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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Navy proposal would cut fleet production

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — The Navy is proposing construction cutbacks and accelerated ship retirements that would delay, or sink, the Navy's goal of a larger fleet — and potentially hurt shipyards, according to an initial proposal.

The proposal would shrink the size of the fleet from today's level of 293 ships to 287 ships, a far cry from the official goal of 355 ships established in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act.

According to a defense official familiar with the memo, budget negotiations are ongoing and no final decisions have been made. But the Navy is looking at a number of ways to cut costs to fund other priorities, the official said.

One of the proposed cuts would reduce the number of Arleigh Burke-class destroyers planned for construction from 12 to seven over the next five years, trimming \$9.4 billion, or about 8%, from the shipbuilding budget, the official said.

Another potential cut would decommission Ticonderoga-class cruisers more quickly over the next five years, leaving

nine in the fleet, rather than 13.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss preliminary budget planning discussions that have not been made public.

"Either option runs counter to the Navy's stated requirement for a 355-ship fleet, and would not be well received on Capitol Hill given there's still consensus that the military and strategic threat from Russia and China is only increasing," said naval analyst Jay Korman of Avascent Group.

The memo pertains to what's known as the Future Years Defense Program, which covers federal fiscal years 2021 through 2025, which begin Oct. 1, 2020 and end Sept. 30, 2025. It says the Navy has proposed buying a total of 42 warships over the five-year period at a cost of \$111.8 billion, which would result in a reduction of 12 battle-force ships and \$9.4 billion in funding for shipbuilding compared with President Trump's fiscal year 2020 budget.

Defense analyst Norman Friedman said the proposal would represent a major reduction in anti-aircraft capability that is provided by destroyers and cruisers at a time when the Navy is facing more sophis-

ticated threats from aircraft and missiles.

"If you were serious about facing down the Chinese, you'd probably want more of that than less," said Friedman.

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are produced at two shipyards, Maine's Bath Iron Works, a General Dynamics subsidiary, and Ingalls Shipbuilding in Mississippi.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins and independent Sen. Angus King, of Maine, called the proposal "an abrupt reversal of the Navy's plan to increase the size of the fleet."

The senators noted that Congress will have the final say, and they suggested that much of the funding is already in the works.

The proposed cost-cutting comes as the Navy works to modernize its ballistic missile submarine fleet, replacing aging current Ohio-class subs with new Columbia-class nuclear subs. That program is putting pressure on the shipbuilding budget.

The memo reportedly provided some wiggle room in reaching the 355-fleet size by suggesting a legislative proposal that would include the battle force to include unmanned, as well as manned, warships.

Lawsuit: Contractors' bribes financed Taliban

Bloomberg

Families of almost 150 U.S. service members and civilians who were killed or wounded in terror attacks in Afghanistan sued a group of Western contractors involved in the nation's reconstruction for allegedly bribing the Taliban for protection for years.

The alleged payments ultimately helped finance a Taliban-led insurgency that led to the attacks in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2017, according to a lawsuit filed Friday in federal court in Washington. The suit seeks unspecified damages for the families under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

"Defendants were all large Western companies with lucra-

tive businesses in post-9/11 Afghanistan, and they all paid the Taliban to refrain from attacking their business interests," according to the complaint. "Those protection payments aided and abetted terrorism by directly funding an al-Qaida-backed Taliban insurgency that killed and injured thousands of Americans."

The allegations are based on several confidential witnesses, internal company documents, declassified government-intelligence reporting and congressional testimony, among other sources, according to the complaint. An employee of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul called such payments "organized crime," according to the suit.

The plaintiffs include family

members of U.S. Army Sergeant Andrew Looney, who was killed when a suicide bomber attacked the checkpoint he was manning in June 2010. A suicide bombing a few months later destroyed an armored bus transporting U.S. forces, killing more than a dozen people, including Lieutenant Colonel David Cabrera and Staff Sergeant Christopher Newman, whose family members also sued. The 288-page complaint contains numerous such examples of deaths and injuries.

Dow Jones reported earlier on the suit.

Two of the defendants — closely-held DAI Global LLC and Louis Berger Group — received about \$1 billion in development aid from 2007 to 2009,

making up about half of the total contracts by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Afghanistan during that period, according to the complaint.

The plaintiffs accuse a predecessor entity of Bethesda, Md.-based DAI of making protection payments to the Taliban between 2006 and 2012, while the company worked on numerous contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Each contract required work in geographic areas under Taliban control or influence, and contractors' standard practice in such circumstances was to pay protection money to discourage the Taliban from attacking their projects," according to the suit.

US contractor killed as rockets hit base

By Chad Garland

Stars and Stripes

IRBIL, Iraq — A U.S. contractor was killed and American and Iraqi federal service members were wounded Friday evening in a rocket attack that struck a coalition base in northern Iraq, the U.S. military said.

The rocket strike on the K1 base in Kirkuk occurred about 7:20 p.m., the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State said in an emailed statement that contained few other details.

Information about the service members wounded in the attack or the severity of their injuries was not included.

