

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, February 13, 2020

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Bataan ARG transits key Gulf strait

BY JOSHUA KARSTEN

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — The amphibious assault ship USS Bataan transited the Strait of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf on Wednesday, becoming the first U.S. Navy “big deck” to enter the strategic waters in 2020.

“Our passage through this important strait and continued presence in the area plays a critical role in maintaining the freedom of navigation key to regional security and stability here,” Capt. Lance Leshner, the group’s commodore, said in a statement.

Bataan and its amphibious ready group comprises 2,500 Marines from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the transport dock ship USS New York and the dock landing ship USS Oak Hill, the statement said.

Also traveling with the group is the destroyer USS Carney and cargo ship USNS McClean.

The last big deck to transit the strait before the Bataan was the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, which departed last November during its record-breaking 10-month deployment.

The 96-mile-long Strait of Hormuz is bounded to the north by Iran and to the south by Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Around a fifth of the world’s oil passes through the strategic shipping route, which is only 21 miles wide at its narrowest point.

Bataan’s passage through the strait was to “reassure allies” and ensure “stability and security essential to maritime commerce,” skipper Capt. Greg LeLand said.

The transit comes after a month of tension in the region following the January killing by the U.S. of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani and retaliatory rocket attacks on an airbase in Iraq that left more than 100 U.S. service members with traumatic brain injuries.

On USS Normandy, elevated threat level ‘like a splash of cold water in the face’

The Washington Post

ABOARD THE USS NORMANDY IN THE NORTH ARABIAN SEA — The captain of this warship loaded with Tomahawk missiles delivered the news to his crew: Hours earlier, the United States had killed Iran’s most powerful military commander in a drone strike.

Navy Capt. Christopher Stone said it wasn’t clear how Iran might respond to the death of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani. But the Normandy, escorting the USS Harry S. Truman near the Persian Gulf, had to be ready for anything, he said.

“We must be prepared for direct military action,” Stone recalled telling the crew.

With the warning and an elevated threat level, the sailors prepared for potential combat. Additional precautions put in place on the Normandy required them to carry flame-resistant balaclavas and gloves to complement their flame-resistant uniforms, and the Internet service they used to speak to family members was temporarily cut.

Across the region, U.S. military officials made other changes as vessels were dispatched to sea, where they would be better positioned. The Navy’s schedule for ships going into port also was altered.

The previously unreported details and interviews with more than 20 sailors on three Navy warships paint a picture of a military that was bracing for war in the wake of Soleimani’s Jan. 3 death in Baghdad. Days later, Iran launched ballistic missiles at two sites in Iraq housing U.S. troops, briefly deepening the crisis until it became clear that no Americans were killed.

The events point to a new reality: While tensions have cooled for the moment, the Pentagon is still feeling out whether Iran will retaliate again, and how.

“I have spent 26 years in this Navy not hoping for war, but preparing for war so that we can keep our nation safe,” Stone said in an interview on his warship. “I would say overwhelmingly, the response I saw was a crew that was very focused.”

After Iran’s missile attack, President Donald Trump declared on Twitter that “all is well!” But defense officials have reported a growing number of service members who suffered mild traumatic brain injuries. As of Monday, the Pentagon said 109 had been diagnosed, with 75 treated

in Iraq and returned to duty, 21 sent back to the United States and others still under evaluation in Germany.

“Our great American forces are prepared for anything,” Trump said in a televised address. “Iran appears to be standing down, which is a good thing for all parties concerned and a very good thing for the world.”

Aboard the Normandy, sailors watched Trump’s speech, said Navy Lt. David Remmers, who oversees weapons and is on his third deployment to the Middle East.

There was “almost an eerie feeling” afterward because the threat against U.S. forces at sea seemed to dissipate so quickly, he said. Days earlier, Remmers had told his sailors they needed to make sure the Normandy’s weapons were ready to use.

“I’ve never really spoken to anyone who has deployed to any [area of operations] that has experienced a threat warning level that we were at,” Remmers said. “My experience, speaking to other people who have been in high-tension situations, is it was the highest I had ever heard.”

Chief Warrant Officer Jordan Buck said Stone’s announcement about Soleimani was a “shocking moment.”

With 17 years in the Navy and several deployments to the Middle East, Buck said he arrived on the Normandy on Dec. 28 and “just thought it was my luck” that a crisis erupted days later. He soon began refreshing sailors on how to use life rafts.

“The threat level being elevated like it was, I had never seen that,” Buck said. “It was like a splash of cold water in the face.”

Nearby on the Truman, a 1,092-foot vessel where 5,000 Americans and dozens of fighter jets are deployed, the situation felt similar for some sailors.

Seaman Desiree Allen, who operates aviation support equipment on the carrier, said “of course I was scared” when she heard about the rising tension with Iran. One of the most challenging parts was not being able to share specifics with worried family members about what was happening, she said.

Still, she added, she knew she had a job to do and put her faith in the ship’s defenses and her fellow sailors.

“At the end of the day, the carrier is one of the most protected ships, so I felt protected,” she said. “I know what we’ve got on board, and I know they don’t have nothing on us.”

