

3 soldiers awarded Medals of Honor

By **NIKKI WENTLING**

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Three U.S. soldiers received the Medal of Honor on Thursday, including two men who sacrificed their lives to ensure the safety of their fellow service members and a third who fought off suicide bombers at a U.S. base in Afghanistan.

President Joe Biden presented the Medals of Honor, the nation's highest military award, to Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz and Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee. Cashe and Celiz died as a result of the actions that led to their awards. Plumlee received the honor in person at the White House.

Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe

More than 16 years after his death, Alwyn Cashe on Thursday became the first Black recipient of the Medal of Honor for actions in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cashe, a 3rd Infantry Division platoon sergeant, was on a nighttime patrol near Samarra, Iraq, on Oct. 17, 2005, when his Bradley Fighting Vehicle struck a roadside bomb, engulfing it in flames. Cashe, 35, extracted himself from the vehicle, and then went back for the driver. Though his fuel-soaked uniform ignited and caused severe burns to his body, Cashe repeatedly entered the fire-engulfed Bradley to pull his fellow soldiers to safety, not stopping until they all had escaped.

Despite being covered in second- and third-degree burns, Cashe ensured the other soldiers received medical care. When evacuation helicopters arrived, he refused to board until the others were treated.

Cashe suffered second- and third-degree burns over 72% of his body. He died about three weeks later on Nov. 8, 2005 at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas.

Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz

Christopher Celiz, 32, led a special operations unit on July 12, 2018, to clear an area of enemy forces in the Paktia province of Afghanistan. The unit comprised members of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, as well as members of partner forces.

Once Celiz and his men reached the area of their mission, they came under a large enemy attack.

Celiz exposed himself to enemy fire to retrieve a "heavy weapons system" that allowed his unit to regain their position and move to a secure location, according to the Army. One person, a member of the partner forces, was injured in the attack. When a medical evacuation helicopter arrived to retrieve the injured person, "the enemy opened up with all they had," recalled 2nd Lt. David White, who was under Celiz's command that day.

Celiz willingly put himself between the enemy fire and the team that loaded the injured person into the helicopter, using his

body as a physical shield. He guarded the helicopter and its crew as they started to take off.

As Celiz ran for cover, he was hit by enemy fire. Understanding the peril to the aircraft, Celiz motioned to the pilots to depart, rather than land to pick him up.

Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee

Earl Plumlee said he's accepting the honor, humbly, on behalf of his Special Forces regiment and the entire U.S. Army.

Plumlee was at Forward Operating Base Ghazni in Ghazni province, Afghanistan, on Aug. 28, 2013, when it was attacked by enemy forces.

At the time, he was a staff sergeant assigned to the 1st Special Forces Group.

According to the Army, Plumlee and five other special operations soldiers got into two vehicles and sped toward the explosion, intent on defending the base.

Plumlee left the vehicle and used his body to shield the driver from enemy fire. He ran toward the enemy, armed only with a pistol, and killed two insurgents. He killed one by firing into the insurgent's suicide vest, causing it to detonate.

He advanced toward the enemy multiple times, despite being outmanned. He joined a small group of other American and coalition forces who moved to counterattack. He carried one injured soldier to safety and rendered first aid.

Marines to curtail Amtracs use in wake of fatal accident

By **CHAD GARLAND**

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps will no longer send its amphibious assault vehicles on regular deployments or training in water except in crisis response, the service said Wednesday.

The decision comes nearly 1½ years after eight Marines and a sailor died when an AAV sank off the coast of California during a training drill.

The decision could be reversed if necessary, as the service still believes that with measures implemented after the fatal event, the vehicles are safe for amphibious operations, spokesman Maj. Jim Stenger said in an email to USNI News.

Also known as Amtracs, the amphibious fighting vehicles have been in use since the 1970s. They'll continue to be

used on land, where they perform about three quarters of their tasks, Stenger said.

The Corps halted waterborne use of the AAVs for months after the deadly July 2020 accident, but resumed some use in the water earlier this year.

Stenger said the service is committed to fielding the Amphibious Combat Vehicle, the Corps' second try at replacing

the AAVs. The first, called the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, was canceled in 2010.

The service approved the ACV for full-rate production a year ago, but paused its waterborne operations in September because of problems with that platform's towing mechanism.

"We expect that issue to be resolved soon and for ACVs to return to the water early in the new year," Stenger said.

Pentagon official visits Hawaii facility

By JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks on Tuesday inspected the underground fuel storage facility in Hawaii where a fuel leak may be contaminating water the Navy supplies to nearby military housing.

Hicks visited Oahu's Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, a massive underground system that stores fuel for the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Coast Guard and Hawaii National Guard.

"I spent nearly two hours with a team, in the tunnels, to gain a better understanding as to what happened and what can be done," Hicks said in a statement provided by the DOD. "I also had the opportunity to meet with three military families and hear from

them, firsthand, how this has impacted their lives as well as the greater community."

