

## US boosts military aid to Ukraine

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged western nations on Wednesday to remain united in the face of what he called “relentless” Russian aggression against Ukraine and reassured Ukraine’s leader of their support while calling for Ukrainians to stand strong.

Blinken told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a visit to Kyiv that the U.S. and its allies were steadfast in backing his country and its democratic aspirations amid growing fears of a potentially imminent Russian invasion.

Blinken said Russia had plans to boost its military presence of some 100,000 troops along the Ukrainian border and suggested that number could double soon. Blinken also said he would not be presenting a formal written response to Russia’s demands when he meets on Friday with Russia’s foreign minister.

“The Ukrainian people chose a democratic and European path in 1991. They took to the Maidan to defend that choice in 2013, and unfortunately ever since you have faced relentless aggression from Moscow,” Blinken

said, referring to Ukraine’s trajectory since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

“Our strength depends on preserving our unity and that includes unity within Ukraine,” he told Zelenskyy. “I think one of Moscow’s long-standing goals has been to try to sow divisions between and within our countries and quite simply, we cannot and will not let them do that.”

The Biden administration said earlier it was providing an additional \$200 million in defensive military aid to Ukraine to help protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Zelenskyy thanked Blinken for the assistance, which was approved in late December but not formally confirmed until Wednesday, as well as for his visit and assurances of support.

“This (military) support not only speaks to our strategic plans of Ukraine joining the alliance, but more importantly to the level of our military, our military supplies,” he said, referring to Kyiv’s desire to join NATO over Russia’s strong objections.

“If we want dramatically fast steps in modernizing the military, we need help es-

pecially in these tough times,” Zelenskyy said. “Your visit is very important. It underlines once again your powerful support of our independence and sovereignty.”

The aid announcement came at the start of Blinken’s hastily arranged visit as U.S. and western officials stepped up increasingly dire warnings about a possible Russian invasion.

Blinken said Russian President Vladimir Putin is now in position to launch military action against Ukraine at will and at very short notice with more than 100,000 troops massed on its border and plans to add more. He said that number “could double on relatively short order,” but he did not provide details.

“We know that there are plans in place to increase that force even more on very short notice and that gives President Putin the capacity, also on very short notice, to take further aggressive action against Ukraine,” Blinken told staff at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv.

After his meetings with Zelenskyy and other senior Ukrainian officials, Blinken plans a short trip to Berlin for talks with German and other European allies on Thursday.

## Discharges ramping up for sailors who refuse vaccine

**BY FRANK ANDREWS**

*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has opened a fast lane to discharge for sailors who refuse a COVID-19 vaccine, to “maximize speed and equity in achieving a fully vaccinated force,” according to the chief of naval personnel.

Sailors eligible to exit active duty by June 1 and who refuse the vaccine will be discharged honorably under an expedited process, barring special circumstances, according to a naval administrative message Dec. 15. To qualify, sailors must be eligible for separation, retirement or transfer to the Reserve on or before June 1.

“In order to ensure a fully vaccinated force, U.S. Navy policy is, first, that all Navy service members receive the vaccine as directed and, second, that any who refuse the vaccine be processed for separation at the earliest possi-

ble opportunity,” the chief of naval personnel, Vice Adm. John B. Nowell Jr., wrote in Naval Administrative Message, or NAVADMIN, 283/21.

As of Jan. 12, nearly 8,200 sailors remained unvaccinated: 5,209 active-duty sailors and 2,968 in the Ready Reserve, according to the most recent update to the Navy’s COVID-19 online tracker. The service had nearly 347,300 sailors in November, according to the Defense Manpower Data Center.

Even though the vaccination deadlines have passed, the discharge process will pause or stop for sailors who get vaccinated and report their status through their chains of command, according to the Navy’s Sailor-to-Sailor newsletter earlier this month.

Nov. 28 was the vaccination deadline for active-duty sailors, and Dec. 28 for Ready Reserve sailors.

“While the vast majority of Navy service members have already received the vaccine,

it remains in the interest of the Navy to encourage remaining Navy service members to become fully vaccinated as soon as possible and, at such time, consider them for retention,” Nowell wrote in the message.

Sailors who have applied for a vaccine exemption will not be processed, but if denied an exemption they must start their shots within five days or face discharge, according to the message.

Since Jan. 12, the Navy has issued 640 exemptions: eight permanent and 244 temporary medical exemptions and 68 for administrative reasons, according to the Navy’s online tracker.

Of the 3,038 requests from active-duty sailors for religious exemptions, the Navy has granted none.

The Air Force and Army have also not approved any requests for vaccine waivers on religious grounds, as of Monday.

# US special ops presses on in Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER

*Stars and Stripes*

STUTT GART, Germany — U.S. special operators are continuing with a mission to build up an elite fighting force in Ukraine, military officials said, even as Russia threatens invasion with its thousands of troops, tanks and artillery massed along their borders.

“The bottom line is that our training mission in Ukraine is ongoing,” Lt. Col. Juan Martinez, spokesman for U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, said Tuesday.