Esper: US, Taliban take step toward talks

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. and Taliban have agreed in principle to a “seven-day reduction in violence” in Afghanistan, which could lead to a peace deal to end 18 years of war in the country, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Thursday at the end of a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels.

Seven days would be “sufficient” to test whether the Taliban was serious about moving toward a peace deal, Esper said.

“But in all things, our approach to this process will be

conditions-based,” Esper said. “Let me say it again: conditions-based. So it will be a continual evaluative process as we go forward, if we go forward.”

Esper declined to comment on whether the U.S. would cease counterterrorism operations during any period of reduced violence, saying talks were ongoing.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said allies supported U.S. efforts to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban.

“We welcome any steps that can lead to the reduction of violence, (but) the Taliban have to show a real will and a real

ability to deliver a reduction of violence on the ground,” Stoltenberg said.

American and Taliban negotiators have also laid the foundations for a political agreement in Afghanistan, Esper said.

“Progress has been made on this front and we’ll have more to report on that soon, I hope,” he said.

During the two-day meeting of NATO defense ministers, in addition to consulting with allies about the potential pause in fighting in Afghanistan, Esper got commitments from them to contribute more troops to NATO’s effort in Iraq.

Esper has called on NATO to do more in Iraq so that the U.S. can reduce some of its roughly 5,000 troops there and refocus them on other missions. Allied defense ministers agreed “in principle” to enhance the NATO mission in Iraq. Neither they nor Esper said which countries would be adding forces to an alliance training mission in the country.

Allies also considered ways that NATO can do more in the broader Middle East and North Africa, which has been a priority for U.S. President Donald Trump.

Defense secretary defends Stars and Stripes decision

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Thursday defended the Pentagon’s effort to strip Stars and Stripes of all of its federal funding as part of its fiscal year 2021 budget request, telling reporters in Brussels that the independent news organization is not a priority.

“So, we trimmed the support for Stars and Stripes because we need to invest that money, as we did with many, many other programs, into higher priority issues,” Esper said during a news conference at NATO headquarters. He listed space, nuclear programs, hypersonic missiles and “a variety of systems” as places the money — slightly more than \$15.5 million — could be reinvested in the \$705.4 billion Defense Department spending proposal.

Pentagon officials acknowledged Wednesday for the first time that the budget proposal completely cuts the subsidy that the department provides Stars and Stripes to print and distribute newspapers to troops deployed around the world, including remote and often dangerous locations in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Stars and Stripes receives about \$8.7 million annually in operations and maintenance funds and about \$6.9 million in contingency operations funds, said Marine Lt. Col. Chris Logan, a spokesman for Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist.

The cut to Stars and Stripes’ annual Pentagon subsidy equals about half of the

news organization’s annual funds to pay expenses. Stars and Stripes’ remaining money comes from sales, subscriptions and advertising.

Pentagon officials confirmed Monday that the budget request would cut at least some funding to Stars and Stripes, but they declined to provide monetary figures attached to the proposal. Stars and Stripes’ leadership was informed of the proposed cuts by Pentagon leadership also Monday, after The Wall Street Journal reported the news organization was eyed for a funding reduction.

Stars and Stripes first appeared during the Civil War, and it has been continuously published since World War II. It produces daily newspapers for U.S. military troops around the world and a website, which is updated with news 24 hours a day. Though it is part of the Pentagon’s Defense Media Agency, Stripes retains its editorial independence and is congressionally mandated to be governed by First Amendment principles.

In Logan’s statement Wednesday, he acknowledged Stars and Stripes’ value during its seven decades of continuous service to the U.S. military community.

“Their hard work and dedication in reporting on issues that matter the most to the military community continues to be of value,” he said. “However, as we look forward to the current budget proposal and beyond, the DOD must prioritize spending to support our warfighters in the most critical areas of need. Therefore, the department has made the difficult decision that,

beginning in fiscal year 2021, it will no longer provide appropriated funds to Stars and Stripes.”

The news organization’s value to American troops has been proven, said Ernie Gates, Stars and Stripes’ ombudsman. He said the newspaper not only provides service members “a little piece of home” or a “welcome diversion” from tough missions, but it also provides independent, free-flowing information that they need to exercise their rights as Americans.

The proposal has received pushback from various directions, including lawmakers, a former commander of U.S. European Command and a key journalism advocacy and education organization.

Military veteran lawmakers Rep. Gil Cisneros, D-Calif., and Rep. Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz., tweeted their support for Stars and Stripes this week.

“Stars & Stripes was a link to home when I was in Iraq and Okinawa,” wrote Gallego, a Marine veteran. “It’s an A+ indie take on everyday DoD news, f*** ups, and Administration & General Officer BS. No wonder this President wants to cut it. He’s got a fight on his hands.”

Cisneros, a Navy veteran, wrote Stars and Stripes “provides a crucial voice on the DOD, VA, and other military matters.”

“We need their reporting,” he tweeted.

Other members of Congress reached this week for comment said they needed to take a close look at budget documents before speaking. One member expected to be briefed on the Stars and Stripes funding proposal this week.

Sudan government reaches deal with USS Cole families

Associated Press

CAIRO — Sudan's transitional government said Thursday it has reached a settlement with families of the victims of the 2000 attack on USS Cole in Yemen, in a bid to have the African country taken off the U.S. terrorism list and improve relations with the West.