More than 1,700 families were temporarily relocated as of Dec. 10 due to water contamination, according to the Navy. Tests confirmed the presence of petroleum products after housing residents complained of an odor and oily sheen in their tap water.

The Navy has tracked the contamination to a Nov. 20 jet fuel spill connected with the Red Hill underground storage tanks.

Hicks said she met with Hawaii Gov. David Ige, state public health officials and the state's congressional delegation, Sens. Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono and Reps. Ed Case and Kai Kahele.

After the leak appeared, Case

introduced a provision into the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual military funding bill, to seek alternative sites for the fuel facility. Hawaii's Health Department ordered the Navy to halt operations at the fuel storage facility, which the Navy ignored. The bill is still under consideration.

Hicks' visit follows one last week by Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro and Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, who also met with local officials and housing residents.

"At DOD, we recognize the need to continue to care for all affected personnel and their families and help them return to their homes in a safe and expeditious manner," Hicks said in the statement. "And even though the Navy

is leading our efforts, solving this problem will require all of us in DOD and across the Services to be rowing in the same direction."

The Navy is moving a massive water filtration system from the mainland to Hawaii to filter water in the system's pipelines.

"We take this very seriously," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement last week. "And I am personally monitoring our progress and our mitigation efforts. Indeed, Navy leadership updates me daily on the measures they are taking to care for affected military personnel and families, to restore the safety of the water system in military housing, and to coordinate with local authorities — in particular the Hawaii State Department of Health — about the best way forward."

Navy, Japanese responders perform radiation-leak drill

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — For two hours Wednesday, teams of Japanese and American first responders rehearsed what they need to do to contain a leak of radioactive coolant from the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

Working near the nuclear-powered warship, the responders isolated the simulated leak, notified local and national authorities, and began sampling the surrounding water.

A spokeswoman for the Naval Forces Japan, Cmdr. Katie Cerezo, described the leak scenario as "rare but credible." This year marked the 14th annual exercise aimed at preparing for what the U.S. officially describes as an unlikely event. The drill included teams from the Navy, the city of Yokosuka, the Japanese govern-

ment and the Japan Coast Guard.

"In preparation for the drill, the Government of Japan, Yokosuka City, and U.S. Navy have continued to work very closely together to further develop and practice planning and coordination, communications, information sharing, and joint monitoring protocols," Cerezo told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday.

When asked whether the drills are meant to address public concerns over the presence of a nuclear-powered U.S. warship in Japan, Cerezo said she couldn't comment on behalf of the Japanese public, but that the drills demonstrate the Navy's "commitment to public health, safety and the environment."

She also said that such vessels have operated for more than six decades "without experiencing any reactor accident or any release of radioactivity."

DOD: Housing allowance to go up about 5% Jan. 1

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The military's basic allowance for housing rates will increase an average of 5.1% on Jan. 1, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

Service members can expect to see the increase in their 2022 monthly housing allowances, which are given to troops who live off-base in the United States, the Defense Department said.

The total amount given in the allowance depends on where the service member lives, his or her rank or grade and whether the individual has dependents.

The 5.1% increase reflects an increase in the market rate for rent and average utility costs, which the Defense Department uses to calculate its housing allowance rates, according to the statement.

"The department collects rental housing cost data annually for approximately 300 military housing areas in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii," the DOD said in its release. "Local commands provide input, which is used to determine neighborhoods and locations where data is collected."

The housing allowance is locked in once it's raised and will not decrease if the market rate does, so long as the service member remains in the same location and doesn't otherwise become ineligible for the allowance, the Pentagon said.

In October, housing allowance rates were temporarily adjusted for 56 military housing areas across the country. Those amounts will be replaced by the new 2022 rates on Jan. 1, according to the statement.

Ex-soldiers plotted Army weapons theft, sale

Associated Press

Packed with rifles and explosives, the SUV hurtled down a Florida interstate beneath bright blue autumn skies, passing other motorists with little notice.

It was November 2018, and the driver, Tyler Sumlin, was uncomfortable. Clammy. The husky, bearded former U.S. Army soldier was getting a cold, and understandably tense: He was transporting a platoon's worth of stolen rifles, enough C4 to blow up his car and those around him, a live hand grenade.

He would recall thinking, "Is it too late to turn around?"

Riding shotgun was Sumlin's military blood brother, Sgt. 1st Class Jason Jarvis, a soldier on active-duty from Fort Bragg's 18th Ordnance Company in North Carolina — Sumlin's old unit.

The two men, who'd been close since they served in Afghanistan, tried to distract themselves with idle road-trip chatter. Their wives, war stories, favorite movies.

A few months earlier, Jarvis had reached out to ask if Sumlin had any interest in making some money. Jarvis was looking to sell stolen military equipment from an armory at Bragg.

Sumlin said he might be able to find a buyer.

Now they were headed to El Paso, Texas, to sell the stolen weapons. The two men had heard from contacts that the customers were taking the haul into Mexico.

A photograph captures a day in 2009 as Sumlin and Jarvis sat together on a rock in Kunar province, Afghanistan. A rifle rests on Sumlin's lap, and he wears a tactical vest, his T-shirt sleeves cut off to expose a farmer's tan and tattoo on his left shoulder. Jarvis is off to his side, his rifle in hand.

