

GAO report outlines safety shortfalls

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Driver distraction, supervision lapses and training shortfalls were among the leading causes behind Army and Marine Corps tactical vehicle accidents in a new report released Wednesday by the Government Accountability Office.

The study reviewed 3,753 Army and Marine Corps noncombat tactical vehicle accidents between 2010 and 2019, which resulted in 123 deaths. While the number of deadly accidents fluctuated during the years with a high of more than 23 in 2010 and a low of about 7 in 2017, the causes remained largely the same, according to the report.

To address the issue, the GAO made nine recommendations in the report, calling for the services to create more clearly defined roles for supervisors, establish procedures and mechanisms for risk management and ensure driver-training programs have a well-defined process with specific performance criteria.

“The Army and Marine Corps had not clearly defined the roles or put procedures and mechanisms in place for first-line su-

pervisors — such as vehicle commanders — to effectively perform their role,” according to the report. “As a result, implementation of risk management practices, such as following speed limits and using seat belts, was ad hoc among units.”

While no single event inspired the study, the GAO said it was initiated because “the Army and Marine Corps have experienced tactical vehicle accidents that resulted in deaths of military personnel during non-combat scenarios.”

The report found the services lacked appropriate and continuing driver training across “diverse driving conditions, such as driving at night or over varied terrain,” according to the report.

“Licensing classes were often condensed into shorter periods of time than planned with limited drive time and unit training focused on other priorities rather than driving,” according to the units that the GAO interviewed.

In some cases, troops weren’t effectively communicating hazards found on training grounds and ranges to units and drivers, something that the GAO recommended the

services evaluate to ensure “responsibilities to identify and communicate” dangers are upheld.

“If the responsibilities are not being carried out, the [services] should determine if existing workarounds are adequate or if additional resources should be applied to fulfill these responsibilities,” the GAO said in its report.

The GAO also suggested the Army and Navy secretaries evaluate the number of personnel responsible for tactical vehicle safety “and determine if these units are appropriately staffed or if any adjustments are needed to workloads or resource levels,” according to the report.

“The Army and Marine Corps have practices to mitigate and prevent tactical vehicle accidents, but units don’t always use them,” the report found.

The GAO also recommended the Army and Navy secretaries, along with the Army chief of staff and Marine Corps commandant, create “a formal collaboration forum” for the services to “share methods for identifying and communicating hazards to units with each other on a regular basis.”

Ala. base is 1st in States to require proof of vaccination

The Washington Post

An Alabama military base is taking increased actions to combat the ongoing prevalence of coronavirus infections, authorizing leaders to ask for proof of vaccination of service members not wearing a mask while on duty. It is the first military base in the continental United States to allow leaders to check the vaccination status of those in uniform.

The new guidance at Fort Rucker comes as the new delta variant of the virus continues to drive infection rates and now accounts for a majority of cases in the U.S. The base is among facilities, including Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, Fort Sill in Oklahoma and Fort Jackson in South Carolina, where less than half of the surrounding populations have been vaccinated.

The order issued Tuesday by Maj. Gen. David Francis, commanding general of Fort Rucker, states that unmasked uniformed

personnel “must be prepared to show proof of vaccination” when on the base.

“Due to the rising rates in the counties around us and some on Fort Rucker, we’re now implementing G.O. number 12,” Francis said in a video posted July 12 on Fort Rucker’s official Facebook page, referring to the general order issued to Fort Rucker personnel. “The big difference is going to be that if you are not wearing a mask, the leadership will be able to ask you, ask soldiers, to prove that they’ve been vaccinated by showing their vaccination card.”

The new rule applies only to uniformed personnel, of which there are about 5,000 assigned to the base. The base, which houses the Army’s aviation branch, is also home to thousands of civilian dependents and civilian employees.

Civilian employees on the base “must be taken at their word unless the supervisor has

good reason not to,” reads the official order, issued Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that about 70% of military personnel have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine.

“That’s encouraging, but there’s more work to do, and so we continue to be in the mode of encouraging troops to get vaccinated to the maximum degree,” he said.

In Alabama, just 33% of the population is fully vaccinated and just over 40% has received at least one dose, which is well below the national average, according to data from The Washington Post. In Dale County, where Fort Rucker is located, the daily average for coronavirus infections is at 12 cases per day. Alabama is also among states that have enacted legislation banning vaccine passports or requiring immunization to receive government services.

Milley reportedly feared Trump coup

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — In the waning weeks of Donald Trump's term, the country's top military leader repeatedly worried about what the president might do to maintain power after losing reelection, comparing his rhetoric to Adolf Hitler's during the rise of Nazi Germany and asking confidants whether a coup was forthcoming, according to a new book by two Washington Post reporters.