Martinez said there are a “ton of outside factors at work,” but that the command hasn’t stepped back from Ukraine.

“We continue to view our mission in Ukraine as part of an ongoing effort in enhancing Special Operations Forces capabilities as a keystone for regional stability,” he said.

The Stuttgart-based SOCEUR has quietly operated from out of a training center outside of Kyiv for the past several years. The mission’s focus is assisting Ukrainian forces to defend more effectively against

Russian aggression.

The presence of U.S. special operators is part of a small American military contingent that remains in Ukraine. There are also more than 100 Florida National Guard troops in Ukraine in an advisory role, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday.

Martinez declined to say how many special operators are now in Ukraine, citing security concerns.

Whether they would remain there in the event of invasion isn’t clear, but the Biden administration has already ruled out the direct involvement of U.S. troops in any conflict with Russian forces in Ukraine. Still, there could be special implications for SOCEUR’s mission should a Russian invasion turn into an effort to occupy large parts of the country.

On Friday, The New York Times reported that the White House was considering a plan to fund, train and arm a resistance movement inside Ukraine in the event of an occupation. The plan could involve helping Ukrainian resistance fighters by providing

training inside NATO countries such as Poland, Romania and Slovakia, the Times reported, citing administration officials.

For the Green Berets and Navy SEALs assigned to SOCEUR, that could mean a heavy focus on guerrilla warfare instruction, a specialty of such units.

During the Cold War, NATO created a network of clandestine, stay-behind units in many European countries. These consisted of troops tasked with conducting intelligence and reconnaissance operations, as well as guerrilla attacks, in the event of a Warsaw Pact invasion.

But Moscow’s military intentions remain unclear. A U.S. contingency plan to back an insurgency would be rendered moot if Russia’s aim is to dismantle Ukraine’s military rather than occupy territory.

And while some allies, including the United States and United Kingdom, have delivered anti-tank weaponry to Ukraine in hopes of giving Kyiv a boost in conventional combat capabilities, Russia still has the overwhelming military advantage.

## Fewer but better qualified recruits enlisted in 2020, Rand data shows

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

The Pentagon took in fewer recruits in 2020 than in prior years as the coronavirus pandemic swept across the globe, but those accepted into the military were generally of higher quality than in recent years, a new think tank report found.

The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps shipped fewer recruits to boot camps in fiscal year 2020 than a year earlier, as the services shut down their recruiting facilities and moved their efforts to attract new troops entirely online for months, according to the study by the Rand Corp. published Tuesday.

But the quality of new troops — based largely on aptitude test scores and education level — rose for the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps while remaining roughly the same for the Navy in 2020 compared to 2019, the study found.

The study’s findings largely match assertions made by top military officials in recent years, who have repeatedly touted increases

in the quality of the troops that they are bringing into the military and their recruiters’ ability to adapt to new challenges brought on by the ongoing pandemic.

Rand said it found the military services brought in about 16,000 fewer recruits in 2020 than the roughly 171,000 new troops who joined in 2019, but better-than-expected retention numbers among those with the option to leave the military allowed the services to meet their Congress-mandated force sizes at the end of 2020. Rand found while those interested in military service faced new challenges to enlisting in 2020 without in-person access to recruiters because of schools and recruiting centers shutting their doors in an attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus, there was no indication that fewer young Americans were interested in military service.

The Rand study found the military services likely lowered their recruiting goals during fiscal year 2020 because of the sudden uptick in experienced service members choosing to stay in the military or return to service.

## Firm wins \$20M Navy contract for atomic clock

By JONATHAN SNYDER

*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has awarded a small New York firm a \$20 million contract to develop a compact, next-generation mercury ion atomic clock, the Pentagon announced recently.

Frequency Electronics Inc., of Mitchel Field, N.Y., is developing the clock for Navy applications aboard ships, aircraft and spacecraft, CEO Stan Sloane told Stars and Stripes in an email Friday. The Office of Naval Research issued the contract, according to a Pentagon announcement Jan. 10. The completion date is Jan. 11, 2024.

The contract calls for timepieces suitable for Navy platforms that require better performance in environments that include roll, pitch, yaw, heave and vibration, Sloane wrote.

“The Mercury Ion technology is expected to improve clock stability by an order of magnitude or better over what is currently fielded in tactical platforms,” according to Sloane.

# Spike in omicron deaths on the way in US

Associated Press

The fast-moving omicron variant may cause less severe disease on average, but COVID-19 deaths in the United States are climbing and modelers forecast 50,000 to 300,000 more Americans could die by the time the wave subsides in mid-March.

The seven-day rolling average for daily new COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. has been trending upward since mid-November, reaching nearly 1,700 on Jan. 17 — still below the peak of 3,300 in January 2021.

COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents started rising slightly two weeks ago, although still at a rate 10 times less than last year before most residents were vaccinated.

Despite signs omicron causes milder disease on average, the unprecedented level of infection spreading through the country, with cases still soaring in many states, means many vulnerable

people will become severely sick.