The settlement is the latest step from Khartoum to end its international pariah status. Earlier this week, Sudan's provisional rulers said they had agreed to hand over longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court to face trial on charges of war crimes and genocide during the fighting in the western Darfur region.

Also, Sudan's interim leader, Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, earlier this month met in Uganda with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced that Israel and Sudan

would normalize relations after decades of enmity. Observers and Sudanese officials have said that the settlement with the USS Cole victims was among the last hurdles faced by Sudan on its path to being removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terror.

At the time of the Oct. 12, 2000, attack in the Yemeni port of Aden that killed 17 sailors and wounded more than three dozen others, Sudan was accused of providing support to al-Qaida, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

Sudan's information minister and interim government spokesman, Faisal Saleh, told The Associated Press over the phone that Justice Minister Nasr-Eddin Abdul-Bari had traveled last week to Washington to sign the deal, which included compensations for both those wounded and the families of those killed in the attack.

Marine Raiders in Calif. will move to NC's base

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps will move its Raider battalions at Camp Pendleton, Calif., to North Carolina, the East Coast home of Marine Raiders, by 2022, officials announced Wednesday.

The move means all personnel with Marine Forces Special Operations Command will be based at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C., according to a special operations command statement.

About 900 Marines, sailors and civilian employees attached to the 1st Marine Raider Battalion and the 1st Marine Raider Support Battalion at Camp Pendleton will start their moves in summer 2021, the statement said. They will join the 2nd and 3rd Raider battalions already based at Lejeune.

Locating its special operations battalions in one place will have "significant impacts to time and money," according to the statement.

The service will save about \$55 million between 2021-26 by reducing housing allowances and the cost to move Marines and their families between duty stations, the Marine Corps

Times reported Wednesday. Raiders will no longer need to make cross-country moves when switching units.

However, the move will leave the Pacific without a Raider unit as the service trains to meet a "great power" challenge from China in East Asia.

Marine Raiders are elite operators who must complete a rigorous, seven-month individual training course to earn their title. Marine Raiders earned fame in World War II, but the current command was created in 2006.

The cost-savings decision is in line with the 2018 National Defense Strategy's call on defense agencies to "build a more lethal force and reform the department for greater performance and affordability," Marine Forces Special Operations commander Maj. Gen. Daniel Yoo said in the statement.

The Camp Pendleton Raiders will move to Camp Lejeune in three phases to complement normal Marine Corps permanent change of station timelines and manage the population increase in the Jacksonville, N.C., area, according to the statement.

Philippines' plan to end pact is 'fine' with Trump

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump said he's "fine" with the Philippines' intent to terminate a security pact with the United States despite the move's potential effect on American efforts to contest China's influence in the South China Sea.

"That's fine — we'll save a lot of money," Trump said Wednesday in the Oval Office in response to a reporter's question. "I have a very good relationship there, but I really don't mind if they would like to do that."

Philippines Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. announced Tuesday that a notice of termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allows U.S. forces to train and visit in the former American colony, had been submitted to the U.S. Embassy in Manila that day. The pact, which has been in place since 1999, is scheduled

to end 180 days after that notification.

Adm. Philip S. Davidson, commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said Thursday that he hoped the 180-day timeframe would "allow some time for diplomatic efforts to be pursued here."

"I hope we can get to a successful outcome," he told a foreign policy think-tank in Sydney.

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, a critic of the United States long before he was elected in 2016, had ordered the agreement terminated.

Military cooperation with the Philippines is seen by the Defense Department as a key component in pushing back on China's broad but disputed claims to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea.

In his Oval Room comments, Trump did imply that the move displayed ingratitude by the Philippines for U.S. military assistance in helping put down a jihadi uprising

in the southern part of the country in 2017.

The U.S. provided Philippine forces with assistance and training in the areas of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance through a rotating group of special operations troops that did not number more than 100 at any given time, according to a Pentagon statement at the time. American troops were not involved in direct combat.

Trump's remarks ran counter to Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's comments to reporters Tuesday that the move sent the wrong message to China.

"As we try and bolster our presence and compete with [China] in this era of great power competition, I think it's a move in the wrong direction for the long-standing relationship we've had with the Philippines for their strategic location, the ties between our peoples, our countries," Esper said.

China virus spikes with new way of counting

Associated Press

BEIJING — China on Thursday reported a sharp spike in deaths and infections from a new virus after the hardest-hit province of Hubei applied a new classification system that broadens the scope of diagnoses for the outbreak, which has spread to more than 20 countries.

The new diagnostic approach came on the same day that Hubei and its stricken capital, Wuhan, replaced their top officials in an apparent response to public criticism of how authorities have handled the epidemic.

The death toll in China reached 1,367, up 254 from the

previous day. The number of confirmed cases jumped from 15,152 to 59,804. The unusually large increases were due to the change in Hubei's approach.

The total now includes more than 13,000 cases of "clinical diagnosis" in Hubei, which appears to include those based on a doctors' analysis combined with lung imaging, as opposed to waiting for laboratory test results.

