub in Arizona — which manages the continental US-based experimentation events for CENTCOM — told reporters DIU was successful in finding such capabilities, but she also did not specify on the types. But she said there are "gaps that we're aware of that the warfighter needs to fill with technology."

"It's pretty relevant right now to be out in Arizona, getting everything that's happening with the war in Iran and Epic Fury. There's a lot of relevant capability that needs to be transitioned into the Middle East, and so the opportunity to see that on the battlefield today is really real," Aspito said.

Urban warfare: Next Falcon Peak exercise to take counter-drone tech to the streets

After testing cUAS tech against heat and sand in the desert, the Pentagon is upping the exercise's complexity by simulating a bustling city.

YUMA PROVING GROUND, Ariz. — After the joint force and its federal agency partners spent almost a month in the near-vacant desert training to defeat drones coming over the US-Mexico border, military officials have opted to hold their next large-scale counter-drone drill in a very different setting: a bustling city with oodles of people and buildings.

"Homeland defense is not about protecting from outside; it's also protecting inside. We could do one without taking care of the other, and that's not the right answer," Brig. Gen. Jason Rueschhoff, operations director of US Northern Command, told reporters on Sept. 24 in Yuma during Falcon Peak 26.2 — the fourth iteration of the exercise.



A Teledyne FLIR representative, left, and Yuma Proving Ground test officer keep an eye on a command and control interface on the sensor lane during Falcon Peak 26.2 at YPG, Ariz., Sept. 21, 2026. (Department of War photo by John Ingle)

"The big things for us to be focused on will be collateral damage issues," he said.

Falcon Peak is run by NORTHCOM, and the most recent exercise in September at Yuma marked the first time officials from the command, the Defense Innovation Unit, the Army-led Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) 401 and the Department of Homeland Security all came together for the exercise. Together, they tested ways to neutralize drone threats in the open desert — whether through electronic means or by blasting them out of the air — and learned how the heat, wind and sand can wreak havoc on different systems, as Breaking Defense previously reported.

But like Rueschhoff, Marine Col. Scott Humr said he expects the next edition, scheduled for about a year from now, to be more complicated, considering the physical, operational and legal challenges that come with operating in and around populated civilian areas.

In regards to physical barriers, dense buildings, electronic "congestion" and other physical obstacles create signal in-

terference and "block the line-of-sight required for conventional radars and cameras," Humr, the deputy director of science and technology for JIATF 401, said.

"Legally and operationally, defending urban areas in the homeland requires navigating strict domestic policies, complex jurisdictional boundaries and heightened collateral-damage concerns that are not present on an open test range," he said.

Humr noted that JIATF 401's "primary takeaway" going from the recent Falcon Peak to the next one will be taking a "highly coordinated" interagency approach, especially working closely with DHS and the Federal Aviation Administration.

In the past, coordinating with such agencies hasn't been so seamless. For example, in February the FAA suddenly and mysteriously shut down the airspace around the busy El Paso, Texas airport. It was later discovered that the emergency was related to a miscommunication between federal agencies about the use of a counter-drone laser by Customs and Border Patrol, on loan from the Army.

Since then though, military officials have emphasized close coordination with the FAA, culminating in a joint agreement for a laser system to protect the southern border. Brig. Gen. Matt Ross, JIATF 401's commanding general, also told reporters during Falcon Peak that the task force and the military writ large continues to coordinate testing with the FAA.

But Rueschhoff and Humr said perhaps the highest priority, and a key challenge, will be learning how to protect any civilian population from any collateral damage. In the desert, there are relatively few issues with using a shotgun to simply blast a quadcopter out of the sky, but Humr said that for an urban environment, the Pentagon and task force will focus on using low-collateral and non-kinetic options to make congested environments as safe as possible.

The exercise, Rueschhoff said, will be "really telling for capabilities, and this will get at more than just our borders."

We need to make industry crash 100,000 drones next year

The US military needs to find a balance of drone inventory and training consumption that produces the most combat value for its money, writes Col. Dustin Thomas of DCMA.

The Pentagon is working to grow an American drone industrial base capable of producing hundreds of thousands of systems next year. Great! But what happens if we succeed?

While drones are much like munitions in the numbers the US military will need to expend, we shouldn't stockpile drones in warehouses. Technology, threats and tactics are changing too quickly. Large inventories of today's best drones could become tomorrow's stockpile of obsolescence.