The two young men had become brothers amid the breakneck tempo of wartime Afghan-

istan. Sumlin and Jarvis specialized in explosive ordnance disposal, or EOD, the kind of work — with its stifling, hulking bomb suits — given the Hollywood treatment in "The Hurt Locker."

Their work eliminating improvised explosive devices set by the Taliban was nonstop, and gave them little time to process what they saw, heard and smelled. It was a pressure cooker of a job inside a pressure cooker, intense even in the high stakes world of the battlefield. They stashed traumatic experiences and images deep inside themselves, and their comradeship helped blunt the stress.

When they returned stateside, both struggled with adjusting to the slower pace of life. Like many soldiers, they found some balm in the friendship of others who'd seen what they'd seen.

Like many military subcultures, the tight-knit EOD community has its own code of conduct, ethics and language. Sumlin joined a private Facebook group where the EOD community commiserated, argued and pranked one another. They also held each other to account, debating whether a member's conduct violated the brotherhood's code.

Sumlin left the Army in December 2017, but deployed again to do bomb disposal with a private defense contracting company.

Meanwhile, Jarvis remained in the Army. At Fort Bragg, home to some of the Army's most elite units, Jarvis worked in an armory. And that gave him access to a wealth of military firearms, parts and other equipment such as night vision goggles and explosives.

Inside the Fort Bragg armory, Jarvis took photographs of weaponry — and then he stole it, and set out to sell it.

His buddy, Sumlin, sent the photos and an inventory list of the pilfered weapons and explosives to an accomplice who

called himself "Mr. Anderson." Anderson, a former Army combat engineer who had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was one of several other soldiers or veterans connected to the scheme.

In May 2018, Sumlin and Jarvis began mining their contacts to offload the haul. They would find a promising lead with the help of a man identified as "Evan," who they hadn't met but who said he had connections with a willing buyer.

Anderson and Evan complained about the weapons' high prices. They sounded paranoid when they discussed dealing with amateur gun dealers like Sumlin and Jarvis, and feared they would attract attention from law enforcement.

"As soon as he named his price (for the gunsights) I thought he was joking since they're definitely USED," Anderson wrote. "I'm not sure if it's his first time or not. But it's the last time I ask around for (Sumlin)."

After a few days, Evan said he'd found a buyer who wanted it. All of it.

What Anderson didn't know is that Evan was a longtime confidential informant working with Homeland Security Investigations, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

In his communication with Sumlin and Anderson, Evan said he represented a buyer who claimed to be connected to narco-traffickers. (Sumlin has denied that the weapons were meant to be sold to drugrunners.)

"I didn't know (the buyer) was south of Texas," Anderson wrote.

"Yep he goes between Texas and Mexico all the time," Evan wrote back.

"I wouldn't sell anything to anyone down there," Anderson replied.

"Lol ... well he has always been a cash buyer without question and never any issues at all,"

Evan responded. "It sounds like they've made a deal."

"I hope so. They still have to meet and conclude," wrote Anderson.

By mid-November 2018, Jarvis had rented a Chevy Tahoe SUV in North Carolina and drove the stolen cache south. He met Sumlin in Inverness, a small town in central Florida's lakes region, so they could prepare the weapons for sale, according to a federal criminal complaint.

Sumlin would say that he and Jarvis had initially sought \$250,000 for the firearms and explosives. After some back-and-forth, they settled on a much lower price: \$75,000.

In Florida, Jarvis and Sumlin cleaned the firearms to remove their fingerprints. They also paid to have some parts modified to fit the rifles. With the cache assembled, cleaned, packed in storage containers and loaded for delivery, the men got into the SUV for the 24-hour drive to Texas.

Arriving in El Paso, they pulled into a truck stop the morning of Nov. 14, 2018. A man they thought was the buyers' contact, known as Andy, waited with some others. They told Sumlin and Jarvis to follow them to a nearby warehouse — and into the trap.

There, the agents confirmed that the two men were indeed carrying multiple firearms, military equipment and C4 plastic explosives. A SWAT team pounced, arrested them and secured the cache.

Jarvis and Sumlin were indicted on eight different federal charges, including conspiracy and gunrunning. They faced decades in prison, but both reached deals with federal prosecutors. They pleaded guilty to attempting to smuggle goods from the United States.

Each was sentenced to five years' probation, and Jarvis was ordered to mental health counseling and required to take prescribed medication.

US sanctions China over abuse of Uyghurs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The Biden administration said Thursday that it is imposing new sanctions on several Chinese biotech and surveillance companies and government entities for actions in Xinjiang province, the latest step against Beijing over human rights abuses of Uyghur Muslims in the country's western region.

The Commerce Department is targeting China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and its 11 research institutes that focus on using biotechnology to support the Chinese military.

The move will bar American companies from selling components to the entities without a license.

