

350 USS Reagan sailors in quarantine

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Hundreds of sailors from the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan are quarantined after having close contact with others who tested positive for the coronavirus, according to emails between the ship's leaders.

About 350 Reagan sailors "are in some form of" quarantine at Yokosuka, the carrier's homeport, according to executive officer Capt. Matthew Ventimiglia, who started an email chain Sunday between the ship's senior leaders. More than 100 are on board the ship. Some are in isolation because they recently arrived in Japan, according to Ventimiglia's email.

Stars and Stripes on Tuesday obtained the email chain, which includes messages from Reagan commander Capt. Fred Goldhammer and senior medical officer Capt. George Rice to department heads and leading chief petty officers. Some quarantined sailors may be out in time for the holidays. Many "are on track to be released this week" as the ship prepares to conduct a "large test-out of quarantine," Ventimiglia wrote Sunday.

However, Reagan spokeswoman Lt. Cmdr. Dawn Stankus told Stars and Stripes in an email Tuesday that "there is no 'push' to get sailors out of quarantine before the holiday weekend because shipboard leadership continues to take the threat of COVID-19 serious-

ly," referring to the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus.

Sailors quarantined on Christmas "will receive care packages, pizza and have an opportunity to participate in a festive door decorating contest," Stankus said.

Meanwhile, the base is coping with its largest coronavirus outbreak since the pandemic began, base commander Capt. Rich Jarrett said in a Facebook video Friday. As of Tuesday, the base reported 68 people with the virus are being monitored by base medical professionals, according to base public affairs. No infected sailors are aboard the Reagan, Stankus said.

The Reagan on Dec. 8 implemented an "essential-personnel only order" on the ship as coronavirus cases increased, Stankus said. That order was eased Friday, but those who had close contact with positive cases were ordered to quarantine "for further observation and testing."

About 260 quarantined Reagan sailors are assigned to the V-2 division, which maintains and operates the ship's steam catapults, Goldhammer wrote in the email chain Tuesday. They have been under a shelter-in-place order for more than a week.

Of those, 150 have quarantined at their homes, where conditions are "painful but tolerable," Goldhammer wrote in the email chain.

The remaining 110 were quarantined

aboard the ship, Goldhammer said. However, Stankus said there were no sailors quarantined on the ship as of Thursday night.

For them, being confined aboard the carrier was "excruciating," Goldhammer wrote. Some were seen huddling in bathrooms, trying to get better wireless internet access, according to his email.

"They were stuck on the ship and not able to go anywhere, even on the ship," Goldhammer said in the email.

Stankus said the quarantine has had "no impact to mission and readiness," but Goldhammer in the email chain said the carrier could miss an opportunity for maintenance and upgrades, called a selected restricted availability, if sailors can't safely return to work.

"We understand the importance of stopping the spread of COVID quickly so that we can continue essential work to sustain our ability to deploy and answer needs of our nation, allies and partners," Stankus said in her email to Stars and Stripes.

Ventimiglia urged leaders aboard the Reagan to stem the virus's spread to accomplish the work and allow the crew some time off.

"I understand the timelines are tight, but we've got to make tangible progress this week," Ventimiglia wrote, "or we'll quickly find ourselves challenged to keep crew health as required to maximize liberty and SRA on track."

US naval armada sent to Somalia to relocate 700 troops

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A U.S. aircraft carrier group and a Marine expeditionary unit have joined a naval seabase off the coast of Somalia in a display of force as the military moves forward with efforts to remove 700 troops from the country.

The Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group and thousands of embarked Marines and sailors from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Group add "significant combat capability" to help protect U.S. forces as they transit in the region, Air Force Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson said in a statement Tuesday.

Anderson commands the newly formed

Joint Task Force — Quartz, which was set up by U.S. Africa Command to oversee the repositioning of U.S. forces in eastern Africa. And as of Monday, the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and its escorts also were operating off the coast of Somalia, USNI News reported, citing defense officials.

The U.S. military is in the process of pulling most of its 700 troops in Somalia following a Defense Department directive. While AFRICOM has declined to detail where forces will be relocated, it has said most troops will head to locations in eastern Africa.

Neighboring Djibouti, home to the military's main hub in Africa, and Kenya, where there is a smaller base, are possible destinations.

AFRICOM says cross-border operations in Somalia, targeting the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab group, will continue as needed.

"To be clear, the U.S. is not withdrawing or disengaging from East Africa," AFRICOM's Gen. Stephen Townsend said in a statement Saturday. "We remain committed to helping our African partners build a more secure future. We also remain capable of striking Al-Shabaab at the time and place of our choosing — they should not test us."

The Makin Island, which includes an array of support ships, joins the Navy's USS Hershel "Woody" Williams off the coast of Somalia. The Woody, based out of Souda Bay, Greece, arrived last week.