Rockets apparently hit a munitions storage facility on the base, said one official who was not authorized to speak officially on the matter and declined to be named. There were at least 10 blasts — some media reports say as many as 30 rockets — but some blasts appeared to have come from the stored munitions, the official said.

The rockets struck as a major

Iraqi mission was preparing to get underway, the official said.

The Iraqi government's security information cell, in a statement posted to Facebook, confirmed "a number of missiles" fell inside the base and said more details would be provided later.

The death and injuries appear to be the first U.S. casualties from the sporadic rocket strikes on bases housing U.S. troops that began earlier this year and which U.S. officials have blamed on Iran-backed groups amid mounting tensions between Washington and Tehran.

The latest strike comes a little more than a week after Defense Secretary Mark Esper called on Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to help stop rocket attacks targeting bases where U.S. troops are housed, amid an uptick in such attacks.

No group had publicly claimed responsibility for the latest attack, but it resembles a spate of similar rocket strikes that officials have blamed on Shiite militias linked to Iran.

Officials have repeatedly warned that those groups are a threat to U.S. forces.

Earlier this month, following two rocket attacks on an Iraqi installation near the Baghdad airport, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Iran-backed militias.

Any attacks by Iran or their proxies that harm American troops, allies or interests "will be answered with a decisive U.S. response," Pompeo warned.

In light of the threat from Iran-backed groups, some of which fought American forces after the 2003 invasion, U.S. troops have curtailed some operations in Iraq in recent months, officials have said.

ISIS, which remains active near Kirkuk, has also reportedly targeted security forces in the area in recent weeks. The group claimed responsibility for a roadside bomb blast in Kirkuk last month that wounded two Kurdish military members, known as peshmerga, and five coalition troops from Italy.

The group has turned to in-

surgent tactics since they were routed from their last stronghold in Iraq in 2017, and often hides in the Hamrin mountains, a rugged range that extends across part of Kirkuk province, said U.S. military officials who assist Iraqi anti-ISIS missions with intelligence and other support.

While Iraqi forces routinely conduct small-scale operations against ISIS throughout the country, they launch increasingly complex and larger operations as part of the "Will of Victory" campaign about monthly, U.S. officials told Stars and Stripes this week. The strike at K1 appears have come as forces prepared for the latest phase of that campaign.

The base houses U.S. forces, as well as Iraqi Federal Police and Counter-Terrorism Service troops.

Iraqi security forces are leading the investigation into Friday's attack and the response, the U.S.-led coalition said in a statement.

Pentagon warns military about at-home DNA kits

Alabama Media Group
(Birmingham)

Military personnel shouldn't use at-home DNA kits such as 23andme or Ancestry, the Pentagon warned in a recent memo.

The advisory, initially obtained by Yahoo News, said such kits could pose a security risk. It also warned military personnel are being targeted by the companies with discounts encouraging them to purchase the at-home kits.

"Exposing sensitive genetic information to outside parties poses personal and operational risks to Services members," the memo noted. "These (direct-to-consumer) genetic tests are largely unregulated and could

expose personal and genetic information, and potentially create unintended security consequences and increased risk to the joint force and mission."

The memo did not go into detail about the nature of the sensitive information or how it could pose a risk. The Department of Defense stopped short of banning the genetic testing but advised members to use licensed professionals and not mail-in kits.

The kits typically involve users collecting a cheek swab or a saliva sample and sending it in to one of the companies. Customers then receive information on ancestry, as well as medical history and other information.

Chinese man charged with photographing naval base

Associated Press

KEY WEST, Fla. — A Chinese man was arrested Thursday while taking photos at a U.S. Navy base in the Florida Keys, authorities said.

Witnesses spotted Lyuyou Liao, 27, walking around a perimeter fence of the Naval Air Station in Key West and entering the military facility from the rocks along the water, according to a federal complaint. The witnesses warned Liao he was trespassing in a restricted area, known as the Truman Annex, the Miami Herald reported.

When security officials saw Liao snapping photos with his cellphone camera, they took

the phone and called a federal agent, the complaint said. Liao was arrested and charged with entering Naval property for the purpose of photographing defense installations.

Liao told a Naval Criminal Investigative Service agent in broken English that he was trying to take photographs of the sunrise, according to the complaint affidavit. But the agent reported finding photographs of the Truman Annex on the camera.

Court records didn't list an attorney for Liao.

Liao's arrest comes a little more than a year after another Chinese national was charged with taking photos at the Naval Air Station in Key West.

Hawaii tour helo crash kills 6, with 1 person missing

Associated Press

HONOLULU — The search for the final person missing after a Hawaii tour helicopter crash killed six was expected to resume Saturday depending on weather, officials said.

There are no indications that anybody survived the crash, authorities said Friday night after the remains of six of the people on board were found. Authorities have not named those on board and said families are being notified.

The helicopter was set to tour the rugged and remote Kauai's Na Pali Coast, which is one of the most dramatic and sought-after destinations in Hawaii and was featured in the film "Jurassic Park." The plane crashed at the top of a mountain on the island of Kauai, authorities said.

A search began for the helicopter carrying a pilot and six passengers from two families after it was reported overdue Thursday evening. Two passengers are believed to be minors, the Coast Guard said.

