

Pentagon chief pick set to make history

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, a former commander for U.S. Central Command, will be nominated to serve as President-elect Joe Biden's defense secretary, according to news reports late Monday.

Austin, 67, would become the first Black Pentagon leader if he is confirmed by the Senate. But his nomination would require Congress to grant a rarely issued waiver of the requirement that defense secretaries be at least seven years removed from military service. Austin retired in 2016.

Biden offered Austin the job on Sunday, The Associated Press reported, citing four unnamed sources. Biden told reporters Monday that he expected to make an official announcement about the defense secretary job Friday.

Austin's name only surfaced as a candidate last week, as former Pentagon policy chief Michèle Flournoy, long-expected to be Biden's Pentagon pick, faced increased opposition from the Democratic Party's left wing over her ties to the defense industry

and hawkish positions on conflicts in Afghanistan and Libya during her time in former President Barack Obama's administration.

As defense secretary, Austin would bring with him more than 40 years of experience in uniform. He worked closely with Biden when the president-elect was vice president and the Obama administration's point person for Iraq, where Austin has extensive experience, including as the U.S. top commander there.

Austin has commanded infantry units from platoons up and led soldiers in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a general, he commanded the 10th Mountain Division, the XVIII Airborne Corps and, in September 2010, Obama entrusted him with overseeing the U.S. pullout of some 50,000 troops from Iraq.

Despite recommending against the full withdrawal, according to a 2016 Washington Post story, Austin led the efforts to leave Iraq by December 2011, and was one of the last American service members to exit that country.

At the end of Austin's career, after briefly

serving as the Army vice chief of staff in 2012, he led CENTCOM, overseeing all U.S. military forces and operations throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Austin has been retired from the military for less than five years, giving him an extra hurdle to overcome for confirmation as defense secretary. Like Jim Mattis, President Donald Trump's first defense secretary, Austin would need Congress to approve a waiver for him to serve as the Defense Department's top civilian, because law requires retired officers wait seven years before assuming top civilian Pentagon jobs.

If confirmed, Austin will take the reins of a Pentagon already in a transition, following the post-election ouster of former Defense Secretary Mark Esper by President Donald Trump on Nov. 9. Esper, who was Trump's second confirmed defense secretary, was fired via tweet. The outgoing president replaced him with the acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller, a retired Army Special Forces officer and the third acting secretary during the last four years under Trump.

2 generals among 14 disciplined at Fort Hood

By COREY DICKSTEIN
AND ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy said Tuesday that he had relieved or suspended 14 Army leaders at Fort Hood including a two-star general as a result of a probe into the command climate at the Texas installation launched amid a rash of deaths among soldiers.

"I have determined the issues at Fort Hood are directly related to leadership failures," McCarthy said at the Pentagon. "Leaders drive culture, and are responsible for everything the unit does or does not happen to do. I am gravely disappointed that leaders failed to effectively create a climate that treated all soldiers with dignity and respect."

Maj. Gen. Scott Efflandt was the high-

est ranking soldier fired over his role in the Fort Hood problems. The leaders of the Fort Hood-based 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, including its commander Col. Ralph Overland, were also fired, McCarthy said.

The firings come following a release of a report from a civilian-led investigation that found Fort Hood soldiers have a lack of confidence in the SHARP program that has led to a fear of retaliation and significant underreporting of sexual assault and harassment cases, particularly within the enlisted ranks.

Fort Hood leadership knew or should have known of the high risk of harm to female soldiers, according to the report.

McCarthy appointed five civilians to investigate the base in July as part of a Fort Hood Investigative Review Committee, which after three months identified

the central Texas base to have a "deficient climate" and an "ineffective implementation" of the SHARP program.

The investigation was triggered by the disappearance and death of Spc. Vanessa Guillen, who went missing from Fort Hood on April 22 while working in an arms room with the 3rd Cavalry Regiment's engineer squadron. Her remains were found June 30 alongside a river about 30 miles from the base.

Spc. Aaron Robinson, another soldier in Guillen's squadron, killed her with a hammer, then moved her body, according to court documents. A second suspect, Cecily Aguilar, is in federal custody and accused of conspiracy to tamper with evidence in the case. Robinson shot himself dead July 1 when approached by civilian law enforcement in Killeen, the town just outside Fort Hood.

Mideast pullouts raise fears of Iran attacks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As the Pentagon pulls troops out of the Middle East in the coming weeks, under orders from President Donald Trump, U.S. military leaders are working to find other ways to deter potential attacks by Iran and its proxies, and to counter arguments that America is abandoning the region.

A senior U.S. military official with knowledge of the region said Monday that Iran may try to take advantage of America's troop withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the planned departure of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz from the Persian Gulf.

The official said as a result, military leaders have determined that based on the security situation in the region, the Nimitz must remain there now and "for some time to come." In addition, the official said an additional fighter jet squadron may also be sent to the region, if needed.