If the higher end of projections comes to pass, that would push total U.S. deaths from COVID-19 over 1 million by early spring.

“A lot of people are still going to die because of how transmissible omicron has been,” said University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi. “It unfortunately is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Morgues are starting to run out of space in Johnson County, Kan., said Dr. Sanmi Areola, director of the health department. More than 30 residents have died in the county this year, the vast majority of them unvaccinated.

But the notion that a generally less severe variant could still take the lives of thousands of people has been difficult for health experts to convey.

The math of it — that a small

percentage of a very high number of infections can yield a very high number of deaths — is difficult to visualize.

“Overall, you’re going to see more sick people even if you as an individual have a lower chance of being sick,” said Katrina Shea of Pennsylvania State University, who co-leads a team that pulls together several pandemic models and shares the combined projections with the White House.

The wave of deaths heading for the U.S. will crest in late January or early February, Shea said. In early February, weekly deaths could equal or exceed the delta peak, and possibly even surpass the previous U.S. peak in deaths last year.

Some unknown portion of these deaths are among people infected with the delta variant, but experts have said omicron is also claiming lives.

“This is omicron-driven,”

Shea said of the coming wave of deaths.

The combined models project 1.5 million Americans will be hospitalized and 191,000 will die from mid-December through mid-March. Taking into account the uncertainty in the models, U.S. deaths during the omicron wave could range from 58,000 to 305,000.

Overburdened hospitals could also contribute to more deaths, said Marc Lipsitch of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and scientific director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s forecasting center.

“In places with extremely short staffing and overloads of patients, as the medical professionals have been telling us, the quality of care begins to suffer,” Lipsitch said. “That may also lead to higher death rates, but that’s not in any of the models that I’m aware of.”

# Airlines cancel, change flights to US over 5G

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Major international airlines canceled flights heading to the United States or changed the planes they’re using Wednesday, the latest complication in a dispute over concerns that 5G cellphone service could interfere with aircraft technology.

Some airlines said they were warned that the Boeing 777, a plane used by carriers worldwide, was particularly affected by the new high-speed wireless service. The aircraft is the workhorse for Dubai-based Emirates, a key carrier for East-West travel, and its flight schedule took one of the biggest hits.

It was not clear how disruptive the cancellations would be. Several airlines said they would try to merely use different planes to maintain their service.

The cancellations and changes came a day after cellphone carriers AT&T and Verizon said they would postpone new wireless service near some U.S. airports planned for this week. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration has cleared a number of aircraft to fly into airports with

5G signals, but the Boeing 777 is not on the list.

Similar mobile networks have been deployed in dozens of other countries — sometimes with concessions like reducing the power of the networks near airports, as France has done. But in the U.S., the issue has pitted the FAA and the airlines against the Federal Communications Commission and the telecoms companies.

The 5G service uses a segment of the radio spectrum that is close to that used by radio altimeters, which are devices that measure the height of aircraft above the ground and help pilots land in low visibility. The FCC, which set a buffer between the 5G band and the spectrum that planes use, determined that it could be used safely in the vicinity of air traffic. AT&T and Verizon have said their equipment will not interfere with aircraft electronics.

But FAA officials saw a potential problem, and the telecom companies agreed to a pause while it is addressed.

On Wednesday, Emirates announced it would halt flights to several American cities due to “operational concerns associat-

ed with the planned deployment of 5G mobile network services in the U.S. at certain airports.” It said it would continue flights to Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

Japan’s All Nippon Airways canceled 20 flights over the issue.

Japan Airlines said it will stop using the Boeing 777 in the continental U.S. for now. Eight of its flights were affected Wednesday.

But Air France said it planned to continue flying its Boeing 777s into American airports. It did not explain why it didn’t change its aircraft.

Air India also announced on Twitter it would cancel flights to Chicago; Newark, N.J.; New York and San Francisco because of the 5G issue. Korean Air, Hong Kong’s Cathay Pacific and Austrian Airlines said they substituted different planes for flights that were scheduled to use 777s. Germany’s Lufthansa also swapped out one kind of 747 for another on some U.S.-bound flights.

British Airways canceled several planned U.S.-bound Boeing 777 flights and changed aircraft on others.

# AG: Trump's company misled on wealth

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York attorney general's office late Tuesday told a court its investigators have uncovered evidence that former President Donald Trump's company used "fraudulent or misleading" asset valuations to get loans and tax benefits.

The court filing said state authorities haven't yet decided whether to bring a lawsuit in connection with the allegations, but that investigators need to question Trump and his two eldest children as part of the probe.

The Trump Organization issued a statement Wednesday calling the civil investigation "baseless" and politically motivated.

In the court documents, Attorney General Letitia James' office gave its most detailed accounting yet of a long-running in-

vestigation of allegations that Trump's company exaggerated the value of assets to get favorable loan terms, or misstated what land was worth to slash its tax burden. The Trump Organization, it said, had overstated the value of land donations made in New York and California on paperwork submitted to the IRS to justify several million dollars in tax deductions.