Steep terrain, low visibility, choppy seas and rain had complicated the search, the agency said.

The helicopter company, identified as Safari Helicopters, contacted the Coast Guard about 6 p.m. Thursday to say the aircraft was about 30 minutes overdue, authorities said.

According to a preliminary report, the pilot said the tour was leaving the Waimea Canyon area, known as the "Grand Canyon of the Pa-

cific," about 4:40 p.m., which was the last contact with the helicopter, Kauai police said.

The Eurocopter AS350 has an emergency electronic locator transmitter, but no signals were received. The locator devices are designed to activate when an aircraft crashes, Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Ian Gregor said in an email.

The FAA requires the locators to be able to withstand impact. However, it is possible for the device to stop working in an extreme crash, Gregor said.

He said the agency is looking at the company's safety record but likely won't have a full report until Monday. It's looking into the crash along with the National Transportation Safety Board, which announced Friday that it was sending three investigators to Kauai.

U.S. Rep. Ed Case of Hawaii cited fatal accidents over the years, blaming the FAA for not taking NTSB safety improvement efforts seriously and the industry for not regulating itself. He said "innocent lives are paying the price."

The FAA said it conducts random and regular surveillance on all Hawaii air tour operators and ensures companies address any issues. Gregor said the agency does not have concerns about the industry statewide.

The NTSB aviation accident database lists nine crashes of Hawaii helicopter sightseeing flights in the last 10 years.

Age limit now 21 in US for tobacco

Associated Press

People younger than 21 can no longer legally buy cigarettes, cigars or any other tobacco products in the U.S.

The law enacted last week by Congress also applies to electronic cigarettes and vaping products that heat a liquid containing nicotine.

The provision raising the legal limit from 18 to 21 nationwide was in a massive spending bill passed by Congress and signed by the president on Dec. 20. About one-third of states already had their own laws restricting tobacco sales to people 21 and older.

"This is a major step in protecting the next generation of children from becoming addicted to tobacco products," new FDA commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn tweeted last week.

Usually, new legislation doesn't take effect right away. The change simply increased the age limit in existing law, so it was able to go into effect immediately, a spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration said Friday.

The agency has regulated tobacco products since 2009. It enforces the law partly through spot checks. Stores can be fined or barred from selling tobacco for repeat violations.

Anti-smoking advocates said the higher age limit should make it more difficult for young people to get tobacco, particularly high school students who had friends or classmates over 18 buy for them.

Seaman faces court-martial in Alaska death

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — The U.S. Coast Guard said Friday a seaman will face a court-martial on murder and other charges in the death of a fellow seaman during a night of drinking in Alaska.

Ethan Tucker is charged with the January death of Seaman Ethan Kelch, 19, of Virginia Beach, Va., Military prosecutors allege that Tucker, 21, of Ludington, Mich., beat Kelch and left him in frigid water, where he drowned. At the time, both were serving on a cutter based in Kodiak, Alaska.

Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Stephen Brickey said the court-martial is expected to take

place in 2020.

Along with murder, the charges against Tucker include involuntary manslaughter and making a false official statement.

The decision on a court-martial came about a month after Tucker was released from a San Diego brig after an admiral overseeing his prosecution ordered a new hearing that took place earlier this month.

The Coast Guard said the court martial decision was made Dec. 23 after a review of the hearing report.

Tucker's attorney, Navy Cmdr. Justin Henderson said he is confident his client will be vindicated.

A search was launched for

Kelch when he failed to return Jan. 26 from liberty. He was found unresponsive the next day along shore and pronounced dead at a clinic.

During an October hearing, a lawyer for Tucker said a bystander took video that night showing Tucker's efforts to get Kelch out of the water.

Henderson has said the videos also show Kelch had repeatedly tried to go into the water.

Soon after the October hearing, a military official overseeing the case sent the charges back to prosecutors for amendments that included the deleting of statements that Tucker had placed Kelch in the water.

Truck bomb detonates in Somalia's capital

Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — A truck bomb exploded at a busy security checkpoint in Somalia's capital Saturday morning, killing at least 78 people including many students, authorities said.

It was the worst attack in Mogadishu in more than two years, and witnesses said the force of the blast reminded them of the city's devastating 2017 bombing that killed hundreds.

The explosion ripped through rush hour as Somalia returned to work after its weekend. At least 125 people were wounded, Aamin Ambulance service director Abdiqadir Abdulrahman said.

President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed condemned the

attack as a "heinous act of terror" and blamed the local al-Shabab extremist group, which is linked to al-Qaida and whose reach has extended to deadly attacks on luxury malls and schools in neighboring Kenya.

The bombing targeted a tax collection center, police Capt. Mohamed Hussein said, as a large plume of smoke rose above the capital.

Bodies lay on the ground amid the blackened skeletons of vehicles. At a hospital, families and friends picked through dozens of the dead, gingerly lifting sheets to peer at faces. Hundreds of Mogadishu residents began to donate blood in response to desperate appeals.