The Nimitz left the Gulf region and was set to begin heading home. But the ship was

ordered to return last week to provide additional security while the troop withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan continue. A U.S. defense official said at the time that the decision would ensure that American troops could deter any adversary from taking action against U.S. forces. No timeline was given, but the U.S. military official speaking Monday made it clear that the change is open-ended, and it's not clear when the ship's crew will return home.

The potential Iranian threat has become an increasing concern in recent weeks following the killing of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhriadeh. Iran has blamed the death on Israel, which has been suspected in previous killings of Iranian nuclear scientists. U.S. officials are also worried about a possible Iranian retaliatory strike on the first anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani, and senior Iraqi militia leaders near Baghdad's airport in early January.

The military official said the United States is aware of Iranian attack planning

and threats, and that some are more mature, while others are aspirational. A key worry, the official said, is that Iranian-backed militias in Iraq may be willing to act even without the blessings or direction of Tehran.

The presence of the Nimitz, said the official, may cause Iran or the militias to rethink a possible attack.

The Pentagon is mindful of the impact of the extended deployment on the Nimitz sailors and on the Navy's plan for the ship's maintenance, said the military official, who spoke to a small number of reporters on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing troop deliberations.

The Pentagon announced last month that the U.S. will reduce troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan by mid-January, asserting that the decision fulfills Trump's pledge to bring forces home from America's long wars. Under the accelerated pullout, the U.S. will cut the number of troops in Afghanistan from more than 4,500 to 2,500, and in Iraq from about 3,000 to 2,500.

Marine combat engineer adapts runway repair kits

By JAMES BOLINGER

Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWA-KUNI, Japan — First Lt. Christian Cullen knew almost immediately that five 20-foot-long shipping containers holding \$3.5 million worth of new runway repair equipment would move neither quickly nor easily.

In other words, it did not fit the mission assigned Marine Wing Support Squadron 171 to repair runways damaged by missile strikes or aerial bombardments, often unimproved runways used by Marine aviators in places close to the fight.

To move all that new equipment would take at least one C-17 Globemaster, or multiple C-130 Hercules airlifters, the Marines' warehouse. That would not do.

So Cullen, a Mustang, meaning he's a prior enlisted Marine, figured out how to break down all that gear, including a 20-foot concrete mixing trailer, and repack it so it fit into a single C-130. His squadron commander, Lt. Col. Jerry Godfrey, took note of his accomplishment.

"We are excited about 1st Lt. Cullen's innovative ideas regarding employment of our airfield damage repair kits," Godfrey wrote Dec. 4 in an email to Stars and Stripes. "His forward thinking and creativity will allow us

to navigate the EABO environment more efficiently in the future."

EABO, for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, is a relatively new doctrine in the Marine Corps, one created to meet the challenge presented by an expanding China on land and at sea. The concept entails, among other things, distributing bases in austere environments within range of an adversary's weaponry and positioning U.S. weapons like anti-ship cruise missiles and F-35B Lightning II fighters there.

Hence the need to rapidly and easily deploy a runway repair kit. But the five-container kit is too large to be moved quickly and requires an entire combat engineer platoon, about 20 Marines, to employ. The full complement of gear is meant for repair and maintenance of semi-permanent airfields, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the U.S. military has been for two decades.

Cullen started to reconfigure the equipment in August. Using additional equipment, he resized the one kit into three: small, medium and large, each designed for particular jobs in specific places.

The small kit fits into one shipping container 8-feet long by 5-feet wide and 7-feet tall. It comes with hand tools, a concrete saw, buckets of quick-setting concrete mix and a

generator. With it, five Marines can repair small craters in a runway, making it safe for fighter jets to operate.

The C-130 that delivers the repair team can land on expeditionary or unimproved runways, but jet engines can be damaged by debris sucked through an intake.

The medium kit includes all the equipment from one 20-foot shipping container and a compact track loader with optional attachments, he said.

"This kit allows us to conduct expedient repairs to runway surfaces, specifically crater and spall damage," Cullen said. Spall damage is small holes or chunks blown out of a runway. "The only thing the heavy kit can do, which this cannot, is permanent repairs."

The 20-foot shipping container is too large to fit on a C-130 and be unloaded without heavy equipment, so Cullen said the Marines simply unload it and take the individual supplies and equipment aboard a C-130.

The medium-sized kit comes with rapid-fill concrete, a variety of hand tools, concrete saws and a generator. The equipment lacks the glamour of a fifth-generation fighter and the work is down to earth, but the mission is an essential part of Marine air, said the operations officer at Marine Wing Support Squadron 171.

Health picks offer look at virus strategy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden's choices for his health care team point to a stronger federal role in the nation's COVID-19 strategy, restoration of a guiding stress on science and an emphasis on equitable distribution of vaccines and treatments.

With Monday's announcement of California Attorney General Xavier Becerra as his health secretary and a half dozen other key appointments, Biden aims to leave behind the personality dramas that sometimes flourished under President Donald Trump. He hopes to return the federal response to a more methodical approach, seeking results by applying scientific knowledge in what he says will be a transparent and disciplined manner.

"We are still going to have a federal, state and local partnership," commented Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the nonprofit American Public Health Association. "I just think there is going to be better guidance from the federal government and they are going to work more collaboratively with the states."

