

Lifestyle | Features

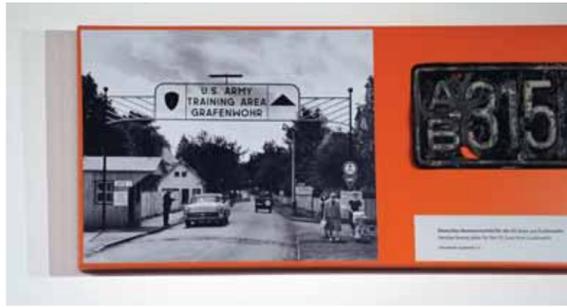


Photo shows an exhibit in the military museum in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany. — AFP photos



Former US soldier and car dealer Raymond Tavarez Gascot poses in his garage in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany. When the United States said it would be withdrawing troops from Germany earlier this year, shockwaves rippled through the country-but nowhere more than in the Bavarian town of Grafenwoehr.



Photo shows the market place in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany.

THE BAVARIAN TOWN WHERE US TROOPS ARE LIFE AND SOUL

When the United States announced last year that it would be withdrawing troops from Germany, shockwaves rippled through the country-but nowhere more than in the Bavarian town of Grafenwoehr. For the town located on the edge of the most important US army base in Europe, hope was revived in November by the election of Democrat Joe Biden as the next US president. But much remains at stake for the community known as "Little America", whose prosperity has depended on the presence of US troops since the end of World War II 75 years ago.

"Grafenwoehr is nothing without the US soldiers," said Piri Bradshaw, whose parents run an Irish pub in the town centre. Establishments like this have become the life and soul of Grafenwoehr, where traditional barbers stand alongside tattoo parlours-not to mention the many bars and restaurants that were doing a roaring trade before COVID-19 came along. On one street corner, a BMW dealership offers a "military discount". "Imagine, we have seven supermarkets-far too many for a town of 6,500 inhabitants," Bradshaw points out. But someone has to feed the 40,000 soldiers and their families who live



Photo shows the main road in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany.

in and around the base.

Roaring of gunfire

In the town centre, a few old buildings still bear witness to Grafenwoehr's distant past as a quiet rural community-but the roaring of gunfire quickly brings visitors back to the present. "We are used to it and sometimes don't even hear it anymore," said Birgit Ploessner, head of culture at the Military Museum, pointing out that a training camp was set up here as

early as 1908. The US set up a permanent base near the town after the defeat of the Nazis, but the country's overall military presence in Germany has declined from some 200,000 soldiers in 1990 to 34,500 today.

Although the prospect had been looming for years, President Donald Trump's decision in July to redeploy 12,000 soldiers from Germany-including some 5,000 from Grafenwoehr and the neighboring town of Vilseck-still came as a shock.

Even a small reduction in troops would have "serious" economic consequences for the town, according to Grafenwoehr mayor Edgar Knobloch. "The base provides employment for more than 3,000 civilians in the region," he said. In addition, the troops spend about 660 million euros a year in the local community.

The election of Biden and the suspension of troop withdrawals pending further analysis by the Pentagon has been a great "relief" for the town, Knobloch said. "Our troubles are not over, but I am confident that the decision will be in our favor," he said. Knobloch believes such a decision would also be in the interests of the US, which has invested heavily in recent years to modernize the base. Soldiers are trained at Grafenwoehr before being sent on missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the armies of NATO member countries also train there regularly.

Plastic Elvis

And the base does not only have economic value. "Three generations of US soldiers have followed one another here, sometimes even from father to son," said Ploessner. They include the King himself, Elvis Presley, who did most of his military

service in Germany. During his time in Grafenwoehr, Presley even gave a private concert in a bar-the only one in Europe in his entire career. The town music has lovingly recreated the scene with the original piano and a plastic Elvis. The presence of the US soldiers permeates every aspect of cultural and social life in the town. "We celebrate US Independence Day like the Maibaum," Ploessner said, referring to a popular Celtic Maypole festival in Bavaria.

"There is a real understanding between people here," adds Knobloch, with some soldiers even returning to settle in the area after they leave the army. Raymond Tavarez Gascot is one of them. A year after retiring from the army, the Puerto Rico-born former paratrooper returned to Grafenwoehr in 2007, got married and fulfilled his dream of setting up a garage. "I fell in love with the country, the culture," said the 45-year-old, though he admits to still struggling with the language. "Yes I miss the weather, the beach, the sun," he said. But "the reality is you can't compare the quality of life". — AFP

From dives to Broadway, US arts aid offers 'lifeline' to devastated venues

The Stone Pony in New Jersey's Asbury Park has hosted dozens of musicians on their ascent to stardom - including none other than Bruce Springsteen - but for months it's sat dark due to the coronavirus pandemic. And like hundreds of other cultural institutions across the United States its owners are hopeful relief is finally on the way: the latest COVID-19 bill recently signed into law by President Donald Trump includes \$15 billion for beleaguered arts venues to survive the ongoing crisis.