Report: Black airmen not treated the same

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Black troops in the Air Force and Space Force are investigated and punished far more often than their white counterparts and they receive fewer career advancement opportunities, according to a review by the Air Force inspector general published Monday.

The four-month data analysis by the inspector general found disparities exist in the treatment of Black and white troops within the Air Force Department, Lt. Gen. Sami Said, the service IG chief, said Monday. However, the investigation did not attempt to determine the actual causes of those discrepancies, meaning Said could not definitively say they were the result of racism or other biases within the force.

“That requires more detailed assessment and analysis,” Said told reporters in a phone call before the report’s release Monday. “If you don’t know where there’s potential smoke, and if you don’t know if it’s smoke or dust, you’ll wander all over the place. So, this review tells us where to focus ... and where additional analysis is absolutely required.”

The Air Force has already begun probes aimed at identifying and addressing the root causes of the disparities, which will be largely driven by institutions within the Air Force with the inspector general’s help, the general said.

He committed to making public further Air Force findings on discrepancies in the way that Black and white troops are treated.

The initial inspector general review was launched at the request of the Air Force Department’s top civilian and military leaders during the summer amid a racial reckoning nationwide following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Said was charged with determining in about 120 days whether the military had disparities that could be documented about how it treated its Black personnel. IG investigators looked at more than five years of data and surveyed some 123,000 troops in an effort to quickly make a determination.

The data is clear that disparities exist, Said said.

Among the statistics noted in the IG report:

- Enlisted Black airmen and guardians were 72% more likely than whites to be punished through the Uniform Code of Military Justice or through nonjudicial punishment measures.

- Enlisted Black airmen and guardians were 57% more likely than whites to face a court-martial.

- Black junior enlisted Air Force and Space Force troops are twice as likely to be involuntarily discharged for misconduct than white troops.

- Black Air Force and Space Force

service members are 1.64 times more likely to be named suspects in Air Force Office of Special Investigations criminal cases than white service members.

- Black airmen and guardians are twice as likely to be apprehended by Air Force security forces than white airmen and guardians.

- Black officers are less likely than white officers to be designated to attend professional military education courses.

- Black Air Force and Space Force members are less likely to be promoted to the ranks of E-5 through E-7 and O-4 through O-6.

Many of the results were unsurprising, Said said, but he had not anticipated the “unprecedented” number of responses from service members who wanted to share their own experiences in the surveys, follow-up reports, and 138 small-group interviews with IG staff at bases across the country.

“The pent-up angst on the topic [and] the volume was surprising,” Said said. “When we asked for feedback, I expected to get feedback, but we were just drowned with feedback. The airman were very eager to tell the story. They wanted their voices heard.”

Said told reporters that the responses to survey questions revealed that information provided by Air Force and Space Force troops largely matched the data that IG investigators observed.

Ex-DOD official charged with taking kickbacks

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A former Defense Department official overseeing construction work at the U.S. military’s hub in Djibouti has been charged with taking kickbacks to help a private contractor obtain \$6.4 million in extra government payments.

Nizar Farhat, 63, of Palm Desert, Calif., was charged earlier this month in connection with allegations he received \$34,000 in illegal gratuity from a private party while serving in a government position, the U.S. Attorney’s central district office in California said in a statement.

In 2014 and 2015, Farhat oversaw a \$15 million contract to construct an aircraft hangar and a telecommunications facility at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, where the Defense Department has spent millions of dollars on upgrades over the past several years.

At the time, Farhat was a construction manager based at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif. He was shifted to Djibouti on a temporary assignment to handle the project at Camp Lemonnier, federal prosecutors said.

After the projects were completed, the contractor submitted a “requests for equi-

table adjustment” that sought \$6.43 million in additional payments from the Defense Department, prosecutors said.

The indictment alleged that Farhat accepted \$20,000 in cash from the company for performing official acts, and recommending that the Navy certify completion of the construction projects and pay the additional \$6.43 million the company requested, the Justice Department said.

The indictment also alleges that Farhat took another \$14,000 in cash from the company as compensation for advising it and drafting the request for more money. The Justice Department did not identify the company involved.

USS McCain sails through disputed chain

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain steamed Tuesday past the Spratly Islands, a disputed chain in the South China Sea west of the Philippines, in another demonstration of freedom of maritime navigation, according to a 7th Fleet spokesman.

Six nations, including the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Taiwan, assert sovereignty over all or part of the chain of more than 100 small, uninhabited islands and reefs rich with fishing grounds and potential oil and gas deposits.

Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and China have created outposts or bases there, according to the CIA World Factbook. China, which claims authority over most of the South China Sea, built bases capable of accommodating fighter jets and other ad-

vanced weaponry.

Three nations — China, Vietnam and Taiwan — expect advance notice when Navy vessels intend to pass through the area, according to the Navy statement. The United States frequently challenges these claims with freedom-of-navigation operations like the one the McCain conducted Tuesday.