In a sense, what Biden has is not quite yet a team, but a collection of players drafted for key positions. Some have been working together as members of Biden's coronavirus advisory board. Others will have to suit up quickly.

By announcing most of the key positions in one package, Biden is signaling that he expects his appointees to work together, and not as lords of their own bureaucratic fiefdoms.

"These are not turf-conscious people," said Drew Altman, CEO of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation, a clearinghouse for health care information and analysis. But "it's up to the (Biden) administration to make it an effective team."

The selection of Becerra as health secretary and businessman Jeff Zients as White House coronavirus coordinator point to a more assertive federal coronavirus role.

Under Trump, states were sometimes left to figure things out themselves, as when the White House initially called on states to test all nursing home residents without providing an infrastructure, only

to have to rectify that omission later.

Zients has made a name for himself rescuing government programs that went off course, such as the "Obamacare" Health-Care.gov website. Becerra has experience managing California's attorney general's office, which is bigger than some state governments.

Former Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius knows both men from her service in the Obama administration, and says she does not see them working at cross purposes.

A Secretary Becerra "can't get up every morning and think only COVID," she said. He'll "work on COVID and coordinate the assets of the FDA, CDC and NIH, but he'll have lots of other things to do." Meanwhile "Zients will be the railroad engineer making sure the trains run on time."

States are ready for the feds to take on a more assertive role, she said.

"Governors — Republicans and Democrats — are eager to finally have a federal partner," she said. "They have felt not only on their own, but unclear about what was coming out of the White House."

House poised to pass defense bill under threat of Trump veto

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The House was poised to pass the annual defense authorization bill Tuesday, throwing down the first of two gauntlets before President Donald Trump, who has threatened repeatedly to scuttle the \$741 billion legislation.

The only question is whether the bipartisan legislation will earn enough votes to override the president's promised veto — and whether the Senate will follow suit. Over the summer, both the House and Senate passed independent versions of the defense bill by veto-proof majorities.

"The stronger the vote, the less chance of having to deal with a veto later," Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, the top Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters Monday, adding that GOP lawmakers should seriously weigh the "consequences of a no vote" before siding with Trump.

The legislation is the product of a month-long negotiation between the House and Senate that authorizes everything from new initiatives to counter China to health coverage for members of the National Guard aiding pandemic response efforts. Yet the bill, which has been cheered by leaders of both parties, was negotiated under shifting veto threats

from the White House that have not been rescinded.

At first, Trump vehemently objected to the legislation's mandate for the Pentagon to rename military installations that commemorate Civil War-era Confederates. In recent days, however, the president has taken existential issue with the fact that the bill does not repeal a law shielding technology companies from liability for what third parties post to their websites — an issue unrelated to defense that Trump has sought to make about national security.

Trump has taken special interest in repealing Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act as part of his long-running vendetta against Facebook, Twitter and Google, whom he has accused of anti-conservative bias. While Republicans and Democrats in Congress agree that the law needs retooling, leaders are uniformly opposed to the president's attempt to hold the bill hostage to its inclusion.

"It needs to be addressed, but in a different place and in a different way. Doing it on the defense bill, airdropping at the last minute is not the right thing," Thornberry said. "If somebody is going to vote no on a bill because of what's not in it, that has nothing to do with it ... that can't be the standard."

If the House is able to secure another veto-proof majority for the final compromise version, lawmakers are hopeful it will set the stage for a similarly decisive vote in the Senate — and dissuade Trump from closing out his presidency with a veto showdown.

But if he wants to, Trump still has the ability to further complicate their efforts. Once both chambers of Congress pass the bill and send it to the White House, the president has 10 days, not including Sundays, to sign, veto or "pocket veto" the legislation — a pocket veto being a de facto rejection of the bill by simply refusing to sign it. Should Trump decide to run out the clock, he could force Congress to reconvene for an override vote after Christmas — an added impediment in any year, but especially during a pandemic.

The defense bill must become law before noon Jan. 3, when the new session of Congress begins, or it will expire along with all remaining unfinished legislation from the last two years.

Facing that calendar, Republicans have sought to convince Trump to back off his veto threats. But whether he listens may come down to whether he wants to end his presidency by dealing with Congress gracefully, or go down fighting.

Virus talks snag on liability in Congress

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers are giving themselves more time to sort through their end-of-session business on government spending and COVID-19 relief, preparing a one-week stopgap spending bill that would prevent a shutdown this week-end.

House floor leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said on Twitter that the temporary government funding bill is slated for a vote Wednesday, when it is sure to easily pass. The development comes as Capitol Hill is struggling to figure out how to deliver long-delayed pandemic relief, including additional help for businesses hard hit by the pandemic, further unemployment benefits, funding to distribute COVID-19 vaccines and funding demanded by Democrats for state and local governments.

Disagreements flared Monday over one key provision — a proposed liability shield from COVID-19-related lawsuits for businesses, schools and organizations that reopen.

Hoyer had previously told lawmakers that this week would probably be the last of the session, but talks are going more slowly than hoped on a \$1.4 trillion omnibus spending bill under assembly by senior members of the powerful Appropriations committees. The stopgap measure would prevent a government shutdown through Dec. 18.