The funds - part of a \$900 billion coronavirus relief package - aim to support institutions from dives to Broadway, and come after months of efforts as part of the "Save Our Stages" campaign. Caroline O'Toole, who manages The Stone Pony, voiced hope that the money would offer a lifeline to the music world, calling the fervent efforts from the industry to get the bill passed "outstanding." "It just makes you so proud to be part of something like this. To get Washington to move on something like this is amazing," she said.

'A backstop'

Independent entertainment venues and theaters as well as many cultural nonprofits can apply to the grants geared towards supporting rent and maintenance. Eligible applicants include those who've lost at least 25 percent of their revenue, with those who've lost more than 90 percent tapped as the first in line. Qualified businesses can receive up to 45 percent of their gross revenue from 2019, with a cap of \$10 million. "We've already started to pull together our documentation," said Katie Tuten, co-owner of The Hideout, a 150-person Chicago music venue.

Tuten was among the industry leaders campaigning for the bill, which was co-



Katie and Tim Tuten, co-owners of The Hideout bar and live music venue pose for a picture with created merchandising for sale inside of their business in Chicago, Illinois.

sponsored by Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar and Republican Senator John Cornyn. The bill's passage comes at a desperate moment for many in the music industry: some 90 percent of independent venue owners, promoters and bookers said they would soon close permanently without targeted government funding, according to a recent survey from the National Independent Venue Association.

Dayna Frank, who owns the iconic Minneapolis venue First Avenue - where Prince's "Purple Rain" was filmed-is president of the NIVA and called the legislation a "lifeline our industry so desperately needs to emerge from a devastating year." "Careers came to a standstill overnight, and people continue to face personal hardships, which is why legislation like this and extending pandemic unemployment assistance is essential." Also as part of the relief package, lawmakers agreed to reboot an extra federal benefit for the unemployed of \$300 through March 14, half of the \$600 a

week distributed in the early days of stay-at-home orders.

"I've never worked harder in my life than this year," said Joe Shanahan, owner of Chicago's 1,000-seat Metro, credited with fostering the success of alt rockers The Smashing Pumpkins. "I've spent the last 10 months banging on congressmen's doors, governors' doors, mayors' doors - just as aggressively as I would go after an agent or a manager for a band," Shanahan said. "It's a grant that helps provide a backstop until the vaccine is administered and public confidence is back. Then we can pivot from a survival mode to strategizing how we will reopen."

Help the little guys

Venue owners say the relief can save their facilities while also supporting many more jobs within the arts ecosystem. "The arts are critical to our social and emotional development but also as an economic driver," said Brooke Flanagan, director of Chicago's Steppenwolf

Theatre. "It helps the restaurants around us, the Lyft drivers, and generates parking revenue." Along with music venues, theaters and museums, the legislation also grants managers and talent agents application opportunities. Publicly traded companies and larger institutions are restricted - an effort to be sure relief goes to those who truly need it.

Greg Kot, who co-hosts the nationally syndicated radio show "Sound Opinions," pointed to fears that the Save Our Stages funds would go the way of the Payment Protection Plan, which saw some aid directed towards large corporations instead of small businesses. "I think the concerns are the same now," Kot said. But Billy Helmkamp - co-owner of Sleeping Village, a 500-seat Chicago music venue - said the legislation prioritizes those venues that have suffered the most. "It also makes sure that the money is helping mom-and-pop, independent businesses," he said, describing "safeguards" like the tiered priority to those who've lost nearly all their revenues.

Eligibility requirements also include employing fewer than 500 people and operating venues in 10 states or fewer. Tuten, of Chicago's Hideout, said it was vital to protect those smaller venues, many of which have already closed nationwide, including Washington's U Street Music Hall and Los Angeles' mainstay The Satellite. "American music is one of our greatest exports, but bands don't just start playing the United Center," said Tuten, referring to the enormous Chicago arena. "Bands make their way up through small clubs," she said. "Take any of us out of the equation and the whole ecosystem gets upset." — AFP



In this file photo, French fashion designer Pierre Cardin poses in a Pierre Cardin store in Paris. — AFP

FASHION DESIGNER PIERRE CARDIN BURIED IN PARIS

French fashion designer Pierre Cardin, who died earlier this week at the age of 98, was laid to rest on Saturday in a private ceremony at Paris's Montmartre Cemetery, his family told AFP. In accordance with his wishes, Cardin was buried in a black coffin with a sword he had designed, the handle intertwined with a thimble, the eye of a needle and a spool of thread while the blade resembled a pair of scissors. Famed for his futuristic designs, Cardin won renown in postwar Europe and turned his name into a money-spinning global brand. He was laid to rest in a vault with his former companion and partner Andre Oliver, who died in 1993.

Under a canopy of green canvas, Cardin's favorite color, family and friends gathered before the burial for a blessing and tributes. The couturier, who was born into a low-income family in northern Italy but became a France-based fashion superstar, died on Tuesday in a hospital in Neuilly in the west of Paris. After setting up his own fashion label in 1950, he quickly established a name as an innovator, creating the now legendary bubble dress in 1954. His 1964 "Space Age" collection remains a landmark in fashion history. A memorial service will be held in Paris at the end of January. — AFP



The iconic Metro concert venue sits empty in Chicago, Illinois. — AFP photos



People walk past a closed Broadway theater near Times Square in New York City.