The McCain did not seek permission or give prior warning before passing through the Spratlys to “demonstrate that innocent passage may not be subject to such restrictions,” according to a statement from Lt. Joe Keiley, 7th Fleet spokesman.

“Unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas, including the freedoms of navigation and overflight, free trade and unimpeded commerce and freedom of economic opportunity for South China Sea littoral nations,” according to the statement.

On Tuesday, “all interactions with foreign

military forces were consistent with international norms and did not impact the operation,” Keiley said in the statement.

The McCain’s last demonstration in the South China Sea, on Oct. 9, put it near the Pratacel Islands, northwest of the Spratlys. During that episode, the McCain was warned away by the Chinese military, according to a report in the state-run Global Times.

Most recently, the McCain steamed Nov. 23 into Peter the Great Bay, off the coast of Vladivostok, Russia, in a challenge to that country’s claims in the area. The Russian Defense Ministry said it expelled the ship from the region, but Keiley at the time called the claim false.

“The United States will never bow in intimidation or be coerced into accepting illegitimate maritime claims, such as those made by the Russian Federation,” he said at the time.

70 West Point cadets accused of cheating while studying remotely

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Military Academy at West Point accused more than 70 underclassmen of cheating on a math final exam in the spring while the students were taking online courses because of the coronavirus pandemic, officials at the New York institution said Tuesday.

West Point officials said 72 plebes — the academy’s term for freshmen — and one second-year cadet were accused of cheating on a calculus final in May when instructors found “irregularities in the mathematical work submitted by cadets” during the grading process. Academy officials said 59 of the accused cadets admitted to cheating on the test. There are about 1,200 cadets in each underclassmen class.

“[The] West Point honor code and character development program remains strong despite remote learning and the challenges brought by the pandemic,” Army Lt. Col. Christopher Ophardt, an academy spokesman, said in a statement. “Cadets are being held accountable for breaking the code.”

West Point cadets are strictly held to the storied academy’s code: “A cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do.” The code is enforced by West Point upperclassmen, a role that is meant to prepare them for

the challenges of ensuring discipline as Army officers upon their graduation, Ophardt said.

West Point upperclassmen, guided by Army lawyers and military ethics experts, led the probes into the cheating allegations, which is the largest academic scandal reported by the academy since 153 cadets resigned or were expelled for cheating on an electrical engineering exam in 1976.

After investigations and preliminary hearings were completed late last month, four cadets resigned from the school and two cases were dismissed for lack of evidence.

The incident was “disappointing” for West Point, Ophardt said, adding the academy’s honor system was properly addressing the scandal. He said the 67 cadets still involved in the incident “will be held accountable for their actions.”

The four remaining cadets who admitted to cheating did not meet criteria for the Willful Admission Program, officials said. They will face boards who will determine their futures at West Point.

The eight other cadets who did not admit to cheating and whose cases were not dismissed will face hearings to determine whether they violated the honor code. If they are found guilty, a board will determine their punishment, including the potential for expulsion, officials said.

Acting secretary of defense makes trip to visit Afghanistan

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller visited Afghanistan on Wednesday, the second senior defense official in a week to travel to the region amid ongoing Taliban violence against civilians and Afghan security forces.

His mission, he said, was to make certain that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani understands “we are still behind him” despite the U.S. troop drawdown there.

Miller met with Army Gen. Austin “Scott” Miller, the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, Ghani and U.S. service members.

The acting defense secretary’s visit to the country follows a car bomb explosion Sunday in Kabul that killed nine people and wounded 20 others. On Saturday, militants fired five rockets onto Bagram Airfield in Parwan province, the largest U.S. base in Afghanistan, from a small truck parked in a nearby village.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the American special envoy for Afghan reconciliation, has warned that the violence is “distressingly high” and could threaten the peace agreement with the Taliban, according to a recent Defense Department inspector general report on Afghanistan.

Biden gets COVID-19 vaccine on live TV

Associated Press

NEWARK, Del. — President-elect Joe Biden on Monday received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations are safe.

The president-elect took a dose of Pfizer vaccine at a hospital not far from his Delaware home, hours after his wife, Jill Biden, did the same. The injections came the same day that a second vaccine, produced by Moderna, was to start arriving in states. It joins Pfizer's in the nation's arsenal against the COVID-19 pandemic, which has now killed more than 317,000 people in the United States and upended life around the

globe.

"I'm ready," said Biden, who was administered the dose at a hospital in Newark, Del. The president-elect rolled the left sleeve of his turtleneck all the way up to his shoulder, then declined the option to count to three before the needle was inserted into his left arm. "You just go ahead anytime you're ready," he told Tabe Mase, the nurse practitioner who administered the shot.

Biden emphasized the safety of the vaccine, and said President Donald Trump's administration "deserves some credit" for getting the vaccine distribution process "off the ground."