Three main items of legislation are at issue in the end-of-session agenda: a defense policy bill that President Donald Trump is threatening to veto, the \$1.4 trillion government-wide spending bill and perhaps \$900 billion in long-sought COVID-19 relief.

North Carolina

ZEBULON — A woman who authorities said organized a concert in North Carolina that had nearly 200 people in attendance was charged with violating the state's limits on mass gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic.

Deputies responding to a noise complaint Sunday night found the concert at an event venue in Zebulon, the Wake County Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

Outdoor gatherings in the state are limited to 50 people unless the event is taking place in a building with a seating capacity of 10,000 people or has received an exemption.

Authorities said Nanci Morales-Gonzales, 20, was the event coordinator. She was charged with participating in an outdoor mass gathering, which is a class 2 misdemeanor, The News & Observer reported.

She could face a \$150 fine if she is found guilty.

Michigan

LANSING — Nonpublic schools sued Monday after Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's administration extended a coronavirus order that prevents in-person instruction at Michigan high schools, saying it violates the First Amendment right to practice religion.

The federal lawsuit, filed in Michigan's Western District, was brought by a group representing more than 400 nonpublic schools across the state, as well as three Catholic high schools and 11 parents. The state health department lengthened the restriction by 12 days, through Dec. 20. It took effect Nov. 18 and also applies to public high schools and all colleges and universities.

The plaintiffs include Lansing Catholic High School, Father Gabriel Richard High School in Ann Arbor and Everest Collegiate Academy in Clarkston. They said they can safely provide face-to-face learning and sought an injunction to block enforcement of the order.

A spokeswoman said Whitmer's office does not comment on pending litigation.

Texas

AUSTIN — With new cases of the coronavirus and hospitalizations spiking in Texas as winter approaches, Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday launched a program to provide small businesses with rapid tests for their employees.

Abbott said the Texas Division of Emergency Management will give local chambers of commerce testing supplies that will be allocated to participating businesses. A similar program for school systems was implemented in October.

"This effective strategy will help us detect and mitigate this virus while ensuring that Texas remains safely open for business," said Abbott, who said the tests were provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

On Monday, the Texas Department of State Health Services reported 8,712 new confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 33 new deaths.

Wyoming

CHEYENNE — Wyoming will reduce bar and restaurant hours, require face coverings in public indoor spaces and further limit gathering sizes in response to this fall's surge in coronavirus cases, Gov. Mark Gordon announced Monday.

The changes take effect Wednesday and will remain in place until at least Jan. 8.

"Too many people have died," Gordon said in a statement. "Science tells us limiting gatherings of groups and using face coverings are effective in slowing transmission of this virus. With these actions, we can avoid taking the more drastic step of closing schools and businesses."

Gordon up to now had resisted ordering face masks amid widespread resistance to coronavirus public health orders in Wyoming.

Some law enforcement officials, meanwhile, have expressed little interest in enforcing mask orders despite their effectiveness in reducing spread of the virus through the population.

Colorado

DENVER — The family that owns a renowned Denver jazz club plans to close its doors permanently, partly because of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

El Chapultepec is known as an unpretentious bar where jazz legends have stopped to play for free, KCNC-TV reported.

The club, commonly known as "The Pec," was operated for decades by Jerry Krantz until his 2012 death. Krantz's daughter, Angela Guerrero, has continued running the club.

Music greats Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Wynton Marsalis, Tony Bennet, Doc Severinsen and Frank Sinatra are among those who appeared on the venue's tiny stage.

Ohio

COLUMBUS — Gov. Mike DeWine announced Monday that he will extend the statewide curfew as Ohio surpassed 7,000 virus-related deaths.

"We think the curfew, as well as the mask order and the enforcement, have slowed this rate of increase, but it is still at too high of a level," DeWine said during a virus briefing.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Ohio has risen over the past two weeks from 7,618 on Nov. 22 to 8,656 on Dec. 6, according to an Associated Press analysis of data provided by The COVID Tracking Project.

The statewide curfew of 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., designated Nov. 17, is set to expire Thursday, but DeWine said it would have to be extended as health experts believe it is helping to marginally flatten the curve in Ohio.

3 years later, dog and her owners are reunited

IL WHEATON — A whiff of her old blanket was enough for Lola: The black Lab was back in her owners' arms three years after the Michigan dog disappeared on a trip to suburban Chicago.

"I feel like I'm in a dream right now," Debra Mejeur said Saturday when she and her husband, Steve, were reunited with Lola at DuPage County Animal Services.

Lola vanished from a fenced yard in 2017 when the Mejeurs, of Kalamazoo, Mich., were visiting a friend in Elk Grove Village.

The couple returned for about a month hoping to find a dog that was specially trained to help Debra Mejeur in case of a seizure.

The Mejeurs posted notices, got help from volunteers and hired a professional pet searcher. No luck.

DuPage County authorities got a call last week from a couple in Glendale Heights who had noticed Lola the past few years going into a forest preserve. They had been leaving food for the dog and earned her trust.