As Trump ceaselessly pushed false claims about the 2020 presidential election, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, grew more and more nervous, telling aides he feared that the president and his acolytes may attempt to use the military to stay in office, Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker report in "I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year."

Milley described "a stomach-churning" feeling as he listened to Trump's untrue

complaints of election fraud, drawing a comparison to the 1933 attack on Germany's parliament building that Hitler used as a pretext to establish a Nazi dictatorship.

"This is a Reichstag moment," Milley told aides, according to the book. "The gospel of the Führer."

Portions of the book related to Milley — first reported Wednesday night by CNN ahead of the book's July 20 release — offer a remarkable window into the thinking of America's highest-ranking military officer, who saw himself as one of the last empowered defenders of democracy during some of the darkest days in the country's recent history.

The episodes in the book are based on interviews with more than 140 people, including senior Trump administration officials, friends and advisers, Leonnig and Rucker write in an author's note. Most agreed to speak candidly only on the condition of ano-

nymity and the scenes reported were reconstructed based on firsthand accounts and multiple other sources whenever possible.

After attending a Nov. 10 security briefing about the "Million MAGA March," a pro-Trump rally protesting the election, Milley said he feared an American equivalent of "brownshirts in the streets," alluding to the paramilitary forces that protected Nazi rallies and enabled Hitler's ascent.

Late that same evening, according to the book, an old friend called Milley to express concerns that those close to Trump were attempting to "overturn the government."

"You are one of the few guys who are standing between us and some really bad stuff," the friend told Milley, according to an account relayed to his aides. Milley was shaken, Leonnig and Rucker write, and he called former national security adviser H.R. McMaster to ask whether a coup was actually imminent.

Hard landing strands 165 Patriot Express passengers

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — The air station's North Gym basketball court was temporary home for 165 passengers bound for Okinawa after a hard landing Tuesday sent their Patriot Express flight back to Yokota Air Base for repairs.

Most of the delayed passengers slept on cots and dined on Burger King, teriyaki chicken and sandwiches. Forty-one passengers, parents with infant children, were afforded rooms at a hotel on the air station, MCAS Iwakuni spokesman Maj. Joshua Diddams told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

Marine Capt. Antonio Marro, a passenger heading to Camp Schwab on Okinawa, told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday that he and the others arrived at

the base gym around 9:30 p.m. Tuesday.

"The Patriot Express flight had a rough landing and damaged something in the nose of the aircraft," he said.

The plane and its crew returned to Yokota for maintenance, Staff Sgt. David Grigg, a terminal agent at Yokota, told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday.

He said the flight was expected to depart Iwakuni at 10 p.m. Thursday.

The Patriot Express from Iwakuni wasn't the only one delayed Wednesday. Another flight from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport to Yokota turned back to Sea-Tac after two or three hours, a customer service agent for Air Mobility Command in Seattle told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday.

Submariner takes helm of Naval forces in Japan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Rear Adm. Brian Fort closed out 32 years in the Navy this week by handing over his last command to an experienced submariner who recently arrived from Washington, D.C.

Fort transferred the dual-hat responsibility for U.S. Naval Forces Japan and Navy Region Japan to Rear Adm. Carl Lahti, most recently the commandant of Naval District Washington. The command exerts both operational and administrative control over all Navy personnel and installations in the country.

The Wednesday ceremony at the naval base's Fleet Theater featured accolades on Fort's behalf. He presided over the Navy response to the coronavirus pandemic in Japan, which in spring 2020 meant a three-

month lockdown at Yokosuka, the Navy's headquarters south of Tokyo and homeport of the 7th Fleet.

The commander of U.S. Forces Japan, Air Force Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider, congratulated Fort for his many years of service and his numerous accomplishments. Fort received the Order of the Rising Sun, gold and silver, from the Japanese government July 1 in recognition of his service.

Lahti thanked Fort for his service and pledged to continue "to maintain and foster the strong relationships" that Fort created.

"For the U.S. Naval Forces Japan and Naval Region Japan teams, our missions are clear: enable the 7th Fleet, enhance and strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance and serve as the naval component to U.S. Forces Japan," he said.

DOD: US once trained men in Haiti hit

The Washington Post

Some of the former Colombian servicemen arrested after last week's assassination of Haiti's president previously received U.S. military training, according to the Pentagon, raising fresh questions about the United States' ties to Jovenel Moïse's death.

"A review of our training databases indicates that a small number of the Colombian individuals detained as part of this investigation had participated in past U.S. military training and education programs, while serving as active members of the Colombian Military Forces," Lt. Col. Ken Hoffman, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement to *The Washington Post*.