"I'm doing this to demonstrate that peo-

ple should be prepared when it's available to take the vaccine," he added. "There's nothing to worry about."

He noted, however, that distributing the vaccine is "going to take time," and urged Americans to take precautions during the holiday season to avoid the spread of the virus, including wearing masks.

"If you don't have to travel, don't travel," he said. "It's really important."

Biden also thanked health care workers, and offered praise and an elbow bump to Mase.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and her husband are expected to receive their first shots next week.

UK strives to end France's ban on truck travel

Associated Press

LONDON — Stranded Europe-bound truckers hoped Tuesday to receive the green light to get out of Britain soon, after some of the most dramatic travel restrictions of the pandemic were imposed on the country following the discovery of a potentially more contagious strain of the coronavirus.

More than 1,500 trucks snaked along a major highway in southeast England near the country's vital Channel ports or crowded into a disused airport, illustrating the scale of Britain's isolation after countries from Canada to India banned flights from the U.K. and France barred the entry of its trucks for 48 hours beginning Sunday night.

For a country of islands that relies heavily on its commercial links with France, that's potentially very serious — and raised con-

cerns of food shortages if the restrictions weren't lifted by Wednesday.

Hopes increased over Tuesday that the stranded drivers may soon be able to get on the road again as the European Union's executive arm pushed for a coordinated response to the travel restrictions on the U.K. The European Commission said people returning to their home countries or main places of residence should be able to do so provided they either test negative for the virus or quarantine.

Though Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders said EU countries should work together to "discourage nonessential travel" between the bloc and Britain, he said "blanket travel bans should not prevent thousands of EU and U.K. citizens from returning to their homes."

The commission added that "cargo flows need to continue uninterrupted."

Home Secretary Priti Patel told BBC radio that the British government is "speaking constantly" with France to get freight moving again. France has said it wants to lift the ban as soon as possible and is looking at ways of testing drivers on their arrival.

Given that around 10,000 trucks pass through the port of Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the country's trade in goods, retailers are getting increasingly concerned if there is no resolution soon. Andrew Opie, director of food and sustainability at the British Retail Consortium, warned of potential shortages of food like lettuce, vegetables and fresh fruit after Christmas if the borders are not "running pretty much freely" from Wednesday.

Officials: Calif. could see 100K hospitalizations by Jan.

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California has recorded a half-million coronavirus cases in the last two weeks, overwhelming emergency rooms in urban centers and rural areas including along the Mexican border where a small hospital system warns it is fast running out of patient beds.

The state could be facing a once-unthinkable caseload of nearly 100,000 hospitalizations within a month, Gov. Gavin Newsom said Monday.

Conditions at El Centro Regional Medical Center in the southeast corner of the state are desperate, even worse than during a

summer surge that caught the attention of the governor, hospital officials said.

"We don't have space for anybody. We've been holding patients for days because we can't get them transferred, can't get beds for them," said Dr. Alexis Lenz, an emergency room physician at the medical center in Imperial County, home to 180,000 people.

Of the 175 patients at the hospital on Monday, 131 had COVID-19. The facility licensed for 161 beds has erected a 50-bed tent in its parking lot and was converting three operating rooms to virus care.

Newsom, himself quarantined for the second time in two months, said a state pro-

jection model shows previously unfathomable hospitalization numbers and he's likely to extend his stay-at-home order for much of the state next week.

Dr. Mark Ghaly, California's secretary of Health and Human Services, said it's feared entire areas of the state may run out of room even in their makeshift "surge" capacity units "by the end of the month and early in January." In response, the state is updating its planning guide for how hospitals would ration care if everyone can't get the treatment they need, he said.

California is enduring by far its worst spike in cases and hospitalizations.

UPS driver surprised with check for new roof

MO CLAYTON — Residents along the route of a longtime United Parcel Service driver from St. Louis surprised her with a check for a new roof.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that Carolyn Crump initially came back to the neighborhood because she was told there was a missing package. Instead, she was led blindfolded to Concordia Park, where more than 60 of her customers — and their dogs — were waiting.

The giant check she was handed read “Happy Birthday.” Crump’s birthday was Monday.

Jason Lehtman helped organize a GoFundMe after Crump mentioned she was looking to get a new roof next summer.

Humane Society gets 250 guinea pigs

OR PORTLAND — The Oregon Humane Society in Portland took in 250 guinea pigs from an overwhelmed pet owner.

It’s not known exactly how the unidentified person in Lane County became inundated with the furry little rodents, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported. But experts say it can be difficult to determine a guinea pig’s gender — and they’re best kept in pairs — because they keep each other company.

The Oregon Humane Society’s Cat and Kitten Intake Center has been closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, so it could accommodate all of the guinea pigs. Because there are so many, the society is also working with the Greenhill Humane Society and Lane County Animal Services in Eugene.