A microchip revealed Lola's owners.

Masses of shrimp eggs leave visible slick on lake

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Tiny shrimp eggs have been showing up in such huge numbers in Utah's Great Salt Lake that some parts of the lake look covered with an oil slick.

Cold weather in fall or winter causes the lake's small brine shrimp to produce the eggs, called cysts. When conditions are right such as this year, the eggs come together in giant masses.

Photos from the Great Salt Lake State Park and Marina show what looks like a swirling, brown slick on the water at the marina west of Salt Lake City.

When the weather warms up the eggs are expected to hatch and continue their life cycle. Commercial boats harvest the eggs to be raised into adult shrimp known as "sea monkeys" that are sold to fish farms.

Shooting at late-night bonfire leaves 6 people wounded

NC AUTRYVILLE — A shooting after a fight at a late-night bonfire in North Carolina left six people with non-life-threatening injuries, authorities said.

The Cumberland County Sheriff's Office said it was dispatched to a gathering of a large group of people in Autryville, N.C.

An argument between two males broke into a fight that ended with the shooting, the

sheriff's office said.

Detectives interviewed several people at the scene and continued to investigate. Authorities said one of the shooters has been identified.

Group seeks to restore Walter Anderson home

MS GAUTIER — A donation has enabled Mississippi Heritage Trust to buy a former home of artist Walter Anderson, known for his stylized paintings of wildlife and coastal scenes. The trust is looking for partners to help restore the deteriorating structure that dates to 1845.

The Oldfields property in Gautier has been listed as one of the 10 most endangered historic places in the state, WLOX-TV reported.

The white-columned home sits on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi Sound in Gautier. It was built for Alfred Lewis and his family. Lewis was a planter, merchant, politician and Civil War officer.

"The porch was very badly damaged. It needs a new roof. Some of the interior floorboards were washed out," Rash said. "We're looking at complete restoration of the property."

Walter Anderson created some of his most significant work while living at Oldfields.

Semi-truck driver killed when milk tanker rolls over

IN FREMONT — A semi-truck hauling milk on the Indiana Toll Road crashed and rolled in the median, killing the Michigan driver, police said.

The incident occurred in Steuben County in northern Indiana.

The driver was identified as Robert Downs, 61, of Colon, Mich.

Approximately 4,000 gallons of milk spilled from the tanker, along with 100 gallons of diesel fuel. East and west lanes on the interstate were closed for nearly two hours.

"Extensive damage was sustained to both the tractor and trailer," state police said. "Due to the damage sustained, it was initially undetermined if Downs was restrained at the time of the crash. Alcohol use was not suspected."

Man is missing after falling from dinner-cruise ship

FL FORT MYERS — The U.S. Coast Guard says a man went missing after falling into the water from a dinner-cruise ship in the Gulf Coast in Florida.

The agency said Joel Henderson, 37, was not wearing a life jacket when he fell from

the Capt. J.P. boat.

The company J.C. Cruises said Capt J.P. is a 475-passenger paddlewheel boat that tours the scenic Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers, Fla.

Coast Guard crews searched for more than 11 hours in the waters before suspending the search. They received help from agencies such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Fort Myers Beach Police, and the Lee County Sheriff's Office.

Suspect fatally shot during botched robbery

PA PHILADELPHIA — A botched street robbery outside a Philadelphia pharmacy ended with a security company supervisor fatally shooting the would-be robber, authorities said.

The attempted robbery occurred when a 20-year-old man tried to steal the car of a 59-year-old man and the victim's personal belongings, according to city police. The older man yelled for help, and the security supervisor—who happened to be at the pharmacy to check on a subordinate—responded and fired multiple shots, hitting the would-be robber three times.

The wounded man was taken to a hospital but was pronounced dead there a short time later.

No other injuries were reported in the encounter, and the names of the would-be robber and the man who shot him have not been released.

No charges have been filed so far, but authorities say the incident remains under investigation.

Fire marshal warns of holiday decor fire risk

IL SPRINGFIELD — The Illinois State Fire Marshal is warning holiday revelers about the dangers of home fires posed by holiday decorations.

Fire Marshal Matt Perez said statistics from the National Fire Protection Association indicate that two out of every five home-decoration fires occur because decorations are placed too close to a heat source.

More than one-third of home fires are started by candles. Perez said residents should be sure to extinguish all candles before leaving home or retiring for the night.

Perez offered tips for fire safety, including ensuring that decorations are flame retardant, keeping lit candles 12 inches away from anything flammable, and replacing light strands that are worn out.

Last year, holiday time fires killed 15 people in Illinois.

From The Associated Press

Washington hands Steelers first loss

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Steelers spent three months shaking off whatever 2020 threw at them. Schedule changes. Injuries to a handful of impact players. The ever-present threat of COVID-19.

Through the chaos, they kept winning. Sometimes pretty. Sometimes ugly. Sometimes a little of both in the same game. Through it all, they insisted they were well aware of their flaws, pointing out time and again the only thing perfect about them was their record.

So much for that.