The Pentagon's review is ongoing, Hoffman said. He did not say how many of the men received training or precisely what it entailed.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., whose legislation provides oversight to foreign defense aid used in human rights abuses, said the episode was a grim reminder that U.S. assistance to other countries can take unexpected turns.

"This illustrates that while we want our training of foreign armies to build professionalism and respect for human rights, the

training is only as good as the institution itself," he said.

"The Colombian army, which we have supported for 20 years, has a long history of targeting civilians, violating the laws of war and not being accountable. There has been a cultural problem within that institution."

Colombian officials have said 13 of the 15 Colombian suspects in the July 7 assassination plot once served in that country's military, including the two killed by Haitian authorities after Moïse was fatally shot inside his home.

It is common for Colombian troops and other security personnel across Latin America to receive U.S. training and education. Colombia, in particular, has been a significant U.S. military partner for decades, receiving billions of U.S. dollars since 2000 in its effort to battle drug trafficking organizations, leftist guerrillas and far-right paramilitary groups.

That effort has included CIA-backed missions and a close relationship between Colombia military personnel and the Green Berets, who help train their elite counterparts in guerrilla warfare. A Colombian commando school is modeled on the Army's grueling Ranger School, and the two militaries' part-

nership dates at least to the 1950s.

Colombian military and police also use U.S.-provided weapons and equipment, an agreement that came under scrutiny earlier this year after police there killed multiple protesters during demonstrations against government tax proposals. A related analysis by *The Post*, published in May, found that Colombian authorities overstepped their own rules of engagement in some of the deadly encounters.

Fighting in Colombia's decades-long war has been a springboard for military veterans to trade their U.S.-funded experience for hire in other global conflicts, such as in Yemen.

"The recruitment of Colombian soldiers to go to other parts of the world as mercenaries is an issue that has existed for a long time, because there is no law that prohibits it," the commander of Colombia's Armed Forces, Gen. Luis Fernando Navarro, told reporters last week.

Foreign military training provided by the United States is intended to promote "respect for human rights, compliance with the rule of law, and militaries subordinate to democratically elected civilian leadership," Hoffman, the Pentagon spokesman, said in his statement.

'Stepchild' notation on military ID causes dispute

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

Service members and spouses are calling for change to the military's new dependent ID cards this week over the way the relationship field identifies spouses' children from previous marriages.

The Defense Department began transitioning last summer from its paper-based uniformed services ID card to a plastic "next generation" card similar to the Common Access Card used by DOD personnel. The new card is meant to be more secure and harder to counterfeit.

But a photo posted on social media Wednesday drew controversy over the card's use of the term "stepchild" in a field listing the relationship between the dependent and the military

sponsor. Biological offspring are listed only as "child," social media users said.

"Why are we now specifying *stepchild* on dependent IDs?" wrote Twitter user @justsides, whose profile lists her as an Army spouse, in the original post sharing the photo of the new ID.

The tweet was shared nearly 100 times as of Thursday morning, including by several accounts with high numbers of followers and some who tagged top military leaders or official accounts.

Some were concerned the new cards might reveal a child's adoption status, apparently based on the fact that the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, or DEERS, requires different documents, depending on a child's legal relationship to their sponsor.

"My daughter has never called herself a stepchild," @justsides said in a follow-up tweet. "We've never used that term really. I think if she saw this on her ID it would hurt her."

The word "never saw the light of the day in my blended military family," said Fred Wellman, in a retweet of the photo. A retired Army officer and the executive director of political action committee The Lincoln Project, Wellman has more than 186,000 followers on Twitter. His tweet was shared nearly two dozen times.

The ID card photo belonged to a user going by @kristenmary20, that user said in response to Wellman, explaining that she'd originally posted it to a spouse page before it was shared to Twitter.

But in another post that was shared less widely, @kristenmary20 said she had received a response from a Defense Department office explaining the inclusion of the term "stepchild" was an oversight when the new ID card was rolled out, and that officials were looking into the possibility of fixing it.

The previous ID cards listed the relationship as "SC," but the new one allows the whole term to be spelled out more prominently, the email said, according to a series of @kristenmary20's tweets.

"This is an error of omission vice commission," it said. "There was not a conscious decision made during the implementation of this major change to DoD's ID card program to bring emotional distress to any DoD ID card recipient."

Overdose deaths in US hit record 93,000 last year

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Overdose deaths soared to a record 93,000 last year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government reported Wednesday.

That estimate far eclipses the high of about 72,000 drug overdose deaths reached the previous year and amounts to a 29% increase.

"This is a staggering loss of human life," said Brandon Marshall, a Brown University public health researcher who tracks overdose trends.