There will be a special process

for people hoping to adopt the guinea pigs and officials said its small-animal specialists will work with potential adopters to ensure a good fit.

Police officer assaulted while in line at eatery

MD ROCKVILLE — A Maryland police officer was punched in the face twice by a man while he was in line at a fast-food restaurant, authorities said.

The officer was waiting in line to order a meal at the restaurant in Rockville when his assailant came into the restaurant, walked up to the officer and punched him in the face twice without provocation, the Montgomery County Police Department said in a news release.

According to the news release, the suspect continued to throw punches as officers tried to arrest him.

The department said Nyziere London, 21, of Coatesville, Pa., was charged with second-degree assault and resisting arrest.

Village votes to dissolve its government

NY SOUTH NYACK — Residents of the village of South Nyack voted to dissolve their 142-year-old government.

The local board of elections tallied 508 votes to dissolve the village with 292 against the measure, The Rockland Journal News reported.

The dissolution plan calls for municipal services such as police protection and street maintenance to be provided by Orangetown.

South Nyack was incorporated in 1878.

The dissolution process was kicked off by a 250-name pet-

ition filed in August. Supporters pointed to the village’s financial status.

The dissolution process could take up to two years, the Journal News reported.

Police: Man set fires, including chief’s vehicle

AL FAIRHOPE — A southwest Alabama man was charged with setting a string of fires, including trying to burn a police chief’s vehicle and a house.

Investigators told WPMI-TV that Phillip Mack, 33, of Mobile is an “opportunistic fire setter.”

Investigators said that he purposely set fire to a home in Daphne, a vehicle at the freestanding emergency room in Daphne, and three vehicles in Fairhope. The Fairhope Police department confirms one of the vehicles was a city vehicle assigned to Police Chief Stephanie Hollinghead.

Mack was jailed in Baldwin County with bail set at \$1.5 million.

Woman allegedly shoots self in police vehicle

IN GAS CITY — Authorities in Indiana were investigating the death of a 32-year-old woman who allegedly shot herself while sitting in a police vehicle during a crash investigation.

Indiana State Police said that Amanda Elbert, of Alexandria, was not in custody and used a gun that was in her purse.

Elbert was in a car that crashed into a utility pole near Gas City in Grant County, north of Muncie. The car’s driver allegedly fled before police arrived.

Elbert told officers she was not injured. She was allowed to

sit in the front passenger seat of a police vehicle to keep warm.

As officers were conducting an inventory of the crashed car, they heard a gunshot. Elbert was pronounced dead at the scene.

Anonymous donor pays layaway balances

KY HAZARD — Some eastern Kentucky residents got an early Christmas present when their layaway items were paid off by an anonymous donor.

The Hazard Walmart said in a Facebook post that the person gave \$21,000, paying the layaway balances for 96 families, WYMT-TV reported.

Hazard Walmart manager Jason Higgins said it’s touching when customers pay off others’ layaways during the holiday season.

“We’re honored to play a small role in these acts of kindness and we love seeing the joy it brings to our customers this time of year,” he said.

Police are not happy with these doughnuts

FL MIAMI BEACH — More than a dozen people were arrested and dozens of traffic citations were issued when a series of drivers did “doughnuts” in the middle of a Florida city intersection.

In what’s described as a flash mob, several drivers screeched their tires and drove in circles as a crowd cheered in Miami Beach’s South Beach neighborhood. Several videos of the event were posted online.

The Miami Herald reported that police believe the stunt was organized by a car club that does reckless driving events around the county.

— The Associated Press



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NBA cranks up after short offseason

Associated Press

The NBA found a way to get through last season amid a pandemic. Adam Silver sees no reason why the same cannot ring true again this season.

Silver, the NBA's commissioner, said Monday — one day before the new season began — that he is confident the league's health and safety protocols will allow

teams to get through their planned 72-game regular-season slates even as the coronavirus problem rages across the country and the world. He did, however, warn that he expects the virus to create some problems along the way.

Games could be postponed or canceled along the way, and Silver said that if the league encounters issues that cannot be

controlled by what's covered in the health and safety protocols suspending the season — just as was the case back on March 11, when the 2019-20 season was halted for 4½ months — will again be a possibility.

"We do anticipate that there will be bumps in the road along the way," Silver said.

10 things everyone should know about this season

Associated Press

And ... it's back.

The NBA's new season started Tuesday with a pair of games; Kevin Durant and the Brooklyn Nets welcomed Durant's former team in Golden State, while the defending champion Los Angeles Lakers opened with the Los Angeles Clippers in the renewal of rivals who share a building.

For the first time since March, all 30 NBA teams are playing this week. When the season resumed in July, only 22 teams went to the NBA bubble at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. So, for eight teams — Golden State, Minnesota, Atlanta, Charlotte, New York, Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland — games will be played for the first time since March.