Instead, we need to use them. And I don't mean just for training. I mean, really use them, run them quite literally into the ground, and then see what we can learn.

The Defense Innovation Unit's Deputy Director, Travis Metz, told the Senate Armed Services Committee this year that military training should consume drones in "the hundreds of thousands per year." That's an enormous number, and it creates an enormous opportunity. We need to use the elevated demand for those drones to train the industrial base to be able to support a war that quickly expends and iterates those platforms.

The industrial base can't just be seen as a supplier to the military. As the rate of technological change accelerates, manufacturing capacity and its ability to quickly adapt will become an increasingly integral part of the force generation system. That means industry needs to be part of the exercise.

And scale matters. We won't know if the industrial base can adapt at scale by ordering five prototypes — we need to know whether a system can be redesigned, built, trusted, delivered and employed in operationally useful quantities. You can't do that without producing at mass.



Jordanian Armed Forces service members and U.S. Army service members select a target while aiming their Dronebuster during Eager Lion 2024 in Jordan, May 13, 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Ivan Botts)

The good news is, we're already on the path. I attended both of the first two Drone Dominance Gauntlets, and the improvement between them was impressive. First, the drones were better and more reliable. The operators were better too. The Marines I watched had developed checklists and common language that helped them move quickly through setup and into flight. The test team was also better. Requirements were more clearly defined, scenarios were better differentiated and data collection and scoring were substantially more sophisticated.

But most impressively, the relationship between the vendors and operators had also changed. At times they looked less like customer and supplier and more like a single tactical-technical team. The operators knew what they wanted to do while vendors were able to show them how to make the technology accomplish that. From Gauntlet 1 to Gauntlet 2, the whole drone ecosystem adapted and improved. The important lesson: By consuming drones at significant scale, we simultaneously train the force, determine the next iteration of design and create the demand to build that next iteration.

So, what comes after the four Gauntlets conclude? Hopefully, we get more Gauntlets for different classes of systems. But we better not stop there. We should also take the most important lesson and institutionalize it.

If we think the only important training is the training done by warriors on the battlefield, we are losing sight of a very important facet of modern warfare. We need to exercise the industrial base as well.

Of course, consuming drones at this scale will not be cheap. But before you accuse me of wanting to set suitcases filled with $1,000 bills on fire, we need to recognize that drones stored in a warehouse can depreciate in combat value as technology, threats and tactics change. I'm not suggesting we purchase an extra 100,000 drones just to blow them up in tests; we need to plan to crash and replace some portion of the large quantities we're already buying.

A drone deliberately consumed in a well-designed exercise can produce a different kind of combat value from the one stored in the warehouse. We have always recognized that spent munitions and jet fuel produce higher operator proficiency, test data, better tactics and exercised logistics. But by intelligently consuming drones, we will also benefit from industrial learning and improvements to the next generation of systems. Our objective isn't to crash as many drones as possible, nor should it be to save every one of them for war. We need to find the balance between inventory and deliberate consumption that produces the most combat value for the money.

We already have many of the pieces. The Drone Dominance Program is testing both drone performance and manufacturing readiness. Project Flytrap puts emerging technology into soldiers' hands in operationally representative environments, and it's already connected through a series of exercises. Major exercises provide increasingly realistic operational problems, and the Department of War is experimenting with ways to assess manufacturing readiness. Now we need to connect them and integrate manufacturing between them. Together, they could become a continuous industrial exercise that teaches how to adapt when we find ourselves in the next major conflict.

Imagine a major exercise in which thousands of drones are treated as fully consumable. Both sides have drones and counter-drone systems. Operators employ their systems while testers collect data. Engineers, supply-chain experts, acquisition professionals and manufacturers are connected to what is happening in the field.

Once one side finds a significant advantage, that may be the end of that operational event, but that

would then trigger the next phase of the industrial exercise. We start the clock. Operators and testers determine what went right and what went wrong. Maybe they had an advantage in tactics but a disadvantage with the software interface. Maybe an adversary found a vulnerability in a communications link. Maybe a sensor, payload, antenna, component, or airframe needs to change.

Industry takes these lessons and immediately starts working.

Can it redesign the system? Can suppliers support the change? Can the government establish enough trust in the modified system to use it? Can the factory reconfigure? Can it produce the new version in quantities that matter? Can logistics get it back to the unit? Can operators learn the changes?