When giving estimates of Trump's wealth, the company misreported the size of his Manhattan penthouse, saying it was nearly three times its actual size — a difference in value of about \$200 million, James' office said, citing deposition testimony from Trump's longtime financial chief Allen Weisselberg, who was charged with tax fraud last year in a parallel criminal investigation.

James' office detailed its findings in a

court motion seeking to force Trump, his daughter Ivanka Trump and his son Donald Trump Jr. to comply with subpoenas seeking their testimony.

Investigators, the court papers said, had "developed significant additional evidence indicating that the Trump Organization used fraudulent or misleading asset valuations to obtain a host of economic benefits, including loans, insurance coverage and tax deductions."

In its statement, The Trump Organization said "the only one misleading the public is Letitia James."

Trump's legal team has sought to block the subpoenas, calling them "an unprecedented and unconstitutional maneuver." They said James is improperly attempting to obtain testimony that could be used in the parallel criminal investigation.

## Rudy Giuliani is among Trump lawyers subpoenaed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House committee investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection issued subpoenas to Rudy Giuliani and other members of Donald Trump's legal team who filed bogus legal challenges to the 2020 election that fueled the lie that the race had been stolen from the former president.

The committee is continuing to widen its scope into Trump's orbit, on Tuesday demanding information and testimony from Giuliani, Jenna Ellis, Sidney Powell and Boris Epshteyn. All four publicly pushed Trump's baseless voter fraud claims in the months

after the election.

"The four individuals we've subpoenaed today advanced unsupported theories about election fraud, pushed efforts to overturn the election results or were in direct contact with the former President about attempts to stop the counting of electoral votes," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, said in a statement.

Epshteyn in a tweet called the committee illegitimate and its efforts part of a "witch hunt" against Trump and his supporters. The others who were subpoenaed did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Trump's legal team sought to overturn the election results in the battleground states by filing lawsuits alleging widespread irregularities with ballots and claims by partisan poll watchers who said they couldn't see everything going on, in part because of precautions taken as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 50 lawsuits were filed, mostly in battleground states.

The lawsuits were soundly battered down in the courts, sometimes within days of filing. But the legal challenges and the multiple press conferences held by Giuliani and others helped galvanize Trump supporters behind the

idea that the election had been stolen, even though Trump's own attorney general said there was no evidence of widespread fraud and local officials said it had been the most secure election in history.

The committee said it is seeking records and deposition testimony from Giuliani, the 76-year-old former New York City mayor once celebrated for his leadership after 9/11, over his promotion of election fraud claims on behalf of Trump. The panel is also seeking information about Giuliani's reported efforts to persuade state legislators to take steps to overturn the election results.

## Tsunami badly damages 3 of Tonga's smaller islands

Associated Press

SYDNEY — Three of Tonga's smaller islands suffered serious damage from tsunami waves, officials and the Red Cross said Wednesday, as a wider picture begins to emerge of the destruction caused by the eruption of an undersea volcano near the Pacific archipelago nation.

Communications have been down throughout Tonga since the eruption on Saturday, but a ship made it to the outlying islands of Nomuka, Mango and Fonoifua on

Wednesday, and reported back that few homes remain standing after settlements were hit with 49-foot-high waves, said Katie Greenwood, the head of delegation in the Pacific for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which had two people aboard the vessel to help assess the damage.

"Very unfortunate information has come to light overnight about the three islands that we were really worried about — that they have all suffered devastating consequences

as an effect of these incoming waves," she told The Associated Press in an interview from Fiji. "Most of the structures and dwellings on those islands have been completely destroyed."

It is not clear yet what assistance Tonga needs or wants from the international community, and complicating matters is the country's concern over the possible spread of COVID-19, which it has effectively kept outside its borders except for one case reported in a traveler from New Zealand in October.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Motorists mystified by 'singing road'

**CT** STONINGTON — It's been compared to the sound of a pod of humpback whales, or the soundtrack from a horror movie.

The unusual noises on a stretch of Interstate 95 in southeastern Connecticut have gotten it dubbed "the singing road" or "the singing highway," and it has motorists perplexed.

Some who responded to queries from The Day said it had them worried about a problem with their car's tires or bearings.

Transportation officials told The Day that the sound heard between exits 91 and 92 in Stonington comes from "high frequency rolling" of the roadway that's done in chilly temperatures — part of a general resurfacing project.

### Sea turtle swims wild after long rehab period

**MS** GULFPORT — An endangered sea turtle is back in the ocean after more than a year of rehabilitation at aquariums in Boston and Mississippi.

The Mississippi Aquarium released the Kemp's ridley sea turtle named Typhoon into the Mississippi Sound at Biloxi.

Kemp's ridleys are the world's smallest sea turtles and the most endangered of those found in U.S. waters.

The turtle was one of two Kemp's ridleys that the New England Aquarium asked the Gulfport aquarium to care for as veterinarians in Boston prepared for this year's wave of cold-stunned sea turtles.

Typhoon was treated for pneu-

monia, anemia and an infected shoulder joint.