Pittsburgh's bid for an unbeaten season is over. Washington's — yes, Washington's — quest for an unlikely division title may just be starting.

Alex Smith threw for 296 yards and a touchdown, Dustin Hopkins kicked a tie-breaking 45-yard field goal with 2:04 remaining, and Washington rallied for a 23-17 victory on Monday in one of the biggest surprises of the NFL season.

"We've been down for such a long time and we're trying to rebuild ourselves and build up," first-year coach Ron Rivera said. "This is something we can build off of."

The Steelers (11-1) missed a chance to clinch a playoff berth and dropped into a tie with defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City for the best record in the AFC with four weeks remaining. They squandered a

14-point lead.

"It stinks," Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger said. "Been a while since we lost a game. It's not a good feeling."

The Steelers were 10-point favorites while facing a team that hadn't won three straight since 2018 and hadn't won in Pittsburgh since 1991. Washington won the Super Bowl that season. The club's expectations this year are far more modest. Yet a day after the New York Giants won at Seattle, Washington (5-7) kept pace while giving the lowly NFC East its second marquee victory in 25ish hours.

"We're on a roll," said defensive end Montez Sweat, who knocked down three Roethlisberger passes. "This is the kind of football we've been wanting to play since Game 1."

It's the kind of football the Steelers had played since Game 1. The best start in the franchise's 87-year history came to an abrupt halt on a rare Monday late afternoon game. The NFL pushed the contest back a day as part of the fallout from a COVID-19 outbreak in Baltimore that forced the league to postpone the Ravens' visit to Heinz Field three times.

Pittsburgh coach Mike Tomlin insisted his club would not use the disruption as an excuse. But the weight of what the Steelers have been dealing with, combined with second-half injuries to inside linebacker Rob-

ert Spillane and cornerback Joe Haden, made for a tough day.

Roethlisberger passed for 305 yards and two touchdowns, but was picked off by Jon Bostic — a former Steeler — with 1:59 remaining. Hopkins added another 45-yard field goal and Pittsburgh's last-gasp drive ended with the ball near midfield and Washington's players sprinting off in celebration while the Steelers trudged to the locker room.

"We're getting to that point of the season when you've got to be sharp in all areas, your whole team, both sides of the ball," Roethlisberger said. "There can be all kinds of distractions, changes of this, that and the other. At the end of the day, we've got to go play good football."

For the first time in a long time, the Steelers didn't. At least not enough of it.

Still, even after Smith hit Logan Thomas for a 15-yard touchdown pass to tie the game at 17, the Steelers had a chance. They drove into field-goal range but rather than have fill-in Matthew Wright — promoted from the practice squad due to an injury to Chris Boswell — attempt a 45-yard field goal into the open end at Heinz, the Steelers went for it. Roethlisberger's heave to rookie running back Anthony McFarland Jr. fell incomplete and Smith calmly drove Washington 45 yards in nine plays to set up the winning score.

Allen, Bills roll past 49ers, hold onto AFC East lead

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — The passes zipped through the air one by one, almost always finding their intended target right on the hands and in stride.

By the time Josh Allen was done, the quarterback had finished one of the best games of his young NFL career, and the Buffalo Bills once again looked like one of the league's elite teams.

Allen threw for 375 yards and tied a career high with four touchdown passes as the Bills stayed in sole possession of first place in the AFC East with a thoroughly impressive 34-24 victory over the San Francisco 49ers on Monday

night.

"That's our quarterback. He's a baller," Bills safety Jordan Poyer said. "I don't know what answer you want me to say. It's no surprise to us what he does every week. I'm happy he's on our team."

Buffalo (9-3) moved a step closer to winning its division for the first time since 1995, thanks to a nearly flawless performance from Allen. The 24-year-old completed 32 of 40 passes with no interceptions.

He threw touchdown passes to Cole Beasley, Dawson Knox, Isaiah McKenzie and Gabriel Davis as the Bills built a 17-7 halftime lead and controlled the majority of the second half.

"We were clicking," Allen said. "It just seemed like our guys were getting open and the ball was coming out of my hand really well."

The Bills are one game ahead of the Miami Dolphins with four games left for both teams.

San Francisco (5-7) lost in its first game at its adopted home in Arizona. The 49ers will be based in Glendale for at least the next three weeks after Santa Clara County issued strict new coronavirus protocols that forced the team to find a temporary new home.

It was Allen's fourth game of the season with at least 300 yards passing and three touch-

downs, which set a franchise record. Jim Kelly did it three times in 1991 and Drew Bledsoe three times in 2002.

"As long as it correlates to team success, it means we're doing the right thing, making the right decisions and we're winning football games," Allen said. "That's all that matters to me."

The Bills had a much more pleasant trip to the desert than three weeks ago, when they lost a 32-30 heartbreaker to the Arizona Cardinals. That was the game when DeAndre Hopkins made a stunning catch over three Buffalo defenders with 2 seconds left for the game-winning score.

LeBron considers managing workload

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — After LeBron James emerged from the longest season in NBA history with a fourth championship ring, he returned home and planned the first Christmas family vacation of his adult life.