In breaking down the large number of new cases in China, National Health Commission spokesman Mi Feng said that Hubei had adopted a revised diagnosis and treatment plan aimed at accelerating the identification and treatment of patients.

One expert said that the changed case definition in Hubei likely speaks to the crush of patients the health system is experiencing and the backlog of untested samples.

"Clearly in Wuhan, the health system is under extreme pressure, and so the first priority has to be the patient," said Mark Woolhouse, a professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh.

He said that it wasn't unprecedented for case definitions to rely on doctors' diagnoses rather than wait for laboratory confirmation, and that these kinds of changes usually happen when there are simply too many patients to process in a fast-moving outbreak.

"I'm not surprised that this has happened given the way the outbreak has been going in China," Woolhouse said. "You have to be pragmatic and take the concerns of the patient first and treat them as if they already have the disease, even in the absence of lab confirmation."

In an unprecedented measure to contain the disease, recently named COVID-19, the Chinese government has placed the hardest-hit cities — home to more than 60 million — under lockdown. One district in Shiyang, a city in Hubei, has implemented "wartime measures," barring residents from leaving even their apartment compounds for two weeks.

Senate votes to limit Trump's Iran options

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate approved a bipartisan measure Thursday limiting President Donald Trump's authority to launch military operations against Iran.

The measure, authored by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., says Trump must win approval from Congress before engaging in further military action against Iran. Eight Republicans joined with Democrats to pass the resolution by a 55-45 vote.

Kaine and other supporters said the resolution was not about Trump or even the presidency, but instead was an important reassertion of congressional power to declare war.

While Trump and other presidents "must always have the ability to defend the United States from imminent attack, the executive power to initiate war stops there," Kaine said. "An offensive war requires a congressional debate and vote."

Answering a claim by some of Trump's supporters and Trump himself that the measure would send a signal of weakness to Iran and other potential adversaries, Kaine said the opposite was true.

"When we stand up for the rule of law — in a world that hungers for more rule of law — and say 'this decision is fundamental, and we have rules that we are going to follow so we can make a good decision,' that's a message of strength,"

Kaine said.

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, agreed. Lee supports Trump's foreign policy, including toward Iran, but said Congress cannot escape its constitutional responsibility to act on matters of war and peace.

"We want to make sure that any military action that needs to be authorized is in fact properly authorized by Congress. That doesn't show weakness. That shows strength," Lee said Wednesday.

GAO: DOD effort on kid-on-kid sex assaults has gaps

Associated Press

The U.S. Department of Defense is struggling to change how it handles the abuse of military kids, including cases involving sexual assault by other children, according to a report commissioned by Congress.

The military has been slow to implement reforms that lawmakers mandated more than a year ago, said the report released Wednesday by the U.S. Government Accountability Of-

fice. The Pentagon still doesn't know the extent of child-on-child sexual assaults, in part because some officials dismiss incidents without reporting them and the Pentagon has no one place to track all cases that have been logged.

Worldwide, more than 1.2 million school-age children live with military families, many on large bases that include schools, recreation centers, playgrounds and other trappings of civilian life.

While the report credited the Pentagon and some armed services for making policy changes on paper, it concluded that ground-level change was lagging.

"I'd say their intentions are good. They're starting to make progress," said Brenda Farrell, the report's primary author. "But it has a long way to go in order to get it to the point where they have oversight in place to be able to say that things are actually improving or that

they've got this particular area under control."

Generally, the changes related to child-on-child sexual assault so far have focused on revising written policies for how to handle and track reports. The Family Advocacy Program, which is the military's equivalent of social services, published new guidelines, as did the Army and the Pentagon-run school system, Department of Defense Education Activity.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Missing bald eagle found safe

CT ASHFORD — A bald eagle missing from a Connecticut raptor rehabilitation center and feared stolen was found.

The Horizon Wings Raptor rehabilitation and education center announced Tuesday on Facebook that Atka, a 10-year-old male eagle that cannot fly because of a permanent shoulder injury, was found on the organization's Ashford property.

No additional details were disclosed.

Mary-Beth Kaeser, owner and founder of the nonprofit, found the door to Atka's aviary open and the lock on the ground when she went to feed him Monday.

Atka came to the center about nine years ago and is used in its education programs.

Officials: Thief dropped list of homes to hit

TN NASHVILLE — Authorities in Tennessee said they busted a well-organized burglar after he allegedly dropped a notebook during a break-in that contained a list of other places he planned to target.

Robert Shull Goddard, 49, is accused of smashing a glass door and breaking into a Nashville area home, stealing a TV and a gun from the residents, according to records filed in Davidson County court.

But prosecutors said Goddard left something behind that allowed authorities to solve the case — a notebook that listed multiple addresses, including one for another home a few miles away that had been burglarized that same day, The Tennessean reported. Investigators were able to identify the

suspect, in part, through notes his daughter left in the journal, along with her address.

Goddard was caught on video kicking in the back door of another house the next day, court records state.

Dead birds disguised as cat food confiscated

VA CHANTILLY — A package of tiny dead birds passed off as pet food was confiscated by Customs agents at a Virginia airport.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said the package came in to Dulles International Airport on a flight from Beijing on Jan. 27.

Agents discovered the bag of dead birds in the baggage of a passenger who was on their way to Prince George's County, Md.