### Streets named after airman, police officer

**LA** MANDEVILLE — Two streets in a Louisiana city will be named after two notable hometown figures: a Tuskegee Airman and the first Black female police officer.

The Mandeville City Council voted to rename streets for the airman, Samuel Sams Jr., and for law officer Beverly Fulton Watson, The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate reported.

Avenue A will now be known as Corporal Samuel Sams Drive, after the World War II veteran who served with the famed 99th Fighter Squadron.

Avenue D will be renamed Officer Beverly Watson Way to honor the 20-year police veteran who retired in 2007.

### Ice road on large lake opens for 2nd year

**MN** WARROAD — A 37-mile ice highway in Minnesota that takes motorists across the mammoth Lake of the Woods to the northernmost point in the contiguous United States is open for the second straight year, with a toll of \$250 per vehicle.

The road, which costs an estimated \$1,500 per mile for plowing and other upkeep, allows people to bypass a drive into Canada, or get there in a vehicle rather than a plane or snowmobile.

The ice road was created last winter when the Canadian border was closed to nonessential travel from the U.S. amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota Public Radio News reported.

The speed limit is 20 mph, so it

takes about two hours to get from end to end.

### Woman faces charges for fake kidnapping

**SD** SIOUX FALLS — A Sioux Falls woman accused of faking her own kidnapping from a local pizza restaurant told detectives she wanted a break from her husband, according to court documents.

The woman was charged with attempted grand theft and making a false report to authorities.

Court documents said the woman worked for Domino's Pizza and last called her husband Feb. 10, saying she was surrounded by armed individuals who were demanding money. Her husband then started to receive text messages demanding money for the safe return of his wife, officials said.

Police were able to ping the woman's phone to a Culver's restaurant in Brookings. That's where the Brookings SWAT team found the woman's car with her and another man inside, according to court documents.

### State unveils 'all-in-one' tourist admission tickets

**AL** BIRMINGHAM — A new system will allow travelers to purchase "all-in-one" mobile tickets for admission into attractions in different areas of Alabama, tourism officials said.

With six ticket packages available by region and attraction types, the new system allows tourists and tour operators to create itineraries without extra cost.

"The message to consumers is that they can spend less and do more in Alabama with the 'All-in-One Ticket,'" said Grey Brennan,

deputy director of the Alabama Tourism Department.

### Animals, including dead horse, taken from home

**CA** OLIVEHURST — Sheriff's deputies removed dozens of animals including a dead horse from a Northern California home and are seeking a felony cruelty warrant for a suspect, authorities said.

A search warrant was served last week at the residence in Olivehurst, where deputies found 61 animals living in "deplorable conditions," the Yuba County Sheriff's Department said.

The animals included 21 pigs, 12 dogs, five chickens, two goats, two lambs, two cats, two rabbits, two cows, one horse and one bull, the Sacramento Bee reported.

### Ex-Catholic chancellor faces new theft charge

**NE** OMAHA — A former chancellor for the Roman Catholic Church's Archdiocese of Omaha, who is already charged with two felony counts, was charged with a new count of theft after authorities said he stole over \$100,000 from a church in Sarpy County.

The Rev. Michael Gutsell faces a preliminary hearing on the new charge on Feb. 8, the Omaha World-Herald reported.

Gutsell was first arrested in October and charged with attempted theft and abuse of a vulnerable adult.

Police said Gutsell admitted to taking \$180,000 from the bank accounts of retired Omaha priest Theodore Richling, who was suffering from Alzheimer's at the time.

— From wire reports

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# Morant increasing stock

Associated Press

A season that started with All-Star goals for Memphis guard Ja Morant has grown far beyond that.

The third-year point guard has emerged as a legitimate MVP candidate.

Opposing coaches use words like “special,” a “true All-Star” and “one of the NBA’s best players period” to describe Morant.

“I don’t know any other way to put it,” Lakers assistant coach David Fizdale said. “The guy is a superstar. I don’t see anybody that’s had a real true answer for the guy. What he’s done against some of the best teams in the league, the best defensive coaches, the best defensive minds, has been really impressive.”

Morant has had high expectations since the Grizzlies drafted him with the No. 2 overall selection in 2019. He helped end a playoff drought, leading the team to play-in wins over San Antonio and Golden State to earn the No. 8 seed before Memphis lost to Utah in five games to cap his second season.

Now he’s helped the team become one of the NBA’s best. The Grizzlies have won of 22 of 27, including 12 of the last 13, and only Phoenix has more wins than Memphis’ 31 tied with Golden State. The Grizzlies also have road wins over both the Suns and Warriors this season.

And Morant is a major reason why.

Morant has improved his scoring each of his first three seasons, and he is averaging a career-high 24.4 points a game along with 5.7 rebounds and 6.7 assists. He joins Stephen Curry, LeBron James, Luka Dončić and Nikola Jokic as the only NBA players averaging at least 24 points, 5 rebounds and 6 assists a game.

Curry, James and Jokic have a combined seven MVP awards.