Most of those killed were university and other students returning to class, Mayor Omar

Mohamud Mohamed said. Somalis mourned the deaths of so many young people in a country trying to rebuild itself after decades of conflict. Two Turkish brothers were among the dead, Somalia's foreign minister said, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the attack.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but al-Shabab often carries out such attacks. The extremist group was pushed out of Mogadishu several years ago but continues to target high-profile areas such as checkpoints and hotels in the seaside city.

Al-Shabab is now able to make its own explosives, its "weapon of choice," United Nations experts monitoring sanctions on Somalia said earlier

this year. The group had previously relied on military-grade explosives captured during assaults on an African Union peacekeeping force.

Al-Shabab was blamed for the truck bombing in Mogadishu in October 2017 that killed more than 500 people. The group never claimed responsibility for the blast that led to widespread public outrage. Some analysts said al-Shabab didn't dare claim credit as its strategy of trying to sway public opinion by exposing government weakness had badly backfired.

"This explosion is similar like the one in 2017," witness Abdurrahman Yusuf said. "This one occurred just a few steps away from where I am and it knocked me on the ground from its force. I have never seen such a explosion in my entire life."

Koala population affected by fires around Australia

Associated Press

PERTH, Australia — Thousands of koalas are feared to have died in a wildfire-ravaged area north of Sydney, further diminishing Australia's iconic marsupial, while the fire danger increased in the country's east on Saturday as temperatures soared.

The mid-northern coast of New South Wales was home to up to 28,000 koalas, but wildfires have significantly reduced their population in recent months. Koalas are native to Australia and are one of the country's most beloved animals, but they've been under threat due to a loss of habitat.

"Up to 30% of their habitat has been destroyed," Australia's environment minister, Sussan Ley, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "We'll know more when the fires are calmed down and a proper assessment can be made."

Images shared of koalas drinking water after being rescued from the wildfires have

gone viral on social media in recent days. "I get mail from all around the world from people absolutely moved and amazed by our wildlife volunteer response and also by the habits of these curious creatures," Ley said.

About 12.35 million acres of land have burned nationwide during the wildfire crisis, with nine people killed and more than 1,000 homes destroyed.

Fire danger in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory was upgraded to "severe" on Saturday, as high temperatures built up over the region. Sydney's western suburbs reached 106 degrees Fahrenheit, while the inner city is expected to hit 88 F on Sunday before reaching 95 F on Tuesday.

Two wildfires in New South Wales are at the "watch and act" level issued by fire services.

Canberra, Australia's capital, peaked at 100 F on Saturday, with oppressive temperatures forecast for the next seven days.

Disney workers say tourists inappropriately touch them

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Walt Disney World employees who portray Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck each filed police reports this month claiming they were inappropriately touched by tourists.

The woman inside the Mickey Mouse costume went to the hospital with neck injuries caused by a grandmother patting the character's head, while the employees wearing the Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck costumes were groped by tourists, according to Orange County Sheriff's Office reports.

The incidents come after a 51-year-old man was arrested in November after an employee portraying a Disney Princess told investigators he groped her breast while getting a photo taken.

"Everyone should feel safe at work, and we encourage Cast Members to come forward in any uncomfortable situation," said Disney spokeswoman Andrea Finger in a statement.

The same day, a 36-year-old Disney employee who portrays Minnie Mouse posed for pictures with a man and his wife from Minnesota. Minnie Mouse gave the man a hug and he groped her chest three times, according to the sheriff's incident report.

On Dec. 3, deputies received a call about a guest mistreating a costumed character at an Animal Kingdom restaurant. A woman in her 60s asked if she could kiss Donald Duck, the incident report said.

Donald Duck agreed, but the situation escalated as the 18-year-old employee playing the character said the woman began touching and grabbing the character's arms, chest, belly, and face. The employee moved toward another Disney employee for help, but the woman followed her, holding on, and then "frantically" put her hands inside the character's costume, touching her chest, the incident report said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Driver crashes after distracted by a puppy

ME FRYEBURG — A teenage driver in Maine who went off the road and hit a tree told police she had become distracted by her puppy jumping into her lap while she was driving.

The crash happened in Fryeburg. The 16-year-old girl was trapped in the vehicle until other drivers stopped to help her, police said.

She had become temporarily distracted when her 8-week-old puppy jumped into her lap, causing the vehicle to cross into the opposite lane, hit a tree and roll over, police said.

Wife, 26, charged with exploiting husband, 77

FL TAMPA — A newly married 26-year-old woman was arrested on charges alleging she tried to cash almost \$1 million in checks from her 77-year-old husband's account.

Lin Helena Halfon was arrested earlier this month at Tampa International Airport. She faces charges of money laundering, organized fraud and exploitation of an elderly person.

An Amscot Financial employee in Tampa refused to cash the checks. Eventually, two checks worth about \$666,000 were cashed by an Orlando business.

Police arrest man for being naked at bar twice

AZ PRESCOTT — Police in Prescott arrested a man after he twice showed up at a bar naked.

Prescott police said Leonard V. Hall, 69, entered the bar and spoke to a female bartender be-

fore leaving.