"The scientific pursuit of biotechnology and medical innovation can save lives. Unfortunately, the PRC (People's Republic of

China) is choosing to use these technologies to pursue control over its people and its repression of members of ethnic and religious minority groups," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a statement. "We cannot allow U.S. commodities, technologies and software that support medical science and biotechnical innovation to be diverted toward uses contrary to U.S. national security."

The Treasury Department is also set to issue penalties against several Chinese entities, according to a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the soon-to-be-announced moves.

The official, explaining the Commerce Department actions, noted that U.S. intelligence has established that Beijing has set up a high tech surveillance system across Xin-

jiang that uses biometric facial recognition and has collected DNA samples from all residents, ages 12 to 65, in Xinjiang part of a systematic effort to suppress Uyghurs.

The White House announced last week that it would stage a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, citing China's "egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang." U.S. athletes will continue to compete, but Biden will not send the usual contingent of dignitaries.

The administration also said this week that it supported bipartisan legislation which bans imports into the United States from Xinjiang unless companies can demonstrate the goods were not produced by forced labor.

China has denied any abuses and said the steps it has taken are necessary to combat terrorism and a separatist movement.

New leader takes over Navy command on Okinawa

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**

Stars and Stripes

WHITE BEACH NAVAL FACILITY, Okinawa — One carrier pilot relieved another Thursday to take command of the Navy's activities on Okinawa, a unique responsibility that includes naval aviators and ocean-going sailors.

Capt. Patrick Dziekan, an E-2 Hawkeye pilot, took command of Fleet Activities Okinawa from Capt. Scott Hardy during an outdoor ceremony at White Beach's Port of Call Club. The naval aviators were surrounded by about 150 sailors, dignitaries and special guests, in view of docked vessels and scenic green-blue seas.

"Today is a demonstration of the commit-

ment of the United States and Japan to a free and open Indo-Pacific," Navy Region Japan commander Rear Adm. Carl Lahti said during the ceremony.

No one mentioned China during the event. But Lahti referred to nations that would disregard the "rules-based international order" and impose their will upon the citizenry of the region.

Dziekan has his "full trust" to continue leading where Hardy had left off, Lahti said.

The roots of the Navy command on Okinawa go back to 1951, according to a fact sheet from the service. With headquarters on Kadena Air Base, the command has a presence on four other Okinawa installations, including

White Beach, its staging area for Marines headed to sea.

Fleet Activities Okinawa is responsible for 3 million square feet of facilities on 1,500 acres, across a dozen geographically separate sites, the fact sheet said. It also manages 32 tenant commands and more than 8,000 sailors and civilian employees.

Its primary tenant is Task Force 76, a command that embraces several missions, including expeditionary and amphibious warfare, and humanitarian relief efforts.

Dziekan arrived from Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in Virginia, where he served as executive assistant and acting chief of staff to the commander, his Navy biography states.

UN watchdog: Iran will allow cameras at nuclear site

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — The United Nations' nuclear watchdog and Iran reached a deal Wednesday to reinstall cameras damaged at an Iranian site that manufactures centrifuge parts, though inspectors remain limited on what footage they can access.

The agreement will see cameras put back at Karaj, which came under what Iran describes as a sabotage attack in June. Iran had since refused the International Atomic Energy Agency access to replace cameras damaged in the incident, part of an ongoing hard-line tact taken by

Tehran at negotiations underway in Vienna over its tattered 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Iranian media first reported the deal without citing a source. IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi later tweeted out a statement detailing the arrangement.

"This is important for verification under the Iran nuclear deal, and work will continue to address other outstanding safeguards issues," Grossi wrote.

The IAEA said the cameras would be reinstalled at Karaj in the "coming days."

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian reportedly said earlier Wednesday that Iran had "reached a good agreement" with the IAEA.

Tehran blamed the Karaj assault on Israel amid a widening regional shadow war since former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran's landmark nuclear accord with world powers.

In an interview Tuesday with The Associated Press, Grossi warned that limited access to Karaj hurt international efforts to monitor Iran's program.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Zebras on the run for months are captured

MD UPPER MARLBORO — Two zebras running loose since escaping a Maryland farm about four months ago have been caught.

Prince George's County Animal Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture weren't involved in the capture but were told Monday that the animals returned to their herd last week, The Washington Post reported.

In late August, the two zebras fled from an Upper Marlboro farm where officials have said about 40 zebras live. Residents in the region shared sightings of the free-roaming pair on social media.

The duo was originally a trio, but one got caught in an illegal snare trap on a neighboring property and died soon after the breakout. The county filed animal cruelty charges against owner Jerry Holly in October after another zebra was found dead inside the farm's enclosure.

Lawyer Steven B. Vinick emailed The Post on Tuesday saying his client "has been and is a respected businessman in Prince George's County, and he looks forward to being able to show in court that there is no merit whatsoever to any of the charges pending against him."

USDA inspectors wrote that the zebras escaped "during the unloading process" as the herd was moved to Maryland from Florida, Animal Services Chief Rodney Taylor said.