For others, it's the first time since August. Others, the first time since September. And for the Lakers and Miami Heat, who met in last season's NBA Finals, the offseason only started in mid-October.

But Opening Night, at least, arrived. Here's some of what to know going into this season:

MVP Giannis

Larry Bird, Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain are the only players in NBA history to win three consecutive MVP awards.

Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo has a chance this season to join their club.

The Bucks' star from Greece — and proud owner of a newly signed supermax extension — is already the first two-time MVP hailing from Europe.

LeBron's stats

LeBron James is about at the point where every game he plays creates a new entry in the NBA's record book.

He enters this season with 995 consecutive regular-season games with at least 10 points scored, the longest such run in NBA history and in position to reach the 1,000 double-digit games in a row milestone when the Los Angeles Lakers play at San Antonio on Dec. 30 — which just happens to be James' 36th birthday.

Welcome back

Stephen Curry played in only five games last season with Golden State, part of the long list of injured players that derailed any chance the Warriors had of being competitive.

Curry returns this season and likely won't need long to move into No. 2 on the all-time three-pointers made list. He enters just 65 away from Reggie Miller's total of 2,560.

Ray Allen holds the all-time mark of 2,973 makes from three-point range.

Wall's return

Houston's John Wall is scheduled to return to the court Wednesday, in what will be his first game since Dec. 26, 2018.

To put in context how much time he's missed while recovering from heel and Achilles injuries: Danny Green has appeared in a league-high 158 games since Wall's last appearance, 114 of them wins; Rockets guard James Harden has scored 4,887 points since Wall's last game; Nikola Jokic has handed out 1,085 assists (and LeBron James has 1,079 going into Tuesday); and Giannis Antetokounmpo has grabbed 1,664 rebounds.

All or nothing

The Miami Heat are either going back to the NBA Finals or missing the playoffs entirely.

That is, if the trend from the last seven seasons holds true.

Starting with San Antonio's loss in the 2013 finals, teams that lost the title series one year either go back to it the following year or completely miss the postseason.

Milestone three

Sometime in the coming days — possibly as early as Wednesday, more likely during the Christmas games on Friday — someone will make the 500,000th three-pointer in NBA history, including regular-season and playoff games.

There have been 499,549 made threes in NBA history. At last season's pace of made threes, with teams combining for almost 25 per game, the 500,000th would come during

the matchup between the Dallas Mavericks and Los Angeles Lakers on Christmas night.

For openers

Toronto enters the season with the longest active streak of season-opening wins; the Raptors have started 1-0 in each of the last seven seasons.

Brooklyn is the other end of the spectrum; the Nets have started 0-1 in seven consecutive years.

Close games

Something to watch this season: how the Los Angeles Clippers handle close games without coach Doc Rivers.

Over the past three seasons, the Clippers went a league-best 22-8 in one-possession games, including both regular-season and playoff matchups.

Rivers is coaching Philadelphia now.

The OG

Miami's Udonis Haslem — he's 40, turning 41 in June — is the oldest player in the NBA to start the season, now that Vince Carter is retired.

Video rulebook

A video rulebook site with hundreds of videos that explain the nuances of certain rules of the game has been revamped and relaunched in recent weeks. The league says it offers "a deeper look at some of the game's most misunderstood rules and violations."

Bengals hand Steelers 3rd straight loss

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Bengals safety Vonn Bell made a beeline for JuJu Smith-Schuster and delivered a devastating hit, forcing a fumble while sending the Steelers' receiver flying backward.

After dancing on Cincinnati's midfield logo before the game, Smith-Schuster got planted in the turf — and the underdog Bengals were no pussycats at all in a 27-17 upset Monday night.

Pittsburgh pushovers for years, the last-place Bengals (3-10-1) used a strong defensive effort to beat their AFC North rivals for the first time since 2015 and send the slumping Steelers (11-3) to their third straight defeat.

Bell set the tone near the end of the first quarter with his punishing hit on Smith-Schuster after he caught a pass from Ben Roethlisberger.

The ball popped free and was recovered by Cincinnati, one of three Pittsburgh turnovers in the game.

As promised, Smith-Schuster danced on the Bengals logo before kickoff. He did the same thing in Buffalo prior to a Week 14 loss. Smith-Schuster was not made available to reporters postgame, but Bell had a wry smile when asked about the hit.

"I read Ben's eyes, I saw 19, and I just went and made a play," he said. "We talked about it on the sidelines, and it just happened."

Cincinnati had lost 11 straight games to the Steelers, and it wasn't supposed to win this one — especially with third-string quarterback Ryan Finley making his first start of the season.

As it turned out, the Bengals prevented first-place Pittsburgh from wrapping up the AFC North title, and made the Steelers' postseason prospects look shaky.

Since starting the season 11-0, Pittsburgh has dropped three straight and scored fewer than 20 points in each of its past four games.