The passenger said the package was cat food. The plastic packaging had pictures of a cat and dog.

The birds are barred from importation to prevent the spread of avian flu.

Man posed as deputy to undercover cop

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A New Mexico man is facing charges after authorities say he tried to impersonate a sheriff's deputy to an undercover police officer.

A criminal complaint said Daniel Mitchem was arrested following a high-speed chase in Albuquerque.

According to police, Mitchem, 46, had approached an undercover detective during an auto theft operation and told the officer he was a sheriff's deputy and showed a gun.

When the detective said he was an officer, Mitchem fled in his Chevy Tahoe, according to the complaint. Mitchem

was eventually arrested and charged with impersonating a peace officer and felon in possession of a firearm, police said.

Meteorologists: 209 mph gust likely a mistake

CA SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — A gust of 209 mph recorded atop a California peak recently was likely not a new state wind record but a mistake resulting from a faulty sensor, meteorologists said.

The wind recording was made by an instrument at 9,186 feet on Kirkwood Mountain south of Lake Tahoe. If accurate, it would have broken the previous wind record of 199 mph at Ward Mountain west of Lake Tahoe in 2017.

But forecasters now suspect the sensor wasn't working properly, said Cory Mueller, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

Man accused of paying addicts to shoplift

WV CHARLESTON — A West Virginia man is accused of organizing a network of shoplifters, many of them drug addicts, to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars in store merchandise that he then resold on the internet.

Nedelcho Vladimirov of Cross Lanes was charged in a criminal complaint with acquiring nearly 3,700 stolen items that were later resold for profit, U.S. Attorney Mike Sturt said at a news conference.

Vladimirov, who is charged with money laundering, allegedly paid cash to the shoplifters for a fraction of the stolen items' worth. Many of the shoplifters then would use the money to support their drug habits.

Man gets trampled by deer in parking lot

NC LOCUST — A suspect escaped from a hit and run in a North Carolina McDonald's parking lot last month. But police aren't looking for who's responsible.

Ken Worthy was leaving the restaurant in Locust with his wife and a Diet Coke in hand, when he saw something approaching him, the victim told news outlets.

What he saw coming wasn't a car, but a frenzied deer that had run startled, likely from woods nearby, and was stopping for nothing in its way. Security video taken from the store showed the animal barreling toward Worthy before plowing him over and continuing on.

Worthy and his wife were surprised, but not hurt during the incident, he told the station. In fact, he didn't even spill his Diet Coke.

City's last call might be a little earlier

FL MIAMI BEACH — The mayor of Miami Beach wants the last call for alcohol to be a little bit earlier for spring break.

Mayor Dan Gelber wants alcohol sales to end at 2 a.m. in the South Beach entertainment district for 17 days in March. It's 5 a.m. now across the city.

The Miami Herald reported the proposal was to come before the city commission for a preliminary vote. It could then be finalized at a Feb. 26 commission meeting.

The rollback would begin March 6 and continue for 17 days. It would affect the sale of alcohol for on-site consumption, like at bars and restaurants.

From wire reports

On a mission to provide objective reporting to America's military, wherever they serve.
Read us online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

7-time champ Johnson out to enjoy the ride

Associated Press

Jimmie Johnson has been chasing NASCAR history for so long that his relentless pursuit of rewriting the record books has become part of his legacy.

Johnson, tied with Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt with seven Cup Series titles, has been racing for sole possession of the record since 2017. He made a hashtag for his social media posts — #Chasing8 — and his push to make history has never wavered.

As he heads into his 19th and final full season in stock car racing, Johnson has dropped the motto. He'd love to close his full-time career with a record eighth title, but the 44-year-old Californian said he would rather remove self-inflicted pressure and enjoy his final season in the No. 48 Chevrolet.

His new motto will be "One Final Time" and it begins at Daytona International Speedway. The season-opening Daytona 500, a race Johnson has won twice, is Sunday.

"Through reflecting back since I made the (November retirement) announcement it just kind of dawned on me — the more I thought about it, I never chased anything," Johnson said. "One final time just felt like the correct thing to say and now we've struck the chasing eight from everything and one final time just fits well."

It's been a bumpy ride for Johnson since winning his seventh title. Hendrick Motorsports stalwarts Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt Jr. retired, leaving Johnson as the veteran on a team of 20-somethings. Chevrolet was not competitive with the Camaro it rolled out two years ago, a setback for Johnson and an organization in a rebuild.

The slide was gradual — Johnson won three races in 2017 — but now the winningest driver of his era is in a full slump. He has gone two full seasons without a win, missed the playoffs last year for the first time and had a pair of

crew chief changes.

"It was definitely frustrating (not making the playoffs), I was angry, embarrassed, all of those things," Johnson said. "One thing that helped me with all of it is it didn't happen at once. I knew in my heart of hearts, it was months prior to that where the real opportunity lied and where we missed it."

Team owner Rick Hendrick hired Chad Knaus in 2001 when he launched the 48 team to be built around Johnson, and the driver and crew chief were together for all seven championships and 17 seasons. Then Hendrick made a change before last year, moving Knaus to William Byron's team; his replacement didn't work out and Johnson was given Cliff Daniels midseason.

