

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

“Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another.”

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Stars and Stripes

Editors Note:

It was October 1971. I was an E-4 in the US Army Signal Corp tuning a microwave radio atop a remote hill near Augsburg, West Germany. The task was not so difficult that I couldn't read the Armed Forces news paper "Stars and Stripes" at the same time.

I came across an article calling for volunteers to report for temporary duty assignments as "ski patrolmen" at the Garmisch-Partenkirchen USAFRC near the Austrian border. In hindsight the brief post in the "Stars and Stripes" would be the beginning of the rest of my life.

1.

The Pentagon is waging a war on the American press. This year, *Stars and Stripes*, which has covered the American military with editorial independence since the Civil War, found itself in the crosshairs of higherups in the Defense Department. The DoD announced that it would return *Stars & Stripes* to its original mission, refocusing its content away from "woke distractions that syphon morale," and concentrating on "all things military." On March 9th the Pentagon barred *Stars and Stripes* from using wire services, publishing comics, filing Freedom of Information Act requests and reporting "controlled unclassified information," a label used for material the military considers sensitive.

The DoD stated that *Stars and Stripes'* coverage "must be consistent with good order and discipline," a phrase borrowed from the Uniform Code of Military Justice that can be broadly interpreted as a loyalty pledge. Following the department's directives, Jacqueline Smith, the *Stars and Strips* ombudsman and columnist, criticized the new policy. She was promptly fired.

Despite the heat, reporting at *Stars and Stripes* continued mostly as usual. "I've never felt pressured to censor myself. I was never told to write a story that I didn't feel was accurate or newsworthy," said Lara Korte, a reporter based in Germany who has covered the Middle East for *Stars and Stripes*. Korte and Erik Slavin, *Stars and Stripes'* editor in chief, spoke to CBS for a July 5th report on *CBS Sunday Morning*. "I'm working for *Stars and Stripes*. Not for the Pentagon, not for any administration, not for any policymaker," Korte said on the show. "I'm here to cover the military."

Following the segment, Korte said, "my bosses complimented my accurate statements and my levelheaded comments." Then in early August, the Pentagon appointed William Urban, an active-duty service member and public affairs officer, as a deputy to the publisher William D. Lederer Jr. Lederer was only the second full-time civilian in that position. On August 20th Lederer announced that he would retire at the end of September, writing to staff members that it had "become clear that my philosophy of leadership, and my understanding of the value and mission of *Stars and Stripes*, differ in fundamental ways from the direction the leadership of the Department of Defense has for the organization."

The next day, Korte, Slavin, and Lederer were fired for insubordination. Korte said that the termination email she received linked her dismissal directly to her participation in the July CBS segment. The three former employees have sued the Pentagon in the DC district court, alleging that the terminations violated their First Amendment rights and asking the court to halt their dismissals.



Garmisch-Partenkirchen, ski areas and The Zugspitze in Bavaria, West Germany. Prior to 1995 Garmisch-Partenkirchen hosted the headquarters and one of three recreation areas for the US Armed Forces Recreation Center (USAFRC)

A spokesperson for the Pentagon confirmed the firings in an email and referenced a statement that the DoD was "committed to editorially independent journalism that best serves our most important customer, which is our service members, their families, and greater military community."

The last press briefing inside the Pentagon was held on May 5th. Since then, a ceasefire with Iran has ended, five US service members have been killed and hundreds more injured, President Trump left a NATO summit in a catering truck and an unmarked military jet, and sailors on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* have reported distress as their deployment in the Arabian Sea has extended to more than two hundred fifty days. The Pentagon didn't respond to questions about the absence of press briefings. (Edited from: Columbia Journalism Review News Letter, August 31, 2026)

2.

The longtime publisher of *Stars and Stripes* has announced his retirement, ending a decades-long career with the military newspaper as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has exerted increased editorial control of the military's daily newspaper.

The abrupt retirement of publisher William D. Lederer Jr. came less than four months after the Pentagon fired Jacqueline Smith, ombudsman for the newspaper, whose job was to safeguard editorial independence.

The news outlet, though partly funded by the Defense Department, has a legacy of independence from military and government leadership. "No one should be surprised that they're kicking out the one person charged by Congress with protecting *Stars and Stripes'* editorial independence," wrote Ms. Smith in a news column.

Stars and Stripes has recently been at the forefront of the reporting on conditions for sailors on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and concerns for their treatment during the aircraft carrier's deployment. (Edited from: Associated Press August 19, 2026)

3.

The Pentagon agreed Friday to keep three *Stars and Stripes* employees on administrative leave for another week to allow the court to weigh in on their lawsuit alleging wrongful termination. Erik Slavin, the editor in chief; Lara Korte, the paper's Middle East reporter; and Max D. Lederer Jr., the publisher, filed the 45-page lawsuit against chief Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell, the Defense

Department, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Andres Brey, a Pentagon public affairs official. The lawsuit alleges the firings violated their right to free speech and were issued in retaliation for the news outlet's unflattering coverage of conditions aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln*. David Seide, an attorney on the case with the Government Accountability Project, said Judge Trevor McFadden asked Pentagon attorneys in a hearing Friday if the Defense Department could extend each staffer's firing, which was set to occur two days later, so that he could fully understand the case. The Pentagon agreed to keep them on administrative leave for another week. The next hearing is scheduled for Sept. 4th in Washington, where attorneys will argue before McFadden about imposing a temporary restraining order to halt the firings. "The extension maintains the status quo," Seide said. *Stars and Stripes* operates as a

commercial news outlet but is owned by the Defense Department, which also provides some of its funding. Its employees are federal workers paid through non-appropriated funds, a status that impacts access to some federal worker protections. (Edited from: *Stars and Stripes* August 29, 2026)

Word of the Week volunteer

/ˌvɒl.ənˈtɪr/

noun

1. person who voluntarily undertakes or expresses a willingness to undertake a service: such as
 - (1) one who renders a service or takes part in a transaction while having no legal concern or interest
 - (2) one who receives a conveyance or transfer of property without giving valuable consideration
2. a volunteer plant

verb: volunteered; volunteering; volunteers

1. intransitive: to offer oneself as a volunteer
2. transitive: to offer or bestow voluntarily

adjective

1. being, consisting of, or engaged in by volunteers
2. growing spontaneously without direct human control from seeds lost from a previous crop volunteer corn plants

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