The nation was already struggling with its worst overdose epidemic but clearly "COVID has greatly exacerbated the crisis," he added.

Lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions isolated those with drug addictions and made treatment harder to get, experts said.

Jordan McGlashen died of a drug overdose in his Ypsilanti, Mich., apartment last year. He was pronounced dead on May 6, the day before his 39th birthday.

"It was really difficult for me to think about the way in which Jordan died. He was alone, and suffering emotionally and felt like he had to use again," said his younger brother, Collin McGlashen, who wrote openly about his brother's addiction in an obituary.

Jordan McGlashen's death was attributed to heroin and fentanyl.

While prescription painkillers once drove the nation's overdose epidemic, they were supplanted first by heroin and then by fentanyl, a dangerously powerful opioid, in recent years. Fentanyl was developed to treat intense pain from ailments like cancer but has increasingly

been sold illicitly and mixed with other drugs.

"What's really driving the surge in overdoses is this increasingly poisoned drug supply," said Shannon Monnat, an associate professor of sociology at Syracuse University who researches geographic patterns in overdoses. "Nearly all of this increase is fentanyl contamination in some way. Heroin is contaminated. Cocaine is contaminated. Methamphetamine is contaminated."

Fentanyl was involved in more than 60% of the overdose deaths last year, CDC data suggests.

There's no current evidence that more Americans started using drugs last year, Monnat said. Rather, the increased deaths most likely were people who had already been struggling with addiction.

Biden seeks to unite Dems behind new \$3.5T agenda

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden made a quick foray to the U.S. Capitol hunting support for his multitrillion-dollar agenda of infrastructure, health care and other programs, a potential landmark achievement that would require near-unanimous backing from fractious Democrats.

His visit Wednesday came a day after Senate Democratic leaders capped weeks of bargaining by agreeing to spend a mammoth \$3.5 trillion over the coming decade on initiatives focusing on climate change, education, a Medicare expansion and more. That's on top of a separate \$1 trillion bipartisan compromise on roads, water systems and other infrastructure projects that senators from both parties are negotiating, with Biden's support.

Democrats' accord on their overall \$3.5 trillion figure was a major step for a party whose rival moderate and progressive factions have competing visions of how costly and bold the final package should be. But many of them say bolstering lower-earning and middle-class families, and raising taxes on wealthy people and big corporations to help pay for it, would nurture long-term economic growth and pay political dividends in next year's elections for control of Congress.

Democrats' agreement on a topline spending figure, while significant, is merely an initial move that leaves the toughest decisions for later. They must translate their plan into legislation with specific spending and revenue figures, then line up the needed votes to enact it, a process likely to grind right through autumn.

Fire erupts near site of 2018 blaze

Associated Press

PULGA, Calif. — A blaze that erupted near the flashpoint of the deadliest wildfire in recent U.S. history was heading away from homes on Thursday but survivors of the 2018 blaze in the town of Paradise worried that history could repeat itself.

The Dixie Fire had burned a couple of square miles of brush and timber near the Feather River Canyon area of Butte County and moved into national forest land in neighboring Plumas County.

There was zero containment and officials said people in the tiny, remote communities of Pulga and east Concow should prepare to leave at a moment's notice.

Flames raced along steep

and hard-to-reach terrain about 10 miles from Paradise, the foothill town that was virtually incinerated by the Camp Fire that killed 85 people.

Larry Peterson, whose home in neighboring Magalia survived the previous blaze, said some of his neighbors were getting their belongings together in case they had to flee.

"Anytime you've got a fire after what we went through, and another one is coming up, you've got to be concerned," he told KHSL-TV.

Other locals stocked up on water and other items.

"We pretty much left with our clothes on our backs" during the previous fire, said Jennifer Younie of Paradise. "So this time we are looking to be

more prepared and more vigilant."

Joyce Mclean's home burned last time but she has rebuilt it and will again if necessary, she told the station.

"We just take each day as it comes and if it happens, it happens," Mclean said. "There's not much that we can do about it."

Ironically, the blackened scar of the previous blaze was standing between the fire and homes.

"Everything's pretty much burned between them and the fire," Butte County Supervisor Bill Connelly told the Sacramento Bee. "Some bushes and grass have grown back, but it's probably not a direct threat at this time."

Leaders wary as US seeks Central Asia spot

Associated Press

American diplomats are escalating a charm offensive with Central Asian leaders this week as they work to secure a close-by spot to respond to any resurgence of outside militants in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdraws.

But even as high-level U.S. diplomats head to the region, they're meeting with more doubts from Afghanistan's neighbors about any such security partnering with the United States. That stands in contrast to 2001, when Central Asian countries made available their territory for U.S. bases, troops and other access as America hit back for the 9/11 attacks plotted by al-Qaida in Af-

ghanistan.