Surveillance video showed the man undressing in the parking lot before he entered the bar again, that time naked. He didn't speak to the bartender but she called for help from her boss and Hall left, according to police. The bartender said she'd never seen the man before.

About 24 hours later, police said they received a call that the man was back in the parking lot of the bar and again naked.

Sea lion pup 'still feisty' after fall onto highway

CA LAGUNA BEACH — A sea lion pup was in critical condition but "still feisty" after it fell more than 30 feet from a footbridge onto a highway in California, officials said.

The 33-pound pup, now named "Lords-a-Leaping," was dehydrated and emaciated when it was rescued in Laguna Beach by staff from the Pacific Marine Mammal Center, The Orange County Register reported.

It did not appear to suffer any fractures or internal injuries.

"He is up, he is eating and he is still feisty," Leeds said.

Man gets married at hospital before surgery

UT SALT LAKE CITY — An Idaho man scheduled to have heart surgery decided to get married in his Utah hospital room Christmas Day.

Murray, Utah-based Intermountain Medical Center said in a statement that Curt Harkins, 56, and his fiancée Renee Hall decided to tie the knot ahead of his procedure.

Harkins, from Castleford, Idaho, was hospitalized since

October with heart failure.

Hospital staff helped find a judge to perform the ceremony, gathered the legal paperwork and decorated the Harkins' hospital room with Christmas garlands and flowers.

Couple thought vacuum was intruder, called 911

NC HIGHPOINT — 'Twas the night of Christmas at a North Carolina house, no creature should have been stirring, not even a mouse.

But a Forsyth County couple awoke with a fright, as something was moving about their house in the night.

They dashed to their closet and hid in fear, dialing 911 with a sensitive ear.

Responding sheriff's deputies searched the home and found a robot vacuum alone. The source of the scare had quickly been sorted, WGHP-TV reported. The robot had seemingly started and gotten stuck, its beeping and banging made the audible muck.

Homeowner Thomas Milam said it's not better to be sorry than safe, and he'd call 911 again, even if making a mistake.

Celebrated Irish pub set to close at year's end

GA SAVANNAH — One of Savannah's most celebrated Irish pubs plans to close its doors after ringing in the new year.

Kevin Barry's Pub was a popular spot for sipping Guinness and listening to live Irish folk music since 1980. News outlets reported the pub will close out its New Year's celebration with a final last call.

The pub's owner, Vic Power, decided to retire when his lease for the business expires a spokesman, Frank Emerson, said in a post on Facebook.

\$6K for tips in shooting of endangered crane

LA NEW ORLEANS — Rewards totaling \$6,000 are being offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of whoever shot an endangered whooping crane more than a year ago.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is re-offering most of a \$7,500 reward made public earlier this year.

The reward is for information about a crane released in December 2016 and found with a broken wing Nov. 2, 2018, in Acadia Parish. It was taken to a veterinarian but had to be euthanized, and a necropsy showed it had been shot.

"We haven't received enough information that would lead to arrest at this time and are hoping this re-release will help more people come forward," he said.

455K petition Target to abandon plastic bags

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A frequent Target customer is asking the Minneapolis-based retail giant to stop using plastic bags.

Protest organizer Theresa Carter and other Target shoppers planned to deliver pages containing more than 455,000 signatures to the corporation's headquarters.

The petition calls for Target to commit to eliminating plastic bags that are "choking the earth," Carter said in a statement.

Target spokeswoman Danielle Schumann said the company has taken several steps to help reduce its use of plastic, including sustainable packaging goals and using plastic bags that are now made with 40% recycled content.

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Eagles best when feeling the pressure

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia Eagles have been at their best facing elimination.

They've won three in a row to improve to 8-7 and enter Sunday's game at the New York Giants (4-11) needing another victory to secure the NFC East title.

But New York is no pushover. The Giants have scored 77 points in two straight wins. They also had a 17-3 halftime lead in Philadelphia on Dec. 9 before Carson Wentz rallied the Eagles to a 23-17 overtime victory.

"That's a real thing," Eagles coach Doug Pederson said Friday about fear of a letdown. "For me, it's just about communication and just bringing it to kind of the forefront of my messaging to the team."

The Eagles moved into sole possession of first place with a 17-9 win over Dallas that came down to an incomplete pass on fourth down in the end zone.

They could still win the division if they lose to the Giants but would need the Cowboys (7-8) to lose at home to the Redskins (3-12).

"We poured a lot into that win on Sunday, and that's the thing that I think coming into the next week, is having that mental and emotional letdown," Pederson said. "This is a bigger game obviously than last week. I know our guys are going to be ready. They've prepared this week that way. But for me as the coach, just keep reminding them the importance of this week and the importance of this game and staying focused and all that."

The Eagles are 10-1 in must-win games over the past three seasons, including the playoffs.

In 2017, they cruised to the NFC's No. 1 seed and won three playoff games to capture the first Super Bowl in franchise history.

Last year, they had to win their final three games after a

6-7 start and also needed help in Week 17 — a Vikings loss to the Bears — to earn a wild-card spot. It worked out and then they beat Chicago on the road in the first round before losing at New Orleans in a divisional playoff.