Some parts of the system will likely adapt faster than others. Finding this disparity is exactly what we need. The exercise will expose the bottlenecks that need to be fixed.

Then train again. And again. And again. Faster and faster. This could be done through a string of already existing exercises, modified to collect the right data and insert vendors at the tactical level. One exercise could discover a vulnerability, industry could adapt between events, and the next exercise could test the answer.

In effect, the industrial exercise never really ends. Individual exercises and events become iterations in a continuously adapting campaign to see what failed, what changed, at what scale, how long each step took and where we need to intervene.

Expending drones on this scale will create problems of their own. We'll have to figure out how to recover systems, harvest useful components, handle damaged batteries, recycle materials and dispose of what cannot reasonably be recovered. Good. Those are wartime logistics problems and it's time to start learning those lessons too.

We can't simply replicate what Ukraine did in their drone war. The United States would likely face different constraints and would integrate drones into Joint All-Domain Operations. What we should borrow is Ukraine's rate of learning and adapting drones to fit their operational needs.

We train pilots by flying, infantry by shooting and staffs through exercises because we don't want to discover during wartime whether they can perform their missions. If manufacturing and adaptation are increasingly becoming part of aggregate combat power, that same logic should apply to our industrial base.

The objective shouldn't be to enter the next war with the world's largest warehouse of drones. It should be to enter it with the world's most practiced system for designing, building and delivering drones. And it might take a whole lot more than crashing 100,000 drones to get there.

Col. Dustin Thomas is the Commander of DCMA's Unmanned Systems – Experimental Command (US-X). US-X provides contract oversight for unmanned systems of all sizes across all domains and manages the Blue List. Col. Thomas previously led Black Phoenix, an innovation team focused on designing, building and flying small unmanned systems in less than 24 hours, and founded Game of Drones, an experimentation event focused on the rapid integration of new technology into unmanned systems.

The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of War.

Ukrainian defense firms get creative to try and break through export restrictions

The US military needs to find a balance of drone inventory and training consumption that produces the most combat value for its money, writes Col. Dustin Thomas of DCMA.

WASHINGTON — Ukraine recorded its largest presence ever at AUSA this year, with 14 companies attending as part of the stand-alone Ukrainian defense pavilion. This marked the country's first return to the show since 2017, before Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

But despite the presence of these firms at America's largest defense conference, a longstanding challenge remains: exporting weapon systems from Ukraine is inherently complicated.

"For Ukrainian defense companies, bringing our innovations to international markets is a pretty complex regulatory environment," Yurii Hundych, chief commercial officer at Meta Bureau, told Breaking Defense on the sidelines of the show.

In April, in a long-awaited move, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced that the war-torn country would change its current export regime, which since 2022 has prohibited the transfer of military goods to other countries, to partially allow the sale of some domestically produced weapons to allies deemed non-cooperative with Russia.

At the time, the head of state stated in an X post that Ukrainian companies would receive "a real opportunity to enter partner countries' markets," provided that the country's armed forces were entitled to obtain the required amount of weapons first and "only what companies can produce beyond state orders will be exported."

However, six months later, Ukrainian firms tell Breaking Defense that a simple path forward has yet to materialize.

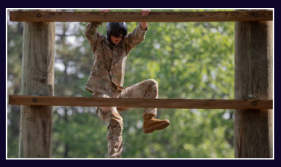
"There is a significant gap between the formal procedure and its practical implementation," a spokesperson for Phantom Defense, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, told Breaking Defense in Lviv last month. "The industry is still gaining practical experience with the new export licensing process, and companies are exploring ways to navigate it. … But the licensing procedure can be a bottleneck for companies looking to start exporting."



A soldier of the Unmanned Systems Forces prepares a drone 'Salut' for flight by connecting cables to the system on March 31, 2026 in Kharkiv, Ukraine. (Photo by Nikoletta Stoyanova/Getty Images)



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Reprogramming robots in the mud: How Army Special Ops trains its new robot technicians

"What we're building is a soldier that can adapt a piece of robotic kit to the mission, to the enemy, to the terrain," said Maj. Gen. Jason Slider, commander of the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

WASHINGTON — As the US military reorganizes to rapidly deploy new drones and other unmanned weapons, the Army's special operations school is building a cadre of expert warrant officers to wrangle the robots on the battlefield: Military Occupational Specialty 390A, Robotics Technicians.