Police: Delivery driver ran over couple's groceries

MN BLAINE — Charges are expected soon for a Minnesota grocery delivery worker accused of driving over sacks of food meant for an elderly couple because she was angry

about their sign supporting law enforcement, police said Tuesday.

The incident happened Dec. 6 after the couple ordered \$50 worth of groceries from Cub Foods to be delivered by Instacart to their home in the north Twin Cities suburb of Blaine. Police said the couple stepped out to meet the driver, who first told them to check the wreath hanging on their front door and then drove back and forth over the groceries.

The driver allegedly scribbled a note on the receipt that complained about the delivery service pay and called police "racist pigs." Investigators said the pro-police sign was in the front yard of the home but did not describe it.

Blaine police have identified the driver as a 36-year-old woman from a nearby suburb, the Star Tribune reported.

The couple received a full refund from Instacart, which said it fired the delivery driver.

Man dies after jump off highway bridge in panic

MT SUPERIOR — A Baltimore man who got into a crash on Interstate 90 in western Montana died after jumping off a bridge, apparently in fear that an oncoming semitractor-trailer was going to strike the crashed vehicles, Mineral County officials said.

The initial crash happened before sunup Monday on a snow-packed bridge in the westbound lanes of I-90 near Superior, Undersheriff Wayne Cashman said Tuesday.

The man got out of his car to check on the other driver, who was uninjured. He saw a semi approaching and tried to wave down the driver, witnesses said, then apparently feared the semi was going to hit him.

The man jumped off the bridge and fell 60 to 80 feet, landing on the

edge of the Clark Fork River, where he died, Cashman said.

Investigators believe the man did not know the height of the bridge because he was unfamiliar with the area, Cashman said.

The semi did collide with the crashed vehicles, but by then it was traveling an estimated 6 mph and the person who stayed in the other crashed car was not injured, Cashman said.

Dog missing for 2 weeks rescued from ledge

CO COLORADO SPRINGS — A dog missing for two weeks in Colorado was rescued from a ledge about 50 yards above a creek and is now back home.

An animal control officer with the Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region anchored herself to a wooden fence and rappelled down to the dog using a mountaineering harness and rope provided by a man living nearby during the Dec. 1 rescue, the humane society said Monday on Facebook.

The dog later identified through her microchip and tag as Jessie Lee immediately wagged her tail and crawled toward the officer but the ground started slipping out from underneath the dog, the humane society said.

The officer put a catchpole around the dog's neck and shoulder to slowly pull Jessie Lee closer safely so she would not fall. Another officer then lowered a second rope that was tied into a makeshift harness for the dog and pulled them both up to safety, the humane society said.

Dock issue suspends USS Arizona Memorial tours

HI HONOLULU — Hawaii's USS Arizona Memorial has problems again with its shore-side dock, which means that boat tours to the popular Pearl Harbor site are suspended.

The National Park Service said staff members at Pearl Harbor were alerted to an issue with the shoreside dock on Sunday. The park service suspended tours via Navy boats to the memorial built in the harbor.

The site is among the most visited in Hawaii, and pays homage to the 1,177 lives lost on the USS Arizona in the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

The dock is past its life expectancy and repetitive stressors such as tidal movements contributed to the recent failure, the park service said Monday. The memorial was closed for 15 months after cracks were found on the dock in 2018.

It was closed again in September for two weeks for emergency safety repairs, Hawaii News Now reported.

A new dock is being built off-site, the park service said.

The Pearl Harbor National Memorial visitor center, museums and other services remain open.

1 arrested in vandalism of police station steps

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Albuquerque police officers went to a familiar location, the police department's own headquarters, to respond to a vandalism call early Wednesday.

Officers found "extensive graffiti" covering the southern steps of the building, which also is home to the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department, a police spokesperson said.

Officer Chase Jewell said the graffiti that included racial slurs and "inappropriate verbiage" was written in red spray paint along the stairs, walls, benches and planters.

Officers arrested one person who was jailed on felony criminal damage charges, Jewell said.

— From wire reports

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Jaguars cut losses, fire coach Meyer

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Urban Meyer never fit in the NFL.

His mottos, methods and even moods seemed to go against what's considered normal behavior in a league filled with professionals and grown men. He rubbed just about everyone the wrong way: assistants, players and eventually his bosses.

Meyer's tumultuous tenure ended after just 13 games — and two victories — when the Jacksonville Jaguars fired him early Thursday because of an accumulation of missteps.

Owner Shad Khan made the move hours after former Jaguars player Josh Lambo told a

Florida newspaper Meyer kicked him during practice in August. It was the latest black eye — adding to an already lengthy list of embarrassments — for the three-time national championship-winning college coach who failed miserably to make the transition to the NFL.

“After deliberation over many weeks and a thorough analysis of the entirety of Urban's tenure with our team, I am bitterly disappointed to arrive at the conclusion that an immediate change is imperative for everyone,” Khan said in a statement. “I informed Urban of the change this evening. As I stated in October, regaining our trust and respect was

essential. Regrettably, it did not happen.”