Perhaps even more surprising was that Cincinnati was the more physical team on Monday night, which is rarely the case in this rivalry.

The Bengals outrushed the Steelers 152-86 despite playing without running back Joe Mixon. Giovanni Bernard ran for 83 yards and a touchdown, and caught a 14-yard pass for another score.

"We've got to dig deep," Pittsburgh linebacker TJ Watt said. "We've got to find out what's going wrong and get better."

Roethlisberger completed just two of his

first eight passes as the Steelers went three-and-out on seven of their first eight possessions. He had an interception and a fumbled exchange in the first half as the Bengals built a 17-0 lead.

Roethlisberger finished 20-for-38 for 170 yards with one TD and one pick.

"I wasn't good enough today," he said. "Their whole defense kept us off balance."

With leading rusher James Conner out with a quadriceps injury, Pittsburgh relied heavily on Bennie Snell Jr., who had 84 of his team's 86 yards rushing. Roethlisberger, however, never got into any kind of consistent rhythm in the passing game. And there was frustration on both sides of the ball.

"We're two weeks out (from the playoffs)," said Steelers defensive tackle Cam Heyward. "We need to make the plays early and not be in a catch-up game. To start 17-0, you're asking a lot for our offense. And our offense has got to start faster."

Roethlisberger continues to preach patience, but he acknowledged the Steelers' frustration level was "high" following the loss.

"I will never stop believing in this team," he said. "We better get it figured out and I think we can."

Cone's threes lead No. 24 Hokies past Longwood

Associated Press

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Jalen Cone scored 18 points off the bench to lead No. 24 Virginia Tech over Longwood 84-58 on Monday night.

Cone shot 6-for-15 from the floor — all three-pointers — for the Hokies (7-1), who struggled for 30 minutes before pulling away down the stretch to win their third straight game. Keve Aluma added 14 points and Joe Bamisile finished with 11, leading a balanced Virginia Tech offense as 10 players scored.

Leslie Nkereuwem paced the Lancers (1-7) with 10 points.

Longwood trailed 45-40 after a basket by Juan Munoz with 11:39 remaining. The Hokies, though, scored on their next 13 possessions to pull away.

No. 1 Gonzaga 95, Northwestern State 57: Corey Kisp-

ert scored 27 points and the Bulldogs won their home opener.

Anton Watson scored 15 points for Gonzaga (5-0), while Jalen Suggs added 12 points, seven rebounds and seven assists.

Carvell Teasett scored 16 points and Jairus Roberson 12 for the Demons (1-8) in the first meeting between the teams.

The Bulldogs have won 32 consecutive regular-season home openers since losing to Boise State in 1988.

No. 2, Baylor 99, Arkansas-Pine Bluff 42: Freshman guard LJ Cryer scored 15 points to lead five players in double figures as the host Bears cruised past the Golden Lions.

Baylor (6-0) is the only Big 12 team left without a loss and has scored at least 80 points in six

consecutive games for the first time since 1994.

Preseason AP All-American guard Jared Butler had 14 points and seven assists, while MaCio Teague scored 13 points and Matthew Mayer had 12. Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua had 10 points and eight rebounds for the Bears, and Flo Thamba added eight rebounds.

Shaun Doss Jr. finished with 25 points and 10 rebounds to lead Arkansas-Pine Bluff (1-8).

No. 8 Tennessee 102, Saint Joseph's 66: Victor Bailey scored 18 points and the host Volunteers beat the winless Hawks.

Bailey was one of six players who scored in double figures for Tennessee (5-0). Santiago Vescovi had 16 points, seven rebounds and five assists, while Yves Pons added 13 points and

nine rebounds. Keon Johnson had 12 points, and John Fulker-son and Jaden Springer each scored 10.

Ryan Daly topped St. Joseph's (0-5) with 13 points. Dahmir Bishop scored 12, while Taylor Funk and Rahmir Moore added 10 apiece.

No. 21 Florida State 72, Gardner-Webb 59: Anthony Polite had a career-high 15 points and Balsa Koprivica added a season-best 14 as the host Seminoles pulled away late to defeat the Runnin' Bulldogs.

Polite scored in double figures for the fourth straight game.

FSU (5-1) outrebounded Gardner Webb 53-30 and went 24-for-32 (75%) from the free-throw line to put the game away.

Army takes Vols' Liberty Bowl spot

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Army went from being left out of the bowls to replacing Tennessee in the Liberty Bowl on Monday night, hours after the Volunteers withdrew because of COVID-19 test results.

The Black Knights, who had been committed to the Independence Bowl since October before the game was called off, will now play West Virginia in Memphis, Tenn., on Dec. 31.