There's distrust of the U.S. as a reliable long-term partner, after an only partly successful war in Afghanistan and after years of widely fluctuating U.S. engagement regionally and globally, former American diplomats say. There's Russia, blasting out this week that a permanent U.S. military base in its Central Asia sphere of influence would be "unacceptable."

Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership, more internationally savvy than it had been in 2001, has been visiting regional capitals and Moscow this summer in a diplomatic push of its own, offering broad pledges that it will pursue regional security, peace and trade

whatever comes of its fight with the Kabul government.

"I mean, I personally can see the value of an American base in Central Asia, but I'm not sure the Central Asian states see such value" currently, said John Herbst, who as U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan helped arrange military access in Central Asia in 2001.

"We've taken a hit through our failures in Afghanistan" in credibility, Herbst said, after the U.S. neutralized al-Qaida in Afghanistan but struggled in fighting against the fundamentalist Taliban and in trying to strengthen a Kabul-based state. "Is that a mortal hit? Probably not. But it's still a very powerful factor."

Child tax credit dollars flowing to parents' pockets

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The child tax credit had always been an empty gesture to millions of parents like Tamika Daniel.

That changed Thursday when the first payment of \$1,000 hit Daniel's bank account — and dollars started flowing to the pockets of more than 35 million families around the country. Daniel, a 35-year-old mother of four, didn't even know the tax credit existed until President Joe Biden expanded it for one year as part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package that passed in March.

Previously, only people who earned enough money to owe income taxes could

qualify for the credit. Daniel went nearly a decade without a job because her oldest son is autistic and needed her. So she got by on Social Security payments.

But the extra \$1,000 a month for the next year could be a life-changer for Daniel, who now works as a community organizer for a Richmond nonprofit. It will help provide a security deposit on a new apartment.

"It's actually coming right on time," she said. "We have a lot going on. This definitely helps to take a load off."

Biden has held out the new monthly payments, which will average \$423 per family, as the key to halving child poverty rates. But

he is also setting up a broader philosophical battle about the role of government and the responsibilities of parents.

Democrats see this as a landmark program along the same lines as Social Security, saying it will lead to better outcomes in adulthood that will help economic growth. But many Republicans warn that the payments will discourage parents from working and ultimately feed into long-term poverty.

Some 15 million households will now receive the full credit. The monthly payments amount to \$300 for each child who is 5 and younger and \$250 for those between 5 and 17.

US unemployment at pandemic low with 360K claims

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits has reached its lowest level since the pandemic struck last year, further evidence that the U.S. economy and job market are quickly rebounding from the pandemic recession.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell by 26,000 last week to 360,000. The weekly tally, a proxy for layoffs, has fallen more or less

steadily since topping 900,000 in early January.

The U.S. recovery from the recession is proceeding so quickly that many forecasters have predicted that the economy will expand this year by roughly 7%. That would be the most robust calendar-year growth since 1984.

As the health crisis has receded, cooped-up Americans have increasingly emerged from their homes, eager to spend on things they had missed during pandemic lockdowns —

dinners out, a round of drinks, sports and entertainment events, vacation getaways and shopping trips.

In response, businesses have scrambled to meet the unexpected surge in customer demand: They are posting job openings — a record 9.2 million in May — faster than they can fill them. The worker shortage in many industries is causing employers to raise wages and in some cases to raise prices to offset their higher labor costs.

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Bucks even NBA Finals with Suns at 2-2

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Khris Middleton is an All-Star with unwavering confidence in his shot, always believing that no matter how poorly he starts that he can turn things around.

"Khris has no fear and he never has," Milwaukee guard Jrue Holiday said.

Middleton's big shots — and throw in Giannis Antetokounmpo's big block — may have turned around the course of these NBA Finals.

Middleton scored 40 points, including 10 straight for the Bucks down the stretch to send them past the Phoenix Suns, 109-103 on Wednesday night to tie the series 2-2.

"We wanted this bad and the team showed it tonight," Antetokounmpo said.

Middleton's hot hand and a big block from Antetokounmpo gave the Bucks their second straight victory in the first close game of the series.

Antetokounmpo had 26 points, 14 rebounds and eight

assists. His streak of 40-point games ended at two but the only number that matters for the Bucks is on the series scoreboard.

Devin Booker scored 42 points for the Suns, but his foul trouble cost them a chance to build a big lead in the second half. Chris Paul struggled through a 5-for-13 night, finishing with 10 points and five turnovers.

Game 5 is Saturday night in Phoenix.