Meyer joins former Atlanta Falcons coach Bobby Petrino as college coaches whose NFL careers flamed out in stunningly swift fashion. Petrino resigned in December 2007 to take over at Arkansas. He was 3-10 at the time.

Meyer went 2-11 in his partial season, and the Jaguars really started to unravel on the offensive side of the ball following the team's bye week. They averaged a measly 9.1 points in Meyer's final seven games, which ended with a five-game skid.

Offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell will serve as Jack-

sonville's interim head coach for the final four games, beginning Sunday against Houston (2-11).

Lambo's claim seemingly proved too much for Khan, who two days earlier said he didn't want to make an impulsive decision on the coach's future.

“What's different about this thing is you have losses and you have drama,” Khan said then.

The Jags had way more drama than victories.

Lambo's allegation came on the heels of an NFL Network report which said Meyer created tension with multiple run-ins with players as well as assistants he allegedly called “losers.”

Source: NFL making changes to COVID-19 protocols

Associated Press

IRVING, Texas — The NFL is planning “significant changes” to its COVID-19 protocols amid the worst three-day stretch for the league during the pandemic, a person familiar with the plans told The Associated Press on Wednesday night.

The person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because details haven't been finalized, said the league and the NFL Players Association are discussing three main areas: testing protocols, return to play guidelines to allow asymptomatic players who've tested positive to return sooner and encouraging booster shots.

On Monday, the league informed coaches, front-office staff and other team personnel to receive a COVID-19 booster by Dec. 27. Players weren't included in the mandate because the league hasn't mandated the vaccine.

The new coronavirus variant has been found among the dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases in the NFL in what the league's chief medical officer is calling a new phase of the pandemic.

Dr. Allen Sills said NFL owners were told in meetings Wednesday that booster shots are the focus of efforts to minimize spread, with Sills saying the omicron variant is expected to become the dominant strain in the United States.

The league said the number of positive

cases Monday and Tuesday ended up at 88, but with players coming and going on the list, about 100 is more accurate.

Still, Commissioner Roger Goodell said there were no plans to cancel or postpone Cleveland's home against the Las Vegas Raiders on Saturday. The Browns have 18 players, including half of their 22 starters, on the COVID-19 reserve list.

“Listen, we've raised this the last two years: It's a challenge,” Goodell said. “I think the things that made us successful was keeping safety first. Second, being willing to adapt at all times. It's clear even in the last couple of weeks that the changes are pretty significant and different than they were before, and I think it calls to modifications to our protocols in general, and we're working with the players association on that.”

Sills said about two-thirds of the positive tests came from people with no symptoms. Asked if there was a chance the NFL would allow vaccinated players who tested positive to play if they didn't have symptoms, Sills said discussions with the union were ongoing.

“It's not about how soon we get them back,” Sills said. “We want to bring them back when it's safe for them and when they are not at risk to others in terms of transmission.”

NFLPA President J.C. Tretter made another plea for daily testing amid the CO-

VID-19 surge, but Sills said testing wasn't the best way to address the league's larger concern of spreading the virus.

Sills said players are testing positive more often than NFL staff, a change from early in the pandemic. In the past week or so, according to Sills, spread within team facilities has been a bigger concern than in the community.

Besides discussions with the union, Sills said he's trying to use video to educate players about the extra shot.

“This is urgent for us, just as it always has been,” Sills said. “And I think we've adapted and changed our protocols at each stage, just based on what the data is telling us and where it's driving us with that. That's what we'll continue to do here.”

In other news, league owners approved Las Vegas as the site of the Super Bowl to cap the 2023 season, a first for the gambling mecca in the Nevada desert.

The NFL's biggest event will follow the Pro Bowl this season and the NFL draft next year, all within five years of the Raiders' move to Las Vegas.

The 2024 Super Bowl was supposed to be in New Orleans, but the new 17-game regular season created a conflict with that city's annual Mardi Gras celebration.

“It's a big day for the Raiders,” club owner Mark Davis said. “It's a big day for the city of Las Vegas.”

Graham's 60-footer at buzzer lifts Pelicans

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Devonte' Graham's 60-foot heave at the buzzer lifted the New Orleans Pelicans to a 113-110 win Wednesday over the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander hit an off-balance 30-footer to tie the score with 2.3 seconds remaining. New Orleans inbounded to Graham, who launched the ball from near the three-point arc on the other end of the floor.

"I just wanted to get one up, honestly," Graham said. "I didn't want to take the ball out. I waited. Then J-Hart (Josh Hart) passed it to me and I just let it fly."

Brandon Ingram scored 34 points and Jonas Valanciunas added 19 points and 16 rebounds for the Pelicans. Graham finished with 15 points and eight assists. Gilgeous-Alexander led the Thunder with 33 points.

Lakers 107, Mavericks 104 (OT): Rookie Austin Reaves hit a three-pointer at the buzzer in overtime to give Los Angeles a win at Dallas.

Reaves' basket, his fifth from behind the

arc, was the only Lakers basket in overtime scored by someone other than the team's Big Three.