“We went from being in tears this evening to just being elated,” Army coach Jeff Monken said. “Our guys, when I announced it to them, they were thrilled and excited. It just couldn’t have worked out better. Sometimes, things don’t work out like you want them to, but somehow, some way, they work out a different way. It almost seems like it’s just even better. We’re just humbled that so

many people have latched onto this and felt so strongly about our team having an opportunity.”

The Black Knights (9-2) were left without a bowl Sunday night when the Independence Bowl, scheduled for Dec. 26 in Louisiana, was called off without an available opponent.

A spot in the Liberty Bowl became available Monday when Tennessee became the first team to back out since bowl berths were announced. The Volunteers ended their season after receiving the results of Sunday’s COVID-19 testing.

“The test results revealed an increase in positive cases among student-athletes and staff and subsequent contact tracing,” Tennessee said in a statement. “The decision was made in consultation with health officials, the Southeastern Conference and the

AutoZone Liberty Bowl.”

In other bowl news Monday, No. 17 Iowa said it was pausing football activities for at least five days because of an increase in positive COVID-19 cases but still hopes to play in the Music City Bowl in Nashville on Dec. 30. The Hawkeyes (6-2) are scheduled to face Missouri (5-5).

The change to its Liberty Bowl opponent was no problem for the Mountaineers (5-4). The game will be the first between the teams since 1961.

“Our team deserves to be in a bowl and so does the 9-2 Army squad,” West Virginia athletic director Shane Lyons said.

The Black Knights are coming off wins over their service-academy rivals on back-to-back weeks. They captured the Commander-in-Chief’s Trophy on Saturday with a 10-7 victory over Air Force.

Peoples runs over North Texas in Myrtle Beach

Associated Press

CONWAY, S.C. — Camerun Peoples and Appalachian State began college football’s virus-impacted bowl season with a record-breaking show at the Myrtle Beach Bowl on Monday.

Peoples ran for a bowl-record 317 yards and tied another mark with five rushing touchdowns to lead the Mountaineers past North Texas 56-28.

“This is probably one of the most memorable football games I’ve ever played,” Peoples said.

The sophomore surpassed the 307 yards rushing of Georgia Tech’s PJ Daniels in the 2004 Humanitarian Bowl. Peoples also became the seventh player to run for that many scores in a bowl game, a list that includes Oklahoma State’s Barry Sanders and Toledo’s Kareem Hunt, as Appalachian State (9-3) remained a perfect 6-0 in bowls since joining the Sun Belt Conference in 2014.

Peoples wasn’t aware he was close to those milestones.

He was told on the sideline in the fourth quarter he was nearing 300 yards and the rushing marks for the Mountaineers and a bowl game. Peoples looked at coach Shawn Clark.

“Coach Clark said, ‘Yeah, you’re not coming out of the game,’” said Peoples, named the inaugural bowl’s MVP.

The Mean Green (4-6) of Conference

USA fell behind 28-7 and had no answer for Peoples or the App State rushing game, which finished with 500 yards.

It was a powerful performance by the Mountaineers and a somewhat normal start to a bowl schedule with few guarantees about how things will play out.

Most years, North Texas, which came in with a losing record, would have had its lockers cleaned out until spring practice.

The NCAA waived victory minimums for bowl eligibility because of COVID-19.

The Frisco Bowl, set to start bowl season last Saturday, was canceled when the virus struck SMU, one of that game’s teams.

So instead, it was the Mountaineers returning to Coastal Carolina’s teal-colored field for the second time this season after losing to the Chanticleers 34-23 in November.

The App State coach was grateful for the opportunity for some normalcy at the end of a fretful season in which games were canceled, postponed and rescheduled every week.

Clark said his team’s two days at the Grand Strand resort area were “the most fun I’ve seen our players have in the last six months.”

Tight end Henry Pearson had first-half TD catches of 22 and 11 yards before App State put things out of reach with a 70-yard touchdown run by Marcus Williams Jr. and Peoples’ 64-yard burst to the end zone. The

Mountaineers led 35-14 at the half.

Peoples piled on with a 62-yard scoring run in the third quarter. He finished the period with a 76-yard run, but was caught just shy of the end zone. No matter. Peoples went in from a yard out.

He added an 11-yard touchdown run around the left side in the final period. Peoples was still running hard with a 7-yard gain midway through the fourth quarter that moved him atop the NCAA record book for bowl rushing yards.

“If you’re going to give up explosive (plays), you’re going to have a long day,” North Texas coach Sam Littrell said.

The takeaway

Appalachian State: Throw in Sun Belt title game victories the previous two seasons and Appalachian State is 8-0 following the regular season since moving to the conference in 2014.

North Texas: The Mean Green didn’t have their usual firepower against Appalachian State. They were already without their best player in receiver Jaelon Darden, who entered the NFL draft earlier this month after having 74 catches for 1,190 yards and 19 touchdowns this season. Before the game, North Texas announced leading rusher DeAndre Torrey and second-leading receiver Deonte Simpson would not play against the Mountaineers.