"If you really want to understand what a 390-Alpha is, what these warrant officers are capable of, I invite you out to Clarke Range, Alabama, during the first week in November," said Maj. Gen. Jason Slider. That's when the second-ever class of MOS 390A candidates will conduct their final field exercise. Inspired by lessons from battlefields in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, the wargame will stress-test the candidates' capability to improvise under fire, he explained.



U.S. Army Soldier assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School climbs an obstacle during an NFL-Army Special Operations Forces commercial production event at Camp Mackall, Hoffman, North Carolina, June 14, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Roddie Arline)

"What we're building is a soldier that can adapt a piece of robotic kit to the mission, to the enemy, to the terrain," Slider said.

Slider commands the Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS), which graduated its first class of MOS 390A soldiers just two weeks ago. He and one of his chief aides, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Updike, spoke about the new program Tuesday at a GovExec event on the sidelines of the annual Association of the US Army conference.

As the simulated enemy presents a changing range of threats, the candidates will have to rethink their tactics and reprogram their robots on the fly, in the field, and under stress, Slider and Updike explained. Electronic warfare will scramble their radio

control links, block GPS, and cut them off from cloud-based AI coding tools, forcing them to rely on only the technology they can bring with them and get to work in the mud.

"When everything goes black … they still have to be able to reach back into their toolkit and bring out those [programs] to put into the Raspberry Pi to get the robot to do what it needs to do," Updike said. In the first class's final exercise earlier this year, for example, the students fit a quadcopter with a $1,000 HD camera and connected it to a decentralized mesh network, enabling the data to route around jammed nodes.

"They have to do all that innovation in the field," Updike emphasized, "without large models that are connected to the internet."

Large Language Models, cloud-based services in general, and even GPS navigation are frequently jammed on battlefields in Ukraine. Even when they are available, soldiers must take care, lest their radio transmissions reveal their location to the enemy and bring down a devasting precision strike. The "final crucible" exercise at Clarke Range reflects that grueling modern battlefield.

"We had specifically designed this capstone exercise to drive failure," Slider said. "[It] gives the students another opportunity to try — and maybe fail again."

It's crucial to understand what 390A soldiers are and what they aren't, Slider emphasized. They're not drone operators, although they can operate drones. They're not programmers, although they can code, often using miniaturized AI tools small enough to run on a ruggedized laptop in the field. Instead, these warrant officers are technical experts who stand between the commissioned officers, who command the force, and the enlisted personnel, who specialize in operating specific systems.

The 390As act as "system integrators," Updike explained, with both deep and broad understanding of different Army drones, ground robots, networks, and how they work together. Above all, the 390As are trained to adapt, modifying that array of interdependent systems to meet new threats.

"We looked at Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine, and we're studying the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East," Slider said. "We learned … units that that solely focus on pilots quickly lose the advantage to an adversary or an enemy force that can adapt."

That adaptation can't be solely technological, either, he said. It must encompass tactics and sheer human resilience as well.

"All the tech that we're talking about is, I think, important, and it'll help get the soldier to the objective," Slider said. "But it's always been true that the soldier has got to be really comfortable in the mud … closing with the enemy and finishing the fight."

Hegseth uses AUSA spotlight to push autonomy, 'generational' defense investment

Senior officials also revealed that the Defense Autonomous Working Group has been absorbed into a new Task Force Autonomous Warfare, which sits inside the Special Operations Command.

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and service leaders took center stage at the Association of the US Army's annual conference this morning discussing broad plans to scale autonomous weapons and stand up a new four-star command.

"You have autonomy. You have robotics. You have SI [super intelligence]. You have space," Hegseth told an audience full of servicemembers and industry figures. "It's that the folks who acquire it [defense platforms] need to be right there, up with the warfighter at the same time, who understand how to iterate it and change on and innovate on it."

While Hegseth and service civilian leaders steered clear of many specifics about autonomy development and investment plans today, they used the event to discuss the need to stand up the recently announced Autonomous Warfare Command, or AUTOWARCOM, that is envisioned as having service-like authorities to scale autonomous and robotic capabilities across the joint force.

While Congress will have to sign off on the plan — a move that could take time — the Defense Department is moving out with several efforts to pave that path forward. For instance, the Pentagon has shifted the Direct Reporting Portfolio Manager (DRPM) for autonomy into an umbrella unmanned tech initiative called Project Agincourt.