That's when James learned that his 17th NBA offseason would be unprecedentedly short.

When James was told the NBA intended to resume games on Dec. 22, just 72 days after the Lakers beat Miami to win the title, the superstar admits he reacted with a mild expletive.

"Just being completely honest, I wasn't expecting that," James said Monday in his first public comments since the NBA champions opened training camp.

"Early conversations were going on, and I was hearing there would be kind of a mid-January start," James said. "Training camp would start after Christmas, and we would have the opportunity to spend Christmas with our families. ... I had to switch up a lot of things. I just started preparing my mind and preparing my body."

James still reported to camp ready last week for his 18th NBA season and the pursuit of yet another banner with the Lakers,

who added an impressive amount of veteran talent in the abbreviated offseason for their repeat quest.

James also showed up with a new two-year, \$85 million contract extension through the 2022-23 season, setting his future in Los Angeles through his 20th NBA campaign.

James chose that year deliberately: His oldest son, LeBron James Jr., will graduate from high school in 2023. Bronny is a sophomore at private Sierra Canyon School, where he played a reserve role on the basketball team last season, and LeBron has previously spoken of his fond dream to play in the NBA with — or against — his son.

"The best thing about it is the year I'll be a free agent will be the same year my oldest son graduates high school," James said of his new deal. "I'll have some options to see, for me personally, what I want to do (going forward — being around my family, being around my son more, or continue to play this game I love with great health and great spirits. We'll see."

Whether that happens, and whether it will be in Los Angeles, won't be certain for three long years. James intends to make the most of the meantime.

James will shoulder the physical challenges of this difficult year, but it isn't easy: He said he was "sore as hell" Monday, although that's normal every year after the first two preseason practices.

The uniqueness of 2020 has forced James and the Lakers to consider whether they should practice load management this season.

LeBron has largely declined to follow other stars' strategy of strategic absences from games in recent years: He played in all 82 games for Cleveland in 2017-18, and after an injury-plagued 2018-19 in LA, he only missed four games last season.

Still, James has played 1,265 career regular-season games — already the 33rd-most in league history — and an NBA-record 260 playoff contests as he heads toward his 36th birthday later this month.

James and the Lakers haven't decided on their plans for the regular season, with James saying there's "a fine line" between strategic rest and unnecessary inactivity. He does sound amenable to limited action in the preseason, which begins Friday.

"We're going to be as smart as I can be in making sure that my body and making sure that I'm ready to go," James said.

MLB roundup

AP source: Rangers trade RHP Lynn to White Sox

Associated Press

Lance Lynn is being traded from the Texas Rangers to the Chicago White Sox, according to a person with direct knowledge of the deal. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press late Monday night, at the end of the first day of Major League Baseball's virtual winter meeting, because there was no announcement from either team.

Lynn would be reunited in Chicago with new manager Tony La Russa. Lynn was a rookie pitcher for the 2011 World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals, who beat the Rangers in seven games in the last season La Russa managed in the big leagues before returning to the White Sox this offseason.

The 6-foot-5, 250-pound Lynn was 22-14 in 46 starts the past two seasons for the Rangers.

Sugano put up for MLB bidding

NEW YORK — Japanese star pitcher To-

moyuki Sugano has been posted by the Yomiuri Giants and is available for bidding to major league teams.

A right-hander who turned 31 on Oct. 11, Sugano was 14-2 with a 1.97 ERA and three shutouts in 20 games last season, striking out 131 and walking 25 in 137½ innings while allowing 97 hits. He is 101-49 with a 2.32 ERA over eight seasons in Japan.

Seven-time All-Star Allen dies

Dick Allen, a seven-time All-Star slugger whose fight against racism during a tumultuous time with the Philadelphia Phillies in the 1960s cost him on and off the field, died Monday. He was 78.

The 1964 NL Rookie of Year and 1972 AL MVP had a lengthy illness while at home in Wampum, Pa.

"Dick will be remembered as not just one of the greatest and most popular players in our franchise's history, but also as a courageous warrior who had to overcome far too

many obstacles to reach the level he did," the Phillies said in a statement. Allen's No. 15 was retired by the Phillies in September, an honor considered way overdue by many for one of the franchise's greatest players.

Angels get Iglesias from Reds

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The Los Angeles Angels acquired closer Raisel Iglesias from the Cincinnati Reds for right-hander Noé Ramirez and a player to be named or cash Monday in the first trade of the week of baseball's winter meetings. Iglesias has been the Reds' closer for the past four seasons, racking up 100 saves in 114 opportunities in that stretch with a career 3.15 ERA.

Wainwright wins Clemente award

NEW YORK — Longtime St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright has won the Roberto Clemente Award, given annually by Major League Baseball for community involvement and philanthropy.

Older coaches well aware of COVID risks

Associated Press

Rick Barnes thought he was in the clear early in his bout with COVID-19.

The Tennessee coach should have known better, given his texts with Tom Izzo, his Michigan State counterpart who also went through it. About a week into his quarantine, Barnes lost his appetite and started feeling lethargic.

Just like Izzo said.