The Eagles were 5-7 this season following a loss at Miami on Dec. 1 but still controlled their playoff hopes because Dallas was 6-6. They had to win out to win the division. The first three wins are now in the books.

The winning streak started when Wentz rallied the team against the Giants, tossing a touchdown pass to Zach Ertz to tie it with 1:56 left and another one to Ertz in OT to win it.

"We started playing together, executing better in the second half and found a rhythm and we feel good and have confidence going into this game," Wentz said. "We have to win this one just like the last few weeks. Everyone knows that. We've had a couple emotional wins. As lead-

ers and coaches, we've done a good job making sure guys are still bought into the here and now and not dwelling on the past or looking ahead. We have our work cut out for us. If we win, we're in so we know what's at stake."

Wentz led the Eagles to another comeback victory at Washington two weeks ago, tossing a TD pass to Greg Ward with 32 seconds remaining.

Now, the division is on the line against the Giants. The Eagles will face Daniel Jones for the first time. Eli Manning started when the teams met this month.

"He's a rookie quarterback but he can make plays so we'll treat him like an experienced quarterback," defensive end Brandon Graham said. "We can't afford a setback or the season would be over so we have our mind on that and everybody is showing that by the way we're practicing. They're trying to kill our season."

Manning likely making final appearance with Giants

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The man who has been the face of the New York Giants since 2004 is probably going to make his final appearance for them this weekend.

Eli Manning's 16-year career with New York, in which he helped restore the Giants as a title force in the NFL and led them to two Super Bowl victories, likely will come to an end Sunday. The Giants will try to spoil the Philadelphia Eagles' bid to win the NFC East.

If it is the end, Manning will leave with almost every Giants passing record; two NFL championships; two Super Bowl MVPs; a streak of 210 consecutive starts between 2004-17; a Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award; and the respect of his teammates.

No doubt the last eight years have been tough. New York has

made the playoffs once since winning the championship for the 2011 season, and that's taken a toll on his tenure and his prospects for selection to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

That's just the stuff on the surface. To his teammates, friends and coaches, Manning will always be the player's player, a classy, giving guy, a family man and a football intellect who wanted nothing more than to help his teammates win games.

What's little known is Manning the prankster, the quiet imp who found a way to get his teammates to laugh.

The pranks are legendary. The No. 1 overall draft pick in 2004 — by San Diego before a quick trade to the Giants — would borrow a teammate's cell phone and change the language. He would put dye in the socks of his offensive linemen that would turn their toes blue

for weeks.

Former center Shaun O'Hara made the mistake of getting into a disagreement with his quarterback and found his car coated with petroleum jelly and baby powder. Try to get that off.

Make no mistake, Manning isn't going out the way he would like. First-round pick Daniel Jones will be the starting quarterback Sunday in a game that may decide the division title.

Manning will be standing on the sideline watching, like he has most of the season. He lost his starting role after the second game, although he did write a heart-warming final chapter at home in leading the Giants to a 36-20 win over the Miami Dolphins two weeks ago.

Though disappointed, Manning never hesitated to help Jones, the No. 6 overall choice in the draft.

"To have a guy like that to

work with every day and to learn football, learn how the NFL works, has been... I've been fortunate to be in that position," Jones said. "He's a fun guy to hang out with, he's a fun guy to come to work with; you learn a lot just hanging around him. I've been lucky to be around him."

Veteran receiver Golden Tate III has been amazed by how Manning went out of his way to help the 22-year-old who took away his job.

"With everything that has gone on with him and D.J. he stayed consistent to who he is, still the witty, funny guy, jokester," Tate said. "He has remained upbeat and we all noticed that and appreciated it. I can't say I would've handled the situation the way he did, with the New York media and being that guy for so long until all of a sudden it's not."

Falcons edge Cougars in Cheez-It Bowl

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Air Force clung to a three-point lead, the clock showing plenty of time left for one of the nation's most prolific offenses.

A field goal was not going to be good enough. The Falcons needed a touchdown to leave Washington State no chance.

Going for it on fourth down was the only option — and it worked.

Kadin Remsberg ran for 178 yards and stretched to the pylon for a 3-yard touchdown on a late fourth down, lifting No. 24 Air Force to a 31-21 victory over Washington State in the Cheez-It Bowl on Friday night.

"A tad bit was a gut feeling, but you're also thinking situationally," Air Force coach Troy Calhoun said. "You see it as an opportunity to make it a two-score game and Kade made a big-time play."

The Falcons (11-2) had their triple option working to near perfection, grinding out 371 yards rushing while setting a Cheez-It Bowl time of possession record of 43:24.

sion record of 43:24.

Donald Hammond III scored two touchdowns and Air Force carried a 10-point lead into the fourth quarter, yet couldn't shake the high-scoring Cougars.

Anthony Gordon, the FBS passing leader, kept Washington State within reach, throwing for 351 yards and three touchdowns. He hit Brandon Arconado on a 13-yard TD to pull Washington State (6-7) within 24-21 late in the fourth quarter, giving the Cougars a shot at the comeback.