Daniels has helped Johnson relax and believes the team is headed in the right direction. In fact, pairing Johnson with Daniels was the catalyst in Johnson deciding to make 2020 his final year. He knew all of

last year he'd need to make a decision on contract talks with Hendrick and it weighed on Johnson until Daniels arrived and changed the mindset of a struggling driver.

"I was thinking about it pretty hard through the course of the year knowing I was going to have to talk to Rick about a contract extension. I started feeling less likely to come back when I started working with Cliff," Johnson said. "When I sat Cliff down to talk to him, I wasn't sure how he was going to react to that. But the peace he brought me and the leadership he has for our race team and where I know our team is going really helped me identify with 2020 as probably my best chance to win a championship."

Johnson said he is encouraged by an updated Camaro that Chevrolet will use starting this weekend, as well as a second year adapting to NASCAR's new rules package.

Speedweeks facing a significant shake-up

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Speedweeks is facing a significant shake-up.

The Daytona 500 is scheduled for Valentine's Day in 2021, a week earlier than usual and putting NASCAR's version of the Super Bowl seven days after the actual Super Bowl.

The revised date could cause changes to Speedweeks, the opening stretch of stock car racing at Daytona International Speedway that includes run-up events such as Daytona 500 pole qualifying, the exhibition Busch Clash and the ARCA Series opener.

It could ultimately lead to "Speedweek," singular. Cramming everything into one week seems like the obvious outcome, which would eliminate two "dark days" at the track between pole qualifying and Daytona 500 practice and help shorten a long, tiring regular season that drivers and crews have been complaining about for years.

But the allure of spending two weeks in Florida, where drivers often can be spotted at Disney World and other various tourist spots, still has an appeal for some.

"I'd miss it," driver Austin Dillon said Wednesday during Daytona 500 media day. "I like being down here for this long. I enjoy this week. I think it's a great start to our season."

NASCAR also could simply run its Daytona 500 lead-in events a day earlier to avoid having anything on Super Bowl Sunday. Of course, that would still leave NASCAR vying for attention in the shadow of the dominant NFL finale.

"I don't think anybody should do that," said Stewart-Haas Racing driver Clint Bowyer, a huge Kansas City Chiefs fan. "It'd be like somebody trying to go on top of the Daytona 500. We're all in this business together. It's the entertainment business. There's a footprint for all of them."

"The Super Bowl is not a game. The Super Bowl is an event. The Daytona 500 can't be just a race. It's got to be an event. The second that we lose sight of that, we've got problems."

The Super Bowl is set for Feb. 7, 2021. NASCAR and Daytona International Speedway announced earlier this week that the 500 will be the following Sunday, but the rest of next year's Speedweeks cal-

endar has yet to be finalized.

Pole qualifying, the Clash and the ARCA race typically run the weekend before the 500. NASCAR has been hesitant to go head-to-head against the Super Bowl, even moving the Daytona 500 back a week in 2012 to avoid any potential conflict in case the league lengthened its regular season.

NASCAR switched the opener back to President's Day weekend before the 2018 season, but still hasn't returned Speedweeks to its original form that included the Rolex 24 at Daytona, pole qualifying/Clash and the Daytona 500 on back-to-back-to-back weekends. They're spread out a bit more now, but still integral to Speedweeks.

There are also sprint cars, late models and modifieds racing at nearby short tracks like New Smyrna and Volusia speedways, all in the general vicinity of Daytona Beach, the birthplace of NASCAR.

Tweaking Speedweeks would be the first hint of an anticipated overhaul to NASCAR's 2021 schedule. The sanctioning body has said it won't shy from trying new venues while heeding calls from fans and drivers to visit more short tracks and dirt tracks.

NBA roundup

Doncic's return lifts Mavericks over Kings

Associated Press

DALLAS — Before heading to the All-Star game to play with his basketball idol, Luka Doncic returned from injury to test a pairing that's a lot more important to the Dallas Mavericks sensation.

The 20-year-old Slovenian and fellow Euro star Kristaps Porzingis will want to keep this up after the break.

Doncic had 33 points and 12 rebounds after missing seven games with a sprained right ankle while Porzingis chipped in 27 points with 13 boards, leading the Mavericks to a 130-111 win over the Sacramento Kings on Wednesday night.

An All-Star starter set to play for LeBron James' team in his second season, Doncic added eight assists in the NBA triple-double leader's final game before going to All-Star weekend in Chicago, where he also plans to play in the rising stars game.

Porzingis will be waiting when he gets back after thriving like rarely before in their first season together, after the 7-foot-3 Latvian recorded a career-best three consecutive games with at least 30 points and 10 rebounds with Doncic out.

"It's just getting better and better," Doncic said of the pair playing together. "It's good when we both have those nights."

Nets 101, Raptors 91: Toronto had its franchise-record winning streak stopped at 15 games by host Brooklyn on Wednesday night.

Joe Harris added 19 points and Spencer Dinwiddie had 17 points and nine assists for the Nets, who head into the break 25-28 after having Kyrie Irving for just 20 games. He sat out again with a sprained right knee.

Lakers 120, Nuggets 116 (OT): LeBron James posted a triple-double and Anthony Davis scored seven of his 33 points in overtime to push Los Angeles to a win at Denver.