"This is a tough one but we've got to bounce back," Paul said. "That's why we fought all season to get home court."

Phoenix led by two with 2½ minutes left before Middleton made the next two baskets to give Milwaukee a 101-99 edge with 1:28 to play. It appeared the Suns would tie it with a lob pass to center Deandre Ayton but Antetokounmpo swooped in to block it, flexing his muscles to the crowd behind the basket as the Bucks broke the other way on the fast break.

"That's an NBA Finals special moment right there, and we're going to need more of them," Milwaukee coach Mike Budenholzer said.

Middleton missed a couple of jumpers but Paul lost the ball after the second one when he slipped and fell down while dribbling. That sent Middleton off for a layup and he followed with four free throws to make it 107-101.

"Nobody caved," Middleton said. "We stayed with it."

Brook Lopez had 14 points for the Bucks and Holiday added 13 points, seven rebounds and seven assists. He shot only 4-for-20, but his defense helped knock Paul off his game. Before Middleton's run, it appeared it was going to be Booker's night. He bounced back in a big way from a 3-for-14 night in Game 3 with his third 40-point game of this postseason.

But he had to spend portions of the third and fourth quarters on the bench after picking up fouls and his teammates

couldn't handle things without him.

With the leaders of its only title team in the arena, Milwaukee improved to 9-1 at home in the playoffs. It is trying to overcome a 2-0 deficit for the second time in this postseason.

The Suns never got more than two wins in their two previous trips to the NBA Finals but it seemed they were finally headed there Wednesday. Booker had a big finish to the third quarter to send them to the fourth leading 82-76, but he picked up his fifth foul barely a minute into the period and sat for about five minutes.

The Bucks trimmed only three points off the lead before he returned in the fourth, but Middleton made sure they surged ahead when it mattered.

"When you have that kind of lead in the fourth, if we can just hold on to the ball and get good possessions, you feel like you can at least hold it there," Phoenix coach Monty Williams said.

Turnover bug hits Paul at wrong time for Suns

Associated Press

The ball was in Chris Paul's hands with 35 seconds left and his team needed a bucket to tie or take the lead in Game 4 of the NBA Finals.

The Phoenix Suns — and the 11-time All-Star — wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

The point guard did one crossover dribble to shake Milwaukee's Jrue Holiday. Then he immediately did another to try to lose Giannis Antetokounmpo.

What happened next was not what the Suns or Paul expected. He just ... fell down. The ball bounced away and so did Phoenix's chances of taking a commanding lead in the series.

Holiday scooped up the free possession and the Bucks converted a 3-on-1 fastbreak when Khris Middleton scored a layup. Just like that, Milwaukee had taken control of a come-from-behind 109-103 victory on Wednesday night that evened these Finals at 2-2.

"The turnovers," Suns coach Monty Williams said, "just crushed us."

Game 5 is Saturday in Phoenix.

The 36-year-old Paul — who has waited 16 seasons to play in the NBA Finals — didn't shy away from taking the blame.

"It was me. I had five of them," Paul said of the turnovers. "It was bad decision making. At the time, we're down two. I try to crossover right there, slip, turn it over. There were some bad passes in the first half. They got a significant amount of more shots than us, so for me, I've got to take care of the ball."

He wasn't the only one coughing up the basketball as the Suns finished with 17 turnovers. But there's little doubt the point guard's five turnovers on Wednesday night, including one in the game's most crucial moment, were some of the team's most unexpected.

They were part of the reason Phoenix blew a seven-point, fourth-quarter lead and wasted an impressive performance

by Booker, who scored 42 points and shot 17-for-28 from the field.

Paul finished with a series-low 10 points on 5-for-13 shooting and seven assists on Wednesday, but the real problem was the giveaways. The miscues have been part of a troubling trend: Paul's had 15 turnovers over his past three games and that's about twice as bad as his career rate of 2.4 turnovers per game.

Even so, his coach isn't concerned and said there is nothing physically wrong with Paul.

"He's fine," Williams said. "Great players have games like that."

Paul has given his coach reason to believe in him, overcoming considerable adversity in these playoffs. A shoulder injury limited Paul in the first round against the Lakers. He missed the first two games of the Western Conference finals against the Clippers in the league's COVID-19 health and safety protocol.

Oosthuizen, Spieth lead at British Open

Associated Press

SANDWICH, England — The majors finally had a degree of normalcy Thursday at Royal St. George's. Louis Oosthuizen and Jordan Spieth leading the way at the British Open felt pretty familiar, too.

Cheered on by the biggest golf crowd since the coronavirus outbreak, Oosthuizen saved par from a fairway bunker on the final hole for a 6-under 64 to take the early lead. Spieth was only one stroke back by making putts like it was 2017 all over again.