Air Force methodically worked the ball down to Washington State's 4-yard line, but failed to punch the ball into the end zone on three tries. After a timeout, Hammond ran an option left and pitched the ball to Remsberg, who got the edge and reached the ball to the pylon with a defender draping him. The touchdown was upheld on review.

"I knew I had to score and I was going to do everything I could to get into the end zone," Remsberg said. "I felt like I had

the touchdown."

The 2018 game was dubbed the Cheez-INT Bowl after TCU and California combined for nine interceptions.

A year later, Air Force and Washington State brought philosophical differences to the desert.

The Falcons like to stay grounded, running 57 times a game while finishing third in the FBS at 292.5 yards per game.

The Cougars love to fly, putting it up 56 times a game to lead the nation with nearly 450 yards a game.

Washington State started the Cheez-It Bowl quickly, racing down the field with a series of completions, only to get stuffed by an Air Force goal-line stand.

The Falcons' opening drive was a yard-churning, clock-winding grind, covering 98 yards in 20 plays and 12:23. Hammond capped it with a 1-yard TD run.

Air Force's next two drives took less time combined than the first, ending in Jake

Koehnke's 28-yard field goal and Taven Birdow's 3-yard run after Gordon lost a fumble at Washington State's 23.

"We just couldn't get off the field," Washington State coach Mike Leach said.

The Cougars had two more quick-hitting drives to pull within 17-14 at halftime on Gordon's two TD passes.

Air Force went right back to the ground to open the second half; 13 plays, 75 yards, capped by Hammond's 7-yard TD run.

Washington State had another fourth-down failure, this one at Air Force's 5-yard line, but bounced back quickly with Gordon's TD pass to Arconado.

The Cougars just couldn't stop Air Force and Remsberg's diving TD run capped another long scoring drive to seal it.

"Our whole goal for the defensive front was to collapse the middle to make them bounce it out," Washington State defensive lineman Misiona Aiolutepa-Pei said. "We were unable to keep our pads low and make plays."

College football roundup

Smith-Marsette leads Iowa over USC in Holiday Bowl

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Ihmir Smith-Marsette scored on a 6-yard run, a 98-yard kickoff return and a 12-yard reception — all in the second quarter — in No. 19 Iowa's 49-24 victory over No. 22 Southern California in the Holiday Bowl on Friday night.

Senior Nate Stanley threw two touchdown passes and the Hawkeyes (10-3) won their fourth straight game for their sixth 10-win season in coach Kirk Ferentz's 21 years.

USC freshman quarterback Kedon Slovis, who threw two touchdown passes, was knocked out of the game with an apparent arm injury early in the third quarter. The Trojans (8-5) had their three-game winning streak snapped. They

fell apart after Slovis left.

Smith-Marsette helped the Hawkeyes to a 28-17 halftime lead.

Smith-Marsette scored on a 6-yard sweep for a 14-7 lead. After USC tied it on Slovis' 16-yard pass to Vavae Malepeai, Smith-Marsette returned the kickoff 98 yards to give the Hawkeyes the lead for good.

Texas Bowl

Texas A&M 24, Oklahoma State 21: At Houston, Kellen Mond ran for a career-high 117 yards and threw a touchdown pass as the Aggies scored 24 straight points to overcome an early deficit and beat the Cowboys.

Chuba Hubbard, who finished the regular season as the nation's leading rusher, ran for

158 yards, and Johnson had 124 yards receiving and two touchdowns for the Oklahoma State.

Hubbard finished the season with 2,094 yards rushing to become the second player in school history to reach 2,000, joining Barry Sanders, who did it in 1988 when he won the Heisman Trophy.

Pinstripe Bowl

Michigan State 27, Wake Forest 21: Brian Lewerke threw for 320 yards and a touchdown and ran for a score in the Spartans' victory over the Demon Deacons at Yankee Stadium in New York.

Lewerke threw a 10-yard pass to wide receiver Cody White in the third quarter to put Michigan State (7-6) ahead 27-21 and it survived down the

stretch to give embattled coach Mark Dantonio his sixth bowl victory.

Wake Forest (8-5) missed a chance to win nine games for just the third time in program history.

Military Bowl

North Carolina 55, Temple 13: At Annapolis, Md., freshman Sam Howell threw for 294 yards and three touchdowns and caught a scoring pass in the Tar Heels' victory over the Owls.

Howell completed 25 of 34 passes and ran for 53 yards on three carries to help North Carolina (7-6) to its first bowl victory since 2013. Temple (8-5) has gone to a bowl five years in a row — and lost four of them.

NHL roundup

Devils gift Maple Leafs an OT victory

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Damon Severson had never scored an overtime goal in the NHL, and this wasn't how he envisioned his first.

The Devils defenseman backhanded the puck into his own net with 2:22 left in overtime, gifting the Toronto Maple Leafs a 5-4 win over New Jersey on Friday night for their season-best sixth straight victory.

Severson got the puck after Toronto's William Nylander lost control of it driving toward New Jersey's net. Severson inadvertently beat goaltender Mackenzie Blackwood while trying to clear the puck out of danger. Nylander was credited with the goal.