James had 32 points, 14 as-

sists and 12 rebounds for his 12th triple-double of the season as the Lakers headed into the All-Star break with a four-game lead over the second-place Nuggets in the Western Conference.

Cavaliers 127, Hawks 105: Tristan Thompson had 27 points and 11 rebounds, Larry Nance Jr. had a career-high 23 points, and Cleveland broke a 12-game home losing streak.

The Cavaliers, coming off their worst home loss in franchise history, went ahead midway through the first quarter and won at home for the first time since beating the Hawks on Dec. 23.

Pacers 118, Bucks 111: T.J. Warren scored 35 points and Malcolm Brogdon added 17 points and tied a career high with 13 assists, helping host Indiana hold on to beat Milwaukee.

Reigning MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo missed his second straight game following the birth of his first child.

Magic 116, Pistons 112 (OT): Aaron Gordon scored 25 points and Markelle Fultz added 21 as host Orlando rallied to beat Detroit.

Wizards 114, Knicks 96: Bradley Beal scored 30 points and Washington used a fourth-quarter surge to win at New York.

Grizzlies 111, Trail Blazers 104: Brandon Clarke matched his career high with 27 points, Ja Morant had 20 points and nine assists and host Memphis beat Portland.

Hornets 115, Timberwolves 108: Devonte' Graham scored 28 points and Malik Monk added 25 to lead Charlotte to a comeback win at Minnesota.

Jazz 116, Heat 101: Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points and Bojan Bogdanovic added 22 to lift host Utah over Miami.

Suns 112, Warriors 106: Devin Booker scored 27 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 15 and host Phoenix held on for a victory over Golden State.

Apologetic Astros open spring training

The Washington Post

Two Houston Astros players expressed shame for the sign-stealing scandal that has engulfed Major League Baseball and owner Jim Crane promised greater control, saying that technologically advanced sign-stealing would "never happen again on my watch" as the team opened spring training Thursday in West Palm Beach, Fla.

The remarks came amid calls for the team to be stripped of its World Series victory in 2017 and were the first since the scandal resulted in the firing of General Manager Jeff Luhnow and team manager A.J. Hinch.

Astros star Alex Bregman directly apologized in a brief statement at the beginning of the news conference, which lasted less than 30 minutes. "I am really sorry about the choices that were made by our team, the organization and by me," he said. "I have learned from this and hope to regain the trust of fans. . . . We as a team are totally focused on moving forward to the 2020 season."

His teammate, José Altuve, added, "We had a great team meeting last night and the whole organization and the team feels bad about what happened in 2017. We especially feel remorse for our fans and for the game of baseball."

The players spoke for less than 90 seconds and declined to take questions, with Crane taking the bulk of the questions.

Dusty Baker, the veteran manager brought in to restore honor to the franchise, pointed to the outsize role technology played in the scandal.

"I must admit that when technology gets as advanced as it has become, the boundaries seem to change. The guys said what they did was wrong. Hopefully baseball can help clean up the game and control the technology so this doesn't happen again."

Crane, wearing an orange

polo shirt emblazoned with the Astros logo, noted that he'd never been the kind of owner who hung out in the clubhouse and admitted that may have to change.

"We'll have better controls in place," he said. "Baseball will have better controls in place," without specifying what those would be because "this came very close to the dugout."

Manager Dusty Baker said he doesn't know all the facts, because he just got MLB's report "the other day," but he says it's clear the game needs progress from this.

Since news of the cheating schemes broke, two teams who lost to the Astros have called for the team to forfeit wins and the 2017 World Series title. Crane was adamant that the team's victories and 2017 championship remain in place.

"Our opinion is this didn't impact the game," Crane said. "We had a good team. We won the World Series and we'll leave it at that."

He also declined to call what the team did in a sport known for using time-honored methods of stealing signs as cheating, saying only "we broke the rules."

Meanwhile, Yankees closer Aroldis Chapman, who surrendered a series-clinching, walk-off home run to José Altuve in the 2019 American League Championship Series, called Altuve's actions "a little suspicious."

After Altuve pounded his slider over the left-field fence at Minute Maid Park, Chapman smiled as he walked off the mound.

As Altuve crossed the plate, he told teammates not to rip off his jersey and clutched the buttons with his hands, video of which was widely circulated amid speculation Astros hitters had used buzzers affixed to their bodies to alert them to what pitch may be coming.

College basketball roundup

Kansas pulls away from West Virginia

Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Devon Dotson scored 15 points and No. 3 Kansas finished the game with a 9-0 run to beat No. 14 West Virginia 58-49 on Wednesday night.

The Jayhawks (21-3, 10-1 Big 12) won for the ninth straight time and remain a game behind first-place Baylor.

Isaiah Moss had seven of his 13 points after halftime for Kansas.

The Mountaineers (18-6, 6-5) fell flat after leading by as many as nine points in each half and lost at home for the first time this season.

Freshman Oscar Tshiebwe led West Virginia with 14 points and nine rebounds, but had just two points after halftime. Jordan McCabe tied a season high with 10 points.