"He gave me full warning," said Barnes, who is 66 and has been a head coach the past 33 years. "He texted me almost every day — just don't be surprised when this stuff happens. And I would tell you, it probably took me 12 days to where I felt really good."

Barnes, Izzo and Syracuse's Jim Boeheim are among the coaches 65 and up who have contracted COVID-19, which can be a greater threat the older you are. While many elderly people are isolating at home, college basketball coaches are required to travel, work indoors and be around crowds — all among the most risky behaviors in the pandemic.

Lon Kruger knows he is taking a chance. Oklahoma's 68-year-old has been spared so far, even with his Sooners having to briefly shut down because of cases within the program.

He said hearing about his colleagues got his attention.

"It's just a reminder to do what we can to avoid it," Kruger said. "Not to say that anything's 100% guaranteed. But the university

continuously reminds us to be careful and follow the recommendations. Especially with the masks. It's a pretty easy thing to do to wear a mask."

Dr. George Monks, president of the Oklahoma State Medical Association, said fans wearing masks, washing and sanitizing their hands, and keeping their distance from others when they are away from the arenas will play a key role in protecting their coaches — even with attendance at games limited or barred altogether.

"We need to all do our part to lower the spread of the virus in the community," Monks said. "When it's going like crazy in the community and there's a lot of cases, that puts those players and those coaches more at risk."

C. Vivian Stringer, the 72-year-old coach of the Rutgers women's basketball program, worries that her daughter who lives with her might be especially vulnerable because she had spinal meningitis at age 2 and still deals with the effects.

"I'm concerned about myself and definitely Nina," Stringer said. "We've got to look out for everyone surrounding us. This is crazy."

North Carolina coach Roy Williams, 70, said he respects the virus, but he can't focus on it too much.

"The biggest thing is, if you spend all your time worried about that, you're not ready to get the job done or not spending your time preparing your team," he said. "We've got to

do everything we can and be able to handle the new information, and be able to handle the next new information and be able to handle the next information."

Adjustments have become the norm. Oklahoma opened the season at home Dec. 3 against UTSA in a game that was supposed to be played the previous week. Players wore masks in warmups. Seats on the bench were separated and in rows rather than one long row. There were just a few socially distanced cheerleaders on hand, next to a small band.

Kruger said it was a different experience.

"You're always trying to do the right thing, but it's not normal to be wearing a mask all the time," he said of being on the bench. "We don't wear it during timeouts, but when play starts, we're wearing it."

Izzo, 65, tested positive for COVID-19 on Nov. 9 and isolated at his home for 11 days. He said it was hard to be away from the team and was thankful to get through it.

"While some people who have tested positive have not been affected too much by it, I am here to tell you that this virus is no joke, and everyone must take this seriously," he said.

Even if all the proper precautions are taken, the risks remain.

"I'm sure a lot of people have gotten COVID without understanding why or it just happened, and we may get it as well," Kruger said. "But we do everything possible to increase our chances of not getting it."

No. 19 Richmond survives Wofford on Gilyard's late 3

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Jacob Gilyard and No. 19 Richmond stepped into uncharted territory and learned a lesson.

The Spiders, playing for the first time this season as a ranked team, scored the game's first 11 points Monday but needed Gilyard's three-pointer with 19.5 seconds left to beat Wofford 77-72.

"I think we let our foot off the gas," Gilyard said. "Early on, we could have pushed the lead a little better. ... We've never been somebody that guys are aiming to play, looking forward to playing. We're going to have a target on our backs. We have to be better."

Gilyard led the Spiders (3-0) with 18 points and Grant Golden had 15. Richmond led almost throughout in a game that was arranged only two days earlier, but the Ter-

riers (2-1) shot 55% after halftime and took their first lead with 4:32 remaining.

Storm Murphy led Wofford with 21 points and Messiah Jones had 20 points and 10 rebounds. Wofford missed its first 13 field-goal attempts and trailed 16-3 after eight minutes, but the Terriers trailed just 37-30 at halftime.

Richmond hadn't played since it beat then-No. 10 Kentucky on Nov. 29. The Spiders had to cancel two games last week after a positive COVID-19 test within the program, and they announced the matchup with the Terriers on Saturday. Wofford also had two games canceled in the first week of December and was playing its first game since Nov. 28.

"Really pleased that we were able to play a game, and I appreciate Wofford being able to also play the game on such short notice,"

Richmond coach Chris Mooney said.

The Spiders appeared to take command with an 11-3 second-half run that gave them a 56-44 lead, but Wofford responded with a 12-3 burst to get to within 59-56. The Terriers grabbed their first lead at 64-63 on Tray Hollowell's three-pointer with 4:32 remaining. It was one of 12 3s for the Terriers, something the Spiders will address.

"That will probably be something we need to look at and figure out what those issues were so we can be better defending the three-point line," Mooney said.

The lead changed hands five times the rest of the way until Tyler Burton scored in the lane to put Richmond ahead 73-72 with 1:09 left.

After Jones missed for the Terriers, Gilyard hit his fourth three-pointer of the game to give Richmond more of a cushion.