Owen West, who is now leading that project, moderated today's AUSA autonomy panel that provided some insight into management changes, including to the Defense Autonomous Working Group (DAWG).



US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth speaks at the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) 2026 Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, DC on October 14, 2026. The AUSA Meeting and Exposition is a defense trade show and networking event for the global defense community. (Photo by Jim WATSON / AFP via Getty Images)

DAWG was established as follow-on to the Biden-era Replicator initiative to dramatically increase the production of drones and counter-drone tech. In 2025 DAWG was placed under Special Operations Command (SOCOM) with the goal of focusing on different capability portfolios.

"We're smaller. We're able to iterate at the speed of relevancy," said Derrick Anderson, the assistant secretary of defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict.

Anderson said that DAWG is now being absorbed by a new Task Force Autonomous Warfare inside SOCOM to support Project Agincourt and, eventually, AUTOWARCOM, to "keep iterating" inside the autonomy space and so that there isn't a "stagnant pause."

"Our guys are going to keep pushing forward," Anderson added.

While lawmakers have not yet approved a fiscal 2027 defense spending bill or moved ahead with the administration's separate reconciliation request, the Pentagon has laid out plans to spend nearly $55 billion on DAWG.

It remains unclear how much of that request will ultimately be approved by Congress, but Hegseth reiterated this morning that the full request is necessary to "drive change" inside the department.

"[It is] a one-time generational investment gives us a chance to reflect the president's priorities," Hegseth said on stage.

"Investments now are going to matter, and they're going to ripple not just for years but for decades across our joint force," he later added.

> *We're smaller. We're able to iterate at the speed of relevancy*
>
> **— Derrick Anderson**
> *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict*

Army's Project Gatekeeper aims to cut software approval times from months to 'minutes'

The service's new cybersecurity testing sandbox will stand up on Oct. 23, said acting Army CIO Gabe Chiulli, streamlining the current cumbersome, ad hoc arrangements for clearing commercial software for Army networks.

WASHINGTON — In just ten days, the Army will activate Project Gatekeeper, a new AI-enhanced cybersecurity sandbox designed to vet commercial software for use on Army networks, officials announced today.

Launching Oct. 23, Project Gatekeeper is creating a single sandboxed environment — running on the Army's cloud but isolated from operational networks and sensitive data — where companies can bring their software for assessment, even if they don't have an Army contract or a program manager to sponsor them. Officials say Gatekeeper will cut the time required to get software approved from months to "minutes" — without sacrificing security in the process.



U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Tiffany D. Jessop, assigned to 4th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, operates the ODIN software platform during a division reconnaissance and security experiment as part of Project Convergence Capstone 6 at Fort Irwin, California. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Ger'vonni Straun)

"Success, to me, looks like a company, within minutes, is able to log in, submit their code and get the green check mark from our pipeline that says you are good to go," acting Army Chief Information Officer Gabe Chiulli told reporters at the annual AUSA conference here this morning.

Compare that with the current, cumbersome clearance process that can take days or weeks — stalling some software projects for as long as nine months, Chiulli and other officials said. That's a long time to wait for a software upgrade, especially under a process that officials say lack consistent cybersecurity practices, transparency for contractors and visibility for Army leaders into what's actually happening on their networks.

"We have had to do a lot of weird janky things to get code into our environments," Chiulli said. Sometimes, he said, "I'm not sure how they're getting code over to us."

The root of the problem, officials said, is that the Army has lacked a single, standardized, centralized process for bringing commercial software onto its secure networks. Instead, "it was up to every program manager," explained David Markowitz, the service's

chief data and analytics officer.

But many program offices lacked the capability or willingness to conduct cybersecurity assessments of new and unfamiliar code. Rather than evaluate the software themselves, they would wait for another organization to vet the company and officially grant its software Authority To Operate (ATO) on military networks.

"A lot of times, organizations in the Army won't talk to [companies] until they have this 'golden ATO,'" Chiulli said.

That created a kind of Catch-22: The companies best positioned to win Army software contracts where often the ones that already had them. Meanwhile new, innovative entrants — the kind of companies that the Pentagon's been courting for over a decade — struggled to navigate the combined complexities of cybersecurity rules, procurement regulations and Army bureaucracy.

If a program manager did decide to give a new piece of software a chance, moreover, they rarely had a dedicated, isolated sandbox in which to test it. Instead, they had to bring it onto an Army network and assess it there. That, in turn, required the company's personnel to get cleared for Common Access Cards (CAC) so they could access the Army system.