"I was just trying to protect the puck," said Severson, who

was consoled by teammates while leaving the ice. "I was not trying to do anything with it. Protect the puck and then get it out of harm's way. I just hit it by accident into our own net."

Nylander set up the play by taking the puck from Jack Hughes. It's Toronto's longest winning streak since November of 2017.

Rangers 5, Hurricanes 3: Mika Zibanejad had two goals and an assist, Henrik Lundqvist stopped 39 shots, and host New York beat Carolina.

Artemi Panarin had a goal and two assists, Chris Kreider had a goal and an assist, and Ryan Strome also scored to help New York get its second win in six games (2-3-1). Tony DeAngelo and Jacob Trouba each had two assists.

Bruins 3, Sabres 0: Patrice

Bergeron scored two goals for the third consecutive game, and visiting Boston beat Buffalo.

Bergeron became the fifth player in Bruins history to score two goals in at least three games and the first Bruin since Cam Neely in 1988-89 to accomplish the feat.

Blues 5, Jets 4 (OT): David Perron scored 3:14 into overtime and visiting St. Louis extended its winning streak to seven games.

Perron scored his 16th goal of the season and added an assist.

Wild 6, Avalanche 4: Mats Zuccarello and Victor Rask scored in a 1:17 span in the third period and visiting Minnesota rallied past Colorado.

Penguins 5, Predators 2: Alex Galchenyuk scored his third goal of the season, Tristan

Jarry made 30 saves and visiting Pittsburgh beat Nashville.

Blackhawks 5, Islanders 2: Robin Lehner made 38 saves against his former team, Dennis Gilbert scored his first career goal and host Chicago beat New York.

Flames 5, Oilers 1: Andrew Mangiapane had a goal and two assists and visiting Calgary beat Edmonton.

Ducks 4, Golden Knights 3: Cam Fowler had a goal and an assist while host Anaheim scored three goals in 1:37 midway through the second period of a victory over Vegas.

Kings 3, Sharks 2 (OT): Martin Frk scored two third-period goals in his debut with visiting Los Angeles, and Jeff Carter scored the winner in overtime.

NBA roundup

Magic survive late free-throw woes, down Sixers

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — The Orlando Magic could've had a smoother finish, though they couldn't complain about their performance the rest of the night.

Evan Fournier scored 20 points and the Magic survived a collapse from the free-throw line in the final minute to squeeze out a 98-97 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Friday.

"The end wasn't great, but we can clean that up," Magic coach Steve Clifford said. "That's a good win against a good team."

Aaron Gordon had 19 points and 11 rebounds, and Nikola Vucevic had 16 points and 12 rebounds for Orlando, which won its second straight.

"It felt like Magic basketball tonight as far as the defense and preparation," Fournier said. "They are one of the top teams in the East and we were

ready for a fight. We need to be like that every night."

Joel Embiid and Tobias Harris each had 24 points and 11 rebounds for the 76ers, who had their three-game winning streak snapped. Embiid missed a desperation 30-footer at the buzzer that could have won it.

Orlando led 93-83 after Gordon's dunk with 1:49 left in the game, but it was far from over. The Magic were 5-for-11 from the free-throw line in the final 1:30. That included four misses in the final 30 seconds.

Philadelphia's last four field goals were three-pointers that gave the visitors a chance at winning. Embiid hit the last of them with 5.1 seconds to play that cut the Sixers' deficit to 98-97.

Heat 113, Pacers 112: Goran Dragic scored in the lane with 6.8 seconds remaining to cap a wild finish and Miami beat Indiana to improve

to an NBA-best 14-1 at home.

Dragic's shot was the third by Miami on the go-ahead possession, after Jimmy Butler and Kendrick Nunn both missed but the Heat were able to grab offensive rebounds. Aaron Holiday had a chance to win it for Indiana, but his 10-footer with about a second left bounced away.

Bucks 112, Hawks 86: Khris Middleton scored 23 points, Ersan Ilyasova had season highs of 18 points and 17 rebounds and NBA-leading Milwaukee overcame Giannis Antetokunmpo's absence to beat host Atlanta.

Antetokunmpo, the league MVP last season and second-leading scorer this season, sat out because of back soreness. He watched from the bench as his teammates helped Milwaukee improve to 28-5.

Celtics 129, Cavaliers 117: Jaylen Brown matched his ca-

reer high with 34 points and Boston beat visiting Cleveland for its fifth straight victory.

Jayson Tatum had 24 of his 30 points in the first half, Enes Kanter added 14 points, and Kemba Walker had 13 to help Boston improve to 13-1 at home.

Thunder 104, Hornets 102 (OT): Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 27 points, Dennis Schroder added 24 and Oklahoma City beat host Charlotte in overtime for its fifth victory in six games.

Chris Paul had 10 of his 16 points for the Thunder in the fourth quarter and overtime.

Warriors 106, Suns 95: D'Angelo Russell had 31 points and six assists, and Golden State rallied from 10 down in the fourth quarter to beat visiting Phoenix for its fourth straight victory.

Devin Booker scored 34 points for Phoenix. The Suns have lost eight straight.