“I’ve been working to be in the position that I am right now,” Morant said after becoming the only NBA player this season to win consecutive player of the week awards. “I’ve just got to continue to keep playing my game. Continue to be aggressive out there on the floor and do whatever it takes for us to get a win.”

Coaches around the league are taking notice.

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said Morant reminds him of Tony Parker with how easily the Memphis guard gets to the rim no matter what a team does to try to stop him.

“He also has a little mid-range game with the floater, he’s starting to shoot the three ball well, his speed is uncommon and when you put all those things together and add unselfishness and competitiveness to that, you’ve got a hell of a player on your hands,” Popovich said.

# Towns’ 3-point play lifts Wolves

Associated Press

NEW YORK — This was always Jacqueline Cruz-Towns’ favorite game, when her family could gather to watch her son play the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden.

She died of complications related to COVID-19 in April 2020, but Karl-Anthony Towns’ father, sister and other friends and family were in the arena Tuesday night.

He gave them a great memory — and the Minnesota Timberwolves a big victory.

Towns converted a go-ahead three-point play with 29 seconds left and the Timberwolves edged the Knicks 112-110.

Towns, who grew up nearby in New Jersey, looked up toward the roof on his first trip to the free-throw line, a way of remembering his mother.

His last trip to the line ended up winning the game.

“I told my dad everyone’s going to get a chance to have their Madison Square Garden moment and I felt that was for me tonight. That was the biggest moment that I’ve had in MSG,” Towns said. “Great crowd, great atmosphere, great energy and I got to silence everybody, so that makes it even better.”

New York got a strong game from Kemba Walker in his return from a nine-game absence with a sore left knee and nursed a lead for most of the fourth quarter.

But Minnesota rallied and then held on when Alec Burks missed a three-pointer that would have won it for the Knicks.

Anthony Edwards scored 21 points and Towns had 20 for the Wolves, who won for the sixth time in eight games to level their record at 22-22. D’Angelo Russell added 17 points.

Evan Fournier scored 27 points and Julius Randle had 21 for New York, which lost for the second straight day and dipped back below .500 at 22-23. Walker scored 17 of his 19 points in the second half.

**Warriors 102, Pistons 86:** Klay Thompson scored 21 points, Stephen Curry had 18, and host Golden State returned from a tough trip to beat Detroit.

Curry, back after a one-game absence, shot 6-for-11 with four three-pointers and added eight assists. He fell on his right hand during a win at Chicago on Friday, then missed Sunday’s 119-99 loss at Minnesota.

Andrew Wiggins scored 19 points for a Warriors team happy to be home for an extended stretch after having lost five of seven, including three of four on the road.

# Prescott apologizes for comment

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Dak Prescott apologized Tuesday night for his comments that condoned Dallas Cowboys fans throwing objects at NFL officials after the team’s playoff loss, with the quarterback saying in a series of tweets that he deeply regretted what he said after the game.

When initially asked about objects such as water bottles being thrown at Dallas players as they left the field at the end of their 23-17 wild-card loss to the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday, Prescott said it was “sad” fans would do that. After another reporter said it appeared that officials were the targets, the quarterback responded, “Credit to them then.”

When given another chance to answer a question about fans throwing objects at officials, Prescott said, “I guess it’s why the refs took off and got out of there so

fast. I think everybody was upset about the way that this thing played out.”

Prescott had since received plenty of pushback nationally for his comments.

“I deeply regret the comments I made regarding the officials after the game on Sunday. I was caught up in the emotion of a disappointing loss and my words were uncalled for and unfair,” Prescott wrote in the first of consecutive posts on his verified Twitter account Tuesday night. A second post immediately followed, “I hold the NFL Officials in the highest regard and have always respected their professionalism and the difficulty of their jobs. The safety of everyone who attends a game or participates on the field of a sporting event is a very serious matter.”

In the third, he wrote, “That was a mistake on my behalf, and I am sorry.”

# No. 5 Baylor ends slump at two games

Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — LJ Cryer scored a career-high 25 points in his second start of the season, and No. 5 Baylor snapped a two-game skid with a 77-68 defeat of West Virginia.

The Bears (16-2, 4-2 Big 12) bounced back after losing twice at home and relinquishing the No. 1 ranking. The defending national champions have won 13 straight away from home.

Matthew Mayer added 20 points for Baylor. Adam Flagler scored 14 and Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua scored 10.

Malik Curry scored 19 points for the Mountaineers (13-4, 2-3), who have lost two straight and saw their streak of 10 straight wins at home to start the season snapped. Taz Sherman added 18 points and Sean McNeil scored 17.

**Florida State 79, No. 6 Duke 78 (OT):** RayQuan Evans made a pair of free throws with 12 seconds left in overtime, John Butler blocked Wendell Moore Jr.'s driving attempt in the lane with 2 seconds remaining, and the host Seminoles stunned the Blue Devils.

FSU (11-5, 5-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) let a nine-point lead slip away in regulation and needed Evans' driving layup high off the glass with 2 seconds left to send the game to overtime. It held on for its first win over a ranked Duke team since Jan. 10, 2017.