LeBron James scored 24 points, Russell Westbrook added 23 and Anthony Davis had 20 points and 12 rebounds after missing two games with a sore left knee.

Jalen Brunson scored 25 points, and Kristaps Porzingis had 23 points and 12 rebounds for the Mavericks. They played their third straight game without guard Luka Doncic.

Bucks 114, Pacers 99: Playing without stars Giannis Antetokounmpo and Khris Middleton, host Milwaukee leaned on Jrue Holiday and had a 21-0 fourth-quarter run to beat Indiana.

Heat 101, 76ers 96: Gabe Vincent hit a key three-pointer in the fourth quarter and scored 26 points, Duncan Robinson had 21 points and short-handed Miami built a 23-point lead and held on to win at Philadelphia.

Hawks 111, Magic 99: Trae Young played through a minor neck injury to score 28 points, John Collins had 21 points and 10

rebounds and Atlanta won at Orlando to end a two-game losing streak.

Cavaliers 124, Rockets 89: Darius Garland scored 21 points, Isaac Okoro added 20 and host Cleveland won its fifth straight, routing Houston.

Timberwolves 124, Nuggets 107: Anthony Edwards made 10 three-pointers and scored 38 points and visiting Minnesota snapped a 12-game losing streak to Denver.

Jazz 124, Clippers 103: Donovan Mitchell scored 19 of his 27 points in the second half, Bojan Bogdanovic made six three-pointers and host Utah beat Los Angeles for its eighth straight victory.

Grizzlies 113, Trail Blazers 103: Desmond Bane scored 23 points and Memphis won at Portland for its fourth victory in a row.

Kings 119, Wizards 105: De'Aaron Fox scored 28 points and short-handed Sacramento beat visiting Washington.

Hornets 131, Spurs 115: Gordon Hayward scored a season-high 41 points and Charlotte never trailed in its victory at San Antonio.

Amid chaos, SEC, usual powers grab top recruits

Associated Press

Through all the changes to the college sports landscape with money-making opportunities for athletes and open transfers, one thing remains the same.

A bunch of Southeastern Conference schools along with venerable programs like Ohio State and Texas are at or near the top of the national recruiting rankings.

The three-day December signing period opened Wednesday, with Texas A&M finishing the day with the lead according to the 247Sports Composite rankings.

Aggies coach Jimbo Fisher put together his fourth straight top-10 class. Alabama, which won nine of the previous 11 recruiting titles, was No. 2. Georgia was No. 3, marking the fifth straight year the Bulldogs have been in the top five.

The team rankings could change with the next letter-of-intent period beginning Feb. 2.

Coaches said the recruiting process now has players taking

into consideration where they could make the most money through endorsement work. The NCAA in July began allowing athletes to monetize use of their name, image and likeness. Some schools are better positioned than others in this new frontier and millions of dollars are swirling around the biggest programs.

"NIL has been going on for a long time. It just hasn't been above board," Fisher said.

The rapid increase in number of players entering the transfer portal and moving to another school with immediate eligibility has also changed the way coaches build their recruiting classes.

Instead of trying to sign a high school player and develop him, a coach might instead pursue experienced players in the portal. And players interested in transferring also might be looking at NIL potential.

All things considered, signing day isn't what it used to be, Mis-

issippi coach Lane Kiffin said.

"That's basically your draft class," he said, "but then you're going to have your free-agent class. I don't think people really say it this way, but let's not make a mistake. I mean, we have free agency in college football. The kids a lot of times go to where they're going to get paid the most.

"No one else is saying that maybe, but the kid says, 'This is what I'm getting here for NIL.' It is what it is," Kiffin added. "Free agency has been created in college football — except you can't lock people into a contract. They can go any time. It's a new world that we're in."

Top of the heap

Texas A&M signed 12 players ranked in the top 100 nationally. Two of its three five-star prospects are defensive linemen: Walter Nolen of Powell, Tenn., and Gabriel Brownlow-Dindy of Lakeland, Fla. The other is quarterback Conner Weigman of Cy-

press, Texas. The Aggies have 17 four-stars.

Alabama brought in three five-star players and 16 four-stars, with edge rusher Jeremiah Alexander of Alabaster, Ala., the highest rated of the 21 signed by coach Nick Saban. Five-star Ty Simpson of Martin, Tenn., joins a deep quarterback room led by Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

Georgia signed 21 players, including four five-stars and 12 four-stars. Coach Kirby Smart downplayed the importance of those rankings.

"I care a whole lot more about how they play," he said. "We've seen evidence of the guys who have played a big role on our team. Some of those guys were not the guys we talked about on this day during their career."

Completing the 247Sports Composite rankings were Ohio State, Texas, Penn State, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan and Oklahoma.

Source: NHL reinstating virus protocols

Associated Press

With the number of coronavirus cases and game postponements climbing, the NHL is reintroducing enhanced COVID-19 protocols that include daily testing and restrictions in a bid to limit a growing outbreak among players and staff.