"We spent a lot of time and energy trying to get people CAC cards simply to help work with us," Chiulli said. "This is to get rid of all that [and] lower barriers to entry."

Gatekeeper will let companies test their software before they have an Army contract, a program manager sponsoring them or even a formal request for proposals to respond to, the officials emphasized, allowing prospective vendors to identify and address cybersecurity problems before trying to do business with the service.

Companies will still need CAC cards to access the platform initially, officials acknowledged. But the Army is finalizing an agreement with the General Services Administration (GSA) to use its Login.gov platform, which allows secure access to government systems for members of the public.

"We're looking at mid-November to have that integrated, at which point we'll be able to make this actually commercially accessible," said David Wright, chief engineer at the Army Software and Innovation Center (ASIC).

Once a company gets access to the Gatekeeper platform, it can upload its software and run it through the Army's standardized cybersecurity tools, including an AI assessment, officials explained. In minutes, the automated system will either tell the company its software passed the test or give detailed, actionable feedback explaining why it failed.

Gatekeeper will also include the Army's DevSecOps software development kit, Wright said, giving companies a secure environment in which to address problems using tools the Army itself has vetted.

"The idea here is not to lessen the security requirements," Wright emphasized, "but more to make the process more accessible and available, so that they can get immediate feedback and understand what it is that needs to be adjusted or corrected before these things are brought into an Army environment."

Army to take a (cautious) step toward employing AI agents to defend networks: Official

The service's new cybersecurity testing sandbox will stand up on Oct. 23, said acting Army CIO Gabe Chiulli, streamlining the current cumbersome, ad hoc arrangements for clearing commercial software for Army networks.

WASHINGTON — The Army is poised to take its next step toward potentially unleashing defensive AI agents on its networks as the service plans to award contracts to two companies by the end of the week, a key official said.

"The one that we plan to award on Friday is our take action element. So essentially, how are we not only autonomously detecting a potential adversary? How are we now doing something — having an autonomous response within prescribed parameters of a human operator, or even in conjunction with that?" Brandon Pugh, the service's principal cyber advisor, said at the annual AUSA conference on Monday. "That is extraordinary. Something we haven't done and we're very excited about."



The Army continues to march forward with industry to meet its Unified Network effort goals, aligning the enterprise and tactical network programs to reduce network complexity and provide greater tactical mobility to support the Army's division-centric warfighting at echelon. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Spc. William Kuang)

Pugh declined to provide the names of the awardees ahead of the Friday announcement.

The network AI effort, dubbed Project Griffin, stemmed from a tabletop exercise with top industry executives and service leaders. The Army published a commercial solutions opening in August, spurring 108 submissions that were narrowed to 10 finalists.

Pugh explained that the Army has tools, such as its Panoptic Junction capability, that he said have a nearly 90 percent success rate at identifying malicious activity on the network. But they don't currently have a way at remediating or remedying those threats, especially with limited humans.

Despite the award on Friday, officials said agents won't begin

work on government networks immediately.

"For us, it's going to be: Are we as humans ready to let the agent actually take action? You think about that for how many years a human has been the person making the patch, remediating something, so we're walking ourselves through what does it mean to have an agent to do that work and then how do you check that agent's work. So a lot still to do in this space," Lt. Gen. Christopher Eubank, commander of Army Cyber Command, told reporters at the conference.

He added that the service is working with companies to understand where what they can do in this space and determine what does it actually mean to take action, noting they're working "hand-in-hand with the companies to build out what it looks like" and then put it through a deliberate process on the Army's portion of the network. The two companies awarded could work in tandem on the effort or do their own thing.

Pugh said that using a commercial solutions opening to gather ideas was actually suggested by members of industry, as a way to keep responses broad as opposed to prescribing what companies should provide to the Army. Industry oftentimes has capabilities or ideas that aren't even on the government's radar, he said.

Given the big aperture, the Army wants to figure out what the companies are capable of providing as they put it through its paces.

For us, it's going to be: Are we as humans ready to let the agent actually take action? You think about that for how many years a human has been the person making the patch, remediating something, so we're walking ourselves through what does it mean to have an agent to do that work and then how do you check that agent's work. So a lot still to do in this space.

— Lt. Gen. Christopher Eubank
Commander of Army Cyber Command

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