



# News Release

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## Medical research unit leaving Europe

By Gino Mattorano  
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SEMBACH KASERNE, Germany – The U.S. Army’s premier medical research unit for behavioral health in Europe is relocating to Joint Base Lewis McChord, Wash., effective June 30.

The unit’s inactivation ceremony is at 2 p.m. June 17 at the Sembach Community Activities Center.

The U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe has been a vital part of the U.S. Army in Europe for 38 years, providing evidence-based research to help improve the well-being and resilience of Soldiers and their Families.

USAMRU-E conducts applied field studies with Soldiers in garrison, deployed, and training settings. These studies help determine prevalence rates of current challenges facing Soldiers and Families, identify emerging behavioral health threats to the force, and help guide potential training and intervention efforts.

“What’s unique about us is that 100 percent of our work is done with Soldiers, where Soldiers are,” said Lt. Col. Jeff Thomas, USAMRU-E commander. “Whether they’re in garrison or in a deployed environment, we conduct all of our research where Soldiers work. It’s an ideal way to get accurate data. Not only are we able to move out on programmatic research, but we can also listen to what’s going on at an operational unit.”

USAMRU-E is headed to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, where it will focus its research on Soldiers in the Pacific theater of operations.

“USAREUR has been a fantastic place to do research and we’ve received outstanding support from ERMC and USAREUR. It’s been a great environment to do research that supports the warfighter and also supports our program.

“However, USAREUR has downsized significantly over the past 20 years so in order for us to continue to be able to work directly with line units, we need to be located closer to a larger projection platform,” Thomas said. “There are currently more Soldiers in the Pacific region, so that gives us access to more operational units. “With fewer units in USAREUR, the risk of doing psychological support research with Soldiers/units is that you reach a saturation point with units, and as a result, it is harder to execute the research mission.”

Thomas says that the unit will still have the capability to come back to Europe, if needed, but the focus will be on Soldiers in the Pacific region for now. That doesn’t mean the European theater won’t be without research support.

“As we move to the background, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research Center for Military Psychiatry and Neuroscience Research (WRAIR) has moved to the foreground in supporting USAREUR,” Thomas said. “Over the years, we have worked closely with WRAIR, which does similar research, shares program funding, and when we do larger studies, it takes everyone from this unit plus that branch to pull it off.

“A great example of this is the work we did with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment,” Thomas continued. “We did this phenomenal study with them and since we’re leaving, WRAIR is able to pick up where we leave off and carry on the study, which has looked at behavioral health leadership and resilience and also addressing some local resilience training programs there.

“We’ve tried to make the handoff pretty seamless and it’s worked pretty well. While we’re leaving Europe, we still have the capability to support the units here in the theater. And from the highest levels, Army leadership understands that we need to support the mission here in Europe.”

The unit was established in 1977 to address problems in the U.S. military during the post-Vietnam era, with high-risk behaviors and illicit drug use and focused on characterizing the nature of the problem from a psychiatric perspective, according to Thomas.

“Drug use was a problem in the late 70s, as we went from an Army at war to adjusting to a post combat Army,” Thomas said. “Clearly, we’ve come a long way in 38 years, in that regard, but the unit’s success at characterizing and benchmarking those problems paved the way for the research USAMRU-E conducted over the years.”

One of the unit’s greatest successes, according to Thomas, was the work they did on psychological screening in 2003-2004, and the data they collected was used to formulate the policy that set up the post-deployment health reassessment.

“We had done a study in Vicenza where we had screened Soldiers as part of a bigger study we were doing, and we noticed that the rates were low, which is a good thing, obviously, but they were coming back from combat, so why were they lower than we thought they would be?” Thomas said.

“Four to six months later we came back and measured those same troops and found up to three-fold increases in rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We realized that the timing of when we did the survey made a huge difference. Some of the Soldiers were fine when they came back, but after being home for three to four months, the reality of post deployment sets in.”

The data from this study was a factor in the Army’s decision to implement a policy for mandatory post-deployment health assessments 90-180 days after units came back from a deployment, according to Thomas.

“Our unit’s work was a big part of that policy decision,” he said. The practical application of USAMRU-E research was also shared with the German Bundeswehr, as well as other NATO allies and partner nations.

“We’ve had a great relationship with the German Bundeswehr’s psychological services and have been part of numerous working groups on suicide prevention or resilience training or other human dimensions work,” Thomas said. “Through our strategic engagements with NATO, our research has also impacted how our NATO partners approach behavioral health and resilience needs of their service members.”

## **Key Accomplishments**

**Late 1970s:** USAMRU-E produced book, “Boys in the Barracks” which addressed the illegal drug use and abuse of alcohol that was pervasive. At the time USAREUR was losing an average of a battalion of Soldiers a month, who were being sent back home due to these problems. The book put a face on the problem and was an impetus for needed changes.

**1980s-1990s:** USAMRU-E played a key role in answering research questions supporting the move of the Army to the Army’s COHORT (Cohesion, Operations, Readiness and Training) and the Unit Manning System Initiatives adopted by the Army which aimed at keeping and fielding intact units en masse, turning the page on the individual replacement system of the past

**1991:** Developed a model for organizing support for families with deployed Soldiers that was implemented in Operation Desert Shield/Storm. The Chief of Chaplains fielded this model in their Family Assistance Plan.

**1996-2006:** USAMRU-E conducted three separate randomized trials validating the psychological screening questions used—from Balkan deployments and from the initial deployments into Operation Iraqi Freedom 1. These studies drove some of the policy decisions to implement the Post-Deployment Health Assessment and ReAssessment.

**2000:** USAMRU-E played a leadership role in ensuring common data elements for psychological researchers from other partner nations in Europe. This enabled direct comparisons of psychological issues faced by Soldiers across partner nations.

**2002:** USAMRU-E developed the Army Suicide Event Report —an updated suicide event tracking form that was developed in order to provide a common data sheet that covered gestures, ideation, and behaviors. The ASER complemented existing suicide behavior tracking mechanisms. Eventually, the ASER was fielded as the DOD Suicide Event Report and is in use today across service components.

**2005-2011:** USAMRU-E, along with colleagues at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research’s Military Psychiatry Branch, conducted three group randomized trials studying the efficacy of Battlemind post-deployment resilience training. These studies found that Battlemind training attenuated PTSD symptoms and stigma, and increased perceptions of organizational support. Battlemind training is now incorporated into the Army’s Master Resilience Training.

**2007:** As a member of a NATO working group on providing psychological support to NATO Soldiers, USAMRU-E was co-author of the ‘NATO Leaders Guide to Psychological Support Across the Deployment Cycle’ which is still in use by NATO and in the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command.

**2011:** USAMRU-E researchers developed the ‘Military Occupational Context Model,’ promoting health and resilience with an understanding of the military culture.

**2012-14:** USAMRU-E scientists published a key paper that influenced changes to the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders 5<sup>th</sup> edition. USAMRU-E’s research led to changes in how PTSD is screened and diagnosed in military members.

**2014:** USAMRU-E helped address a mandate written into the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act to provide data examining the effects of master resilience training. Studies with USAREUR’s own 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment helped support addressing the congressional mandate by showing that resilience training was related to positive unit climate.