**No. 7 Kansas 67, Oklahoma 64:** Jalen Wilson scored 16 points, Christian Braun hit a tie-breaking three-pointer with 10.9 seconds left, and the Jayhawks won on the road.

Braun's corner three gave Kansas a 65-62 lead. The Jayhawks fouled Jordan Goldwire with 6.1 seconds remaining to prevent him from shooting a potential tying three, and he made both free throws to make it 65-64.

**No. 8 Wisconsin 82, Northwestern 76:** Johnny Davis scored 27 points and the visiting Badgers beat the Wildcats.

Wisconsin (15-2, 6-1 Big Ten) won its seventh straight, building on its best start since it was also 15-2 during the 2014-15 season.

**No. 10 Houston 74, South Florida 55:** Kyler Edwards had

23 points and seven rebounds, Fabian White Jr. added 16 points and five rebounds, and the host Cougars won their eighth straight.

Josh Carlton finished with 15 points and five rebounds, and Taze Moore scored 13 points for Houston (16-2, 5-0 American Athletic Conference).

**No. 18 Texas Tech 72, No. 15 Iowa State 60:** Kevin Obanor scored 13 of his 15 points after halftime as the host Red Raiders earned their third consecutive victory against a ranked opponent.

Since losing at Iowa State with only seven healthy players two weeks ago, Texas Tech (14-4, 4-2 Big 12) has won four of five. That included back-to-back wins over top-10 teams Kansas and Baylor.

**No. 19 Ohio State 83, IUPUI 37:** E.J. Liddell had 13 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Buckeyes never trailed against the Jaguars.

Liddell extended his streak of double-figure scoring to 27 games and recorded his third double-double this season.

**No. 22 Loyola Chicago 77,**

**Evansville 48:** Luke Williamson made five three-pointers and scored 15 points, and the visiting Ramblers won their 10th straight game.

**Kansas State 66, No. 23 Texas 65:** Mark Smith scored 22 points, Nijel Pack made a go-ahead layup with 1:13 left, and the visiting Wildcats held the Longhorns scoreless for the final 3½ minutes.

**No. 24 Tennessee 68, Vanderbilt 60:** Uros Plavsic made a tiebreaking short jumper with 55 seconds left, and the visiting Vols scored the final eight points to beat the in-state rival Commodores for the ninth straight time.

**No. 25 UConn 76, Butler 59:** Adama Sanogo had 13 points and 15 rebounds to lead the host Huskies past the Bulldogs in the first of two games this week between the programs.

**Boise State 62, Air Force 56:** Tyson Degenhart registered 19 points as the host Broncos stretched their winning streak to 10 games.

Nik Jackson had 17 points for the Falcons (8-7, 1-3).

# Osaka, Barty advance toward showdown Down Under

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — For the first set, Naomi Osaka's rediscovered love of the game meant it was anything but fun for Madison Brengle in the second round of the Australian Open.

The defending champion conceded only four points in the first four games Wednesday and rifled forehand winners seemingly at will as she breezed to 6-0 in a mere 20 minutes.

The second set started with Brengle celebrating a service hold like she'd finished a long-distance race, but gradually the No. 54-ranked American's keep-the-ball-in-play strategy ground down Osaka to a stage

where she finally converted a break-point opportunity — after missing her first nine chances.

That triggered a change in the former No. 1-ranked Osaka, who responded by breaking back immediately and reeling off the last nine points to complete a 6-0, 6-4 victory. She finished with 37 winners and 32 unforced errors.

Osaka will next face Amanda Anisimova, a 20-year-old American who beat Olympic gold medalist Belinda Bencic 6-2, 7-5. The winner of that is likely to face top-ranked Ash Barty in the fourth round.

Osaka won the Australian Open last year, her fourth

Grand Slam title, but then withdrew from the French Open and skipped Wimbledon as she took a break for her mental health. She then was ousted early at the U.S. Open.

After a long offseason to reset, she's unbeaten in five matches in Australia this year.

Asked how she rated her form, Osaka said that's not how she's approaching things.

"Honestly I'm trying not to do that," she said in an on-court TV interview. "I'm a bit of a perfectionist. If I compare myself with the past, I'll never be satisfied."

"The goal for me is just to have fun ... (and) I think we're accomplishing that."

Since the draw for the first

major of the year was made, a big focus has been on a potential encounter between Osaka and Barty, the 2021 Wimbledon and 2019 French Open champion who is aiming to be the first Australian woman since 1978 to win her home championship.

Barty was front and center when the tournament celebrated its inaugural First Nations Day, albeit only for 52 minutes as she beat 142nd-ranked qualifier Lucia Bronzetti 6-1, 6-1.

Rafael Nadal didn't get it all his own way in the subsequent match on Rod Laver Arena, needing five match points before beating 126th-ranked German qualifier Yannick Hanfmann 6-2, 6-3, 6-4.

# Ovechkin scores 27th goal, Caps beat Jets in overtime

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored his league-leading 27th goal of the season, Tom Wilson scored in overtime and the Washington Capitals beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-3 Tuesday night.