"It feels inside the ropes, from the first tee forward, the most normal of any tournament we have played thus far relative to that same tournament in previous years, pre-COVID," said Spieth, whose run of four straight birdies in his round of 65 reminded him of his play at Royal Birkdale when he lifted the claret jug four years ago.

Oosthuizen is coming off two straight runner-up finishes at majors — the PGA Championship and the U.S. Open — and is contending again after tying the lowest opening round at Royal St. George's. Christy O'Connor Jr. had a 64 in 1981.

That didn't look as though it would be the case after the South African opened with seven straight pars. He followed with six birdies in his next nine holes.

"I've learned over the years playing major championships that patience is the key thing," said Oosthuizen, who hasn't won one of them since the British Open at St. Andrews in 2010. There have been six runner-up finishes in the majors since then.

Patience already might be wearing thin for U.S. Open champion Jon Rahm, who slapped his thigh in frustration after making a double-bogey at No. 9 after taking two shots to get out of a pot bunker in the fairway. He shot 71. Bryson DeChambeau had the same score after spending much of his first round up to his knees in deep grass and unable to use his power to overwhelm Royal St. George's.

Shane Lowry, the defending champion from 2019, also shot 71 in front of a crowd that has a daily capacity of 32,000 this week. Not since Royal Portrush, where Lowry won, has a major seen so many spectators through the gates.

There was plenty of good scoring on a course where soft fairways and greens — because of recent rain — negated the impact of its storied undulations.

By halfway through the first round, 14 players had shot 67 or better. They included Justin Rose and three more of his countrymen looking to become the first English winner of golf's oldest championship since Nick Faldo in 1992.

Brian Harman was tied for second with Spieth after making five birdies in his first eight holes and finishing with another for 65.

Stewart Cink, the 2009 champion at Turnberry, was in a three-way tie for fourth place with Dylan Frittelli and MacKenzie Hughes after 66s.

Top-ranked Dustin Johnson hit 14 greens in regulation and said he was pleased with

his round of 68 that had him in a tie for 15th.

Spieth had not won since Birkdale until he ended his slump at the Texas Open in April. He looked the happiest of anyone, saying he liked where his game was at after matching his lowest score at an Open. He also had a 65 on the first day at Birkdale.

And he made reference to that victory while running off four straight birdies starting at No. 5, telling former caddie John Wood — part of the U.S. broadcast team — that it was just like 2017 the way he was making putts and Wood was watching him. Wood was caddying in the final round at Birkdale for Matt Kuchar, who was second.

"Here I feel for the first time since then I'm at least coming in with a bit of form, a bit of confidence, and really my start lines off the tee," Spieth said.

The return of the spectators made it feel like a proper Open, especially on the hill overlooking the par-3 6th hole that attracted some of the biggest galleries.

Just before midday, the group containing Cink, Lee Westwood and Martin Kaymer all hit tee shots inside 6 feet of the pin. As they walked onto the green to mark their balls, one spectator shouted: "You three should be professionals."

To which Kaymer's caddie, Craig Connolly, replied back across the green: "You should be a comedian."

"I feel like the fans here are very knowledgeable about the sport," Spieth said, "and they're also having a great time."

Pogacar wins last mountain stage, pads overall lead

Associated Press

LUZ ARDIDEN, France — Tadej Pogacar won the final mountain stage of the Tour de France on Thursday to cement his grip on the race.

The short trek in the Pyrenees featured a daunting combination of the Col du Tourmalet and the final sharp climb to the Luz-Ardiden ski resort, two classics of the Tour.

Pogacar's main rivals did not take advantage of the brutal course. The defending champion surged away from a reduced group of four riders in the last kilometer. After Enric Mas

attacked, Pogacar countered the move and dropped Jonas Vingegaard and Richard Carapaz to claim a third stage win this year and win his second straight mountaintop finish.

"It's unbelievable, it's crazy," Pogacar said. "It's been a game for me since I started (my career) and I'm enjoying playing it," Pogacar said.

Barring an accident, the 22-year-old UAE Team Emirates rider should be crowned Tour champion for the second straight year when the race ends in Paris on Sunday.

Before Sunday's processional

ride leading to the Champs-Élysées, there is just one difficult stage remaining — a time trial through the Bordelais vineyards scheduled Saturday. Pogacar excels in the race against the clock and won the first time trial of this year's Tour, beating the pure specialists.

Pogacar has a huge lead of five minutes, 45 seconds over Vingegaard in the general classification. Carapaz is in third place, 5:51 off the pace.

"Still three days, but it looks good," Pogacar said.