Georgia Tech 64, No. 5 Louisville 58: Moses Wright made

a huge block at one end, then powered inside for a basket that helped the host Yellow Jackets snap the Cardinals' 10-game winning streak.

No. 23 Creighton 87, No. 10 Seton Hall 82: At Newark, N.J., Damien Jefferson, Ty-Shon Alexander, Marcus Zegarowski and Denzel Mahoney all scored 18 points and the Bluejays beat the Pirates for their second road win over a Top 10 team this month.

No. 11 Auburn 95, Alabama 91 (OT): Austin Wiley had 18 points, a career-high 17 rebounds and five blocked shots and the host Tigers beat the rival Crimson Tide in overtime.

No. 15 Villanova 72, No. 18 Marquette 71: Jeremiah Robinson-Earl had 17 points and 11 rebounds and the host Wildcats held on to beat the Golden Eagles and snap a three-game skid.

No. 19 Butler 66, Xavier 61: Sean McDermott scored 14 points to lead the host Bulldogs past the Musketeers.

Kamar Baldwin added 11 points and Jordan Tucker scored 10 for Butler (19-6, 7-5 Big East).

No. 20 Houston 62, South Florida 58: Quentin Grimes scored nine of his 22 points in the final 3:28, helping the visiting Cougars hold off the Bulls.

Army 65, Lafayette 48: Matt Wilson scored 20 points with 13 rebounds and Josh Caldwell had a double-double as the host Black Knights subdued the Leopards.

Army (12-12, 7-6 Patriot League) led 31-23 at intermission before Lafayette (15-9, 7-6) closed within 37-35 with 15:59 left on a layup by Justin Jaworski.

Kyle Stout's three-pointer tied it at 39 before a 13-0 Black Knights run sealed the Leop-

ards' fate. Army made five layups and Tommy Funk's three-pointer with 8:14 left made it 52-39.

Navy 60, Bucknell 59: Cam Davis had 22 points as the host Midshipmen defeated the Bison.

John Carter Jr. had 10 points for Navy (13-11, 7-6 Patriot League). Tyler Nelson added seven rebounds and Richard Njoku had three blocks.

The Midshipmen took the lead for good, 46-45, on a free throw by Davis with 7:50 remaining. Davis hit a three-pointer with 3:09 to go, giving Navy a 56-50 lead. Bucknell trailed 59-56 when the Bison's Andrew Funk missed a three-pointer with 14 seconds remaining. Tyler Nelson added a free throw to give Midshipmen a four-point lead that proved necessary after Bucknell's Walter Ellis made a three-pointer at the buzzer.

NHL roundup

Pastrnak's hat trick helps Bruins roll past Canadiens

Associated Press

BOSTON — David Pastrnak has been one of the Bruins' most reliable scorers this season.

His latest big night came at the expense of one of Boston's longtime rivals.

Pastrnak had his fourth hat trick of the season and the Bruins rolled to their third straight win over the Montreal Canadiens, 4-1 on Wednesday night.

"Obviously playing Montreal, it's a big rival," Pastrnak said. "These games are always fun."

And even bigger for a Boston team that has won seven of its last eight and took three of four in the season series with its northern nemesis. The Bruins outscored the Canadiens 15-3 in the final three meetings. Montreal has lost two straight as it tries to stay in the hunt for

the playoffs.

Patrice Bergeron added an empty-net goal and Tuukka Rask had 28 saves for the Bruins to improve to 13-0-6 at home this season.

Marco Scandella scored Montreal's lone goal. Canadiens goaltender Carey Price, who had allowed two or fewer goals in seven of his previous 11 starts, had 34 saves.

Pastrnak now has eight career regular-season hat tricks and nine overall, all but one coming in the last two seasons. He is the first Bruins player with four hat tricks in a season since Phil Esposito during the 1974-75 season. The only player in Bruins history with more hat tricks in a single season was Esposito, who had seven in 1970-71. Pastrnak becomes the second player in the NHL

this season with four hat tricks, joining Washington's Alex Ovechkin.

Canucks 3, Blackhawks 0: Jacob Markstrom had a career-high 49 saves as host Vancouver beat Chicago after retiring the numbers of Daniel and Henrik Sedin.

Brandon Sutter had a goal and two assists, and Bo Horvat and Adam Gaudette also scored to help the Canucks win their second straight after a four-game skid (0-3-1). Markstrom was marvelous in recording his second shutout of the season and fifth of his career.

Corey Crawford finished with 17 saves as Chicago lost its season-high fifth straight (0-3-2).

There was an electric atmosphere in the building for the retirement ceremony. The sold-

out crowd was on its feet cheering as Henrik Sedin's No. 33 and Daniel Sedin's No. 22 were raised to the rafters at Rogers Arena.

Kings 5, Flames 3: Tyler Toffoli and Austin Wagner scored 39 seconds apart in the second period and host Los Angeles went on to beat Calgary.

Kurtis MacDermid, Jeff Carter and Sean Walker also scored to help the Kings end a five-game losing streak. Calvin Petersen stopped 35 shots to get his first win of the season in his second start.

Elias Lindholm had two goals and Mikael Backlund also scored for Calgary. Johnny Gaudreau had two assists and David Rittich finished with 28 saves in the Flames' fourth loss in six games.