The enhanced protocols will be put into effect immediately and last through at least Jan. 7, a person with direct knowledge of discussions between the NHL and NHL Players' Association told The Associated Press on Wednesday on the condition of anonymity because the talks were private.

The person said the NHL had little choice but to increase its protocols to ensure a full, 82-game season while still taking an extended Olympic break in February.

"The virus is changing and we have to react accordingly," the person said.

The move came within hours of an ominous step: Ontario health officials unveiled rules that will reduce capacity at the home arenas of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the NBA's Toronto

Raptors plus the Ottawa Senators to 50% starting Saturday.

The NHLPA scheduled a conference call with each of its 32 team representatives to go over the enhanced rules, with road-game restrictions — no leaving the hotel — not expected to be popular among players.

Daily testing will also return for players and coaches as part of the decision, which was reached after two days of meetings amid worsening conditions across the league. Players and staff from three more teams were added to the league's COVID-19 protocol list Wednesday.

That included 17 members of the Calgary Flames, who also had a fourth game postponed (Saturday's home matchup against Columbus). Coach Darryl Sutter and two assistants were on the list along with players including Rasmus Andersson, Johnny Gaudreau and others, raising the number of Calgary players in the protocol to 16.

The league said the Flames' "return to game play is being delayed at least through Satur-

day" following discussions among medical experts. Calgary's training facilities were closed to players until further notice.

Four teams — the Flames, Carolina, Ottawa and the New York Islanders — have had outbreaks force game postponements, a total of 10 in all. But alongside that is a growing number of affected players, who under typical COVID-19 guidance would be tested at least every 72 hours if vaccinated.

The person told AP the omicron variant is responsible for the uptick in cases, and is expected to become the dominant strain if the outbreak continues.

More than 140 NHL players have been on the protocol list this season — including more than two dozen in the last two days — in a league that has proudly noted all but one of its approximately 700 players are considered fully vaccinated even if booster shots are not mandated. It is a discouraging trend for the league, which plans to allow its players to participate in the Winter Olympics in China in February unless CO-

VID-19 disruptions prove to be too much.

The NHL has until Jan. 10 to opt-out of the Winter Games without financial penalty, but retains the right to cancel its plans up until players are scheduled to travel to Beijing.

One issue for players is pinning down quarantine protocols should an athlete test positive in China, with some players expressing concern that they could last up to five weeks.

The NHL and NHLPA are also seeking clarity on where an athlete would be required to quarantine, the person told AP.

"I'd love to go and I'd love to compete," said Toronto star Auston Matthews, who is American. "But there's definitely some things that a lot of us would like to see worked out."

In Boston, Patrice Bergeron became the third Bruins player in two days to enter the protocol, following leading scorer Brad Marchand and fellow forward Craig Smith. All three could be out until late December; coach Bruce Cassidy, who tested positive Nov. 30, just rejoined the team on Monday.

Blackhawks outlast Ovechkin, Capitals in overtime

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Caleb Jones scored his first goal of the season 1:21 into overtime, and the Chicago Blackhawks beat Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals 5-4 on Wednesday night.

Washington tied it on Conor Sheary's sixth goal with 3 seconds left in regulation. But Jones knocked home a rebound to give Chicago a wild victory.

Ovechkin scored his 274th career power-play goal in the second period, matching Dave Andreychuk's NHL record, but Chicago responded with three goals in 34 seconds. After Lars Eller tied it for the Capitals in the third, Alex DeBrincat beat

Ilya Samsonov for his second power-play goal with 5 minutes left.

MacKenzie Entwistle and Philipp Kurashev also scored for the Blackhawks. Brandon Hagel had two assists, and Marc-Andre Fleury made 42 saves.

Ovechkin, Eller and Sheary each had a goal and an assist for the Capitals, who had won three of four. Daniel Sprong also scored, and T.J. Oshie had two assists.

Washington center Nicklas Backstrom picked up an assist in his first game after missing the start of the season with a hip injury. But the Capitals played without Evgeny Kuznet-

sov because of the NHL's COVID-19 protocol.

Rangers 3, Coyotes 2: Kaapo Kakko had two goals, including the game-winner with 2:18 left, and visiting New York scored twice on the power play in the final six minutes to beat Arizona.

Mika Zibanejad added a goal and an assist for the Rangers, who had dropped two straight and three of four. Chris Kreider had three assists — matching a career high — after entering the game with four all season.

Kakko tapped the tiebreaker into an open side off a pass from Kreider after Zibanejad scored with help from Kreid-

er's screen at 14:14 of the third period to tie it 2-all.

Ducks 4, Kraken 1: Troy Terry got his 18th goal and Derek Grant scored short-handed as host Anaheim beat Seattle for its fourth victory in five games.

Trevor Zegras and Sam Carrick also scored for the Pacific Division-leading Ducks, who spoiled the expansion Kraken's first appearance in Southern California with a one-sided win. Anthony Stolarz made 19 saves for Anaheim, which has scored 11 goals on Seattle in two meetings this season.

Ryan Donato scored a power-play goal in the Kraken's fourth loss in five games.