Wilson's goal 26 seconds into the 3-on-3 OT gave the Capitals their first victory in that situation this season. They lost their previous seven games decided after regulation but before a shootout.

Washington needed overtime after Pierre-Luc Dubois tied it with 1:05 left. Vitek Vanecek stopped 30 of the 33 shots he faced, rebounding from allowing two goals in the opening minutes.

Ovechkin beat Connor Hellebuyck, who made 27 saves. It was Ovechkin's 757th goal was also his 1,375th point, putting him ahead of Mike Modano for 24th on the career scoring list.

**Flames 5, Panthers 1:** Sean Monahan scored twice for the first time this season and host Calgary beat NHL-leading Florida.

Rasmus Andersson got his first goal of the season, Matthew Tkachuk and Blake Coleman also scored and Johnny Gaudreau had four assists for the Flames, who snapped a four-game skid and won on home ice for the first time since Nov. 29. They were 2-7-1 in their past 10 games.

Jacob Markstrom had 28 saves for Calgary. He had given up at least four goals in his previous five starts.

Sam Bennett scored for the Panthers,

who ended a four-game winning streak and a nine-game points streak (8-0-1).

**Hurricanes 7, Bruins 1:** Jesperi Kotkaniemi scored twice during Carolina's five-goal first period in a win at Boston.

Jacob Slavin added a goal and two assists after a two-game absence, and the Hurricanes snapped the Bruins' five-game winning streak.

Teuvo Teravainen, Seth Jarvis, Derek Stepan and Andrei Svechnikov also scored for Carolina.

**Lightning 6, Kings 4:** Victor Hedman had two goals and an assist, Nikita Kucherov extended his scoring tear since returning from injury and visiting Tampa Bay topped Los Angeles for its fourth straight win.

Hedman was one of only four Lightning defensemen who dressed after three were scratched due to injuries.

**Canadiens 5, Stars 3:** Christian Dvorak scored twice, Sam Montembeault made a career-high 48 saves for his second win of the season and Montreal beat Dallas for its third road win.

**Islanders 4, Flyers 3 (SO):** Oliver Wahlstrom scored in the ninth round of a shootout and New York sent host Philadelphia to its ninth straight loss.

**Sabres 3, Senators 1:** Michael Houser made 43 saves in his season debut and Buffalo won at Ottawa.

**Canucks 3, Predators 1:** Thatcher Demko made 31 saves to lead Vancouver to a win at over skidding Nashville.

# Boston retires jersey for Black hockey pioneer

Associated Press

BOSTON — Willie O'Ree's No. 22 now has a permanent home in Boston's TD Garden.

The first Black player to appear in an NHL game, O'Ree became the 12th player in franchise history to have his number retired prior to the Bruins' matchup with the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday night.

The honor came 64 years to the day after he became the league's first Black player on Jan. 18, 1958, when he suited up against the Montreal Canadiens. O'Ree was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in the builder category in 2018.

"It was a memorable night," O'Ree said. "I'm just thrilled and overwhelmed."

The pregame ceremony included a video montage with highlights of O'Ree's career, as well as comments from various people who expressed how O'Ree touched their lives.

The Canadian-born O'Ree said during his speech that as a young boy growing up in Fredericton, New Brunswick, he grew up rooting for Montreal.

"But on Jan. 18, 1958, when the Bruins called me up to make my NHL debut in a game against the Canadiens, I knew my heart would be with the Bruins forever," he said.

O'Ree planned to be in attendance for the rescheduled event on Tuesday, but persisting concerns about the pandemic changed those plans. He participated virtually from his home in San Diego.

# NHL will stop testing asymptomatic players after break

Associated Press

The NHL will stop testing asymptomatic players, coaches and staff who are fully vaccinated following the All-Star break in early February, saying coronavirus cases continue to decline across the league.

The league and Players' Association announced the protocol changes Tuesday. The current policy will remain in place until the All-Star break begins Feb. 3.

Carolina Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour, who is expected to be behind the bench

for the Metropolitan Division at All-Star Weekend in Las Vegas, called the change "common sense."

"The players have done all they can, done all their vaccinations — all that stuff that they can do," Brind'Amour said. "I don't know why they would be testing them, to be honest with you, if they're asymptomatic, so I agree with this decision. I think it's a good one."

There will still be testing of asymptomatic individuals when it is needed for crossing the

U.S.-Canada border. Testing will not be required at All-Star Weekend, with one negative result needed to return to team facilities after the break.

The 90-day testing "holiday" for players, coaches and staff who recover from COVID-19 will remain in place. New York Islanders forward Matt Martin pointed out that with the playoffs a little over three months away, not testing asymptomatic players is a smart move that could keep rosters from being decimated at that time.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," Martin said. "Hopefully we can continue to move forward and get back to a normal way of life."

The NHL and NHLPA also agreed to keep the five-day isolation period that went into effect Dec. 29, a reduction from 10 after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control updated its virus guidance. The league and union will review protocols, including enhanced rules that are currently in place, on Jan. 31 as long as cases keep declining.