The stage start was overshadowed by the news that the Bah-

rain Victorious team had been raided by French police as part of a doping investigation. The team confirmed that riders' rooms were searched by officers at the hotel it stayed in on Thursday in the southwestern city of Pau.

In a statement to The Associated Press, the Marseille prosecutor in charge of the case said a preliminary investigation targeting members of the team was opened on July 3 "for acquisition, transport, possession, import of a substance or method prohibited for use by an athlete without medical justification."

MLB on deck: Trades, races and more trophies

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Across the globe, everybody is watching Shohei Ohtani in awe and intrigue. Major League Baseball can only love the attention from around the world surrounding the Angels' two-way star and the spotlight he's brought to the sport.

Can Ohtani keep this up? An encore to a sensational first half? He leads the majors with 33 home runs and has shown no signs of slowing down or slumping — and should soon have a healthy Mike Trout back in the lineup with him.

Pitchers across the big leagues are doing their part so far, too.

There have already been seven no-hitters in the majors this season, matching the mark for most in one year during the modern era. The record of eight was set in 1884, the first season overhand pitching was allowed.

Will Jacob deGrom, Walker Buehler and Gerrit Cole join the list soon? And will the uproar over sticky substances tamp down?

Manager Torey Lovullo and the Arizona Diamondbacks are eager for a fresh start, determined to forget that record 24-game road losing streak in which they went more than two months without a win out of Chase Field.

The rush to the playoffs — and the judgments — for fans all over began Thursday night when the second half opened with one game: Xander Bogaerts, Rafael Devers and the AL East-leading Red Sox visiting Yankee Stadium to start an early stretch that could decide New York's fate.

Here are some things to watch when play resumes:

Trade story-lines

Trevor Story, Nelson Cruz and Kyle Gibson are sure to attract plenty of attention as the July 30 trade deadline — moved up a day this year — rapidly approaches.

Story becomes a free agent after this season and Colorado might try to get something for the star shortstop. Rockies teammate C.J. Cron also will draw interest.

At 41, all Cruz does is continue to hit home runs. He's got 18 more this year and is batting .304. In a down year for the Twins, the big bopper at Target Field is sure to be a trade target.

Gibson, enjoying his best season ever on

the mound, and slugger Joey Gallo could be on the move if Texas wants prospect packages for its All-Stars.

Oh, yes, Ohtani

No matter which coast or division, all eyes are on Ohtani, especially after he topped 500 feet in the Home Run Derby and threw 100 mph heat as the winning pitcher in the All-Star Game.

The two-way Japanese phenom is five homers ahead of All-Star Game MVP Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Fernando Tatis Jr. for the big league lead. He's also got 70 RBIs, just three behind Guerrero for most in the majors.

Want more? He's tied for the AL lead with four triples. No one has led the league in homers and triples since Jim Rice in 1978 (before that, Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays both did it in 1955). Plus, Ohtani tops the Angels with 12 stolen bases.

On the mound, he's 4-1 with a 3.49 ERA in 13 starts. He's struck out 87 in 67 innings, allowing just 46 hits.

Surprise, surprise

At 57-32, reinvigorated Buster Posey, resurgent Kevin Gausman and the surprising San Francisco Giants not only lead the talented NL West, they own the best record in baseball — with two more wins than the Red Sox and Houston Astros both at 55-36.

In a division the defending World Series champion Dodgers or San Diego Padres were expected to dominate, its second-year manager Gabe Kapler's Giants with an unexpected place at the top.

No-no stuff

How many more no-hitters might we see in the second half?

The no-hitters this year have been thrown by San Diego's Joe Musgrove (April 9), Carlos Rodón of the Chicago White Sox (April 14), Baltimore's John Means (May 5), Cincinnati's Wade Miley (May 7), Detroit's Spencer Turnbull (May 18), the New York Yankees' Corey Kluber (May 19) and a combined no-hitter by the Chicago Cubs on June 24.

In addition, Arizona's Madison Bumgarner pitched a seven-inning hitless game in a doubleheader on April 25 that is not recognized as a no-hitter by Major League Baseball.

Jays' return to Toronto is still not definite yet

Associated Press

TORONTO — The Toronto Blue Jays won't find out by this weekend whether they will get permission from their federal government to play in Canada soon, a government official familiar with the talks said on Wednesday.

A team spokeswoman said the club continues to work with the federal government toward playing games at Rogers Centre starting July 30, and expected to receive a response by Friday.

But the government official familiar with the talks said the Blue Jays will not learn whether they will get to play in Toronto by the weekend. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because no one has been authorized to discuss the talks publicly.

The U.S.-Canada border remains closed to nonessential travel. Major League Baseball will require an exemption for nonvaccinated players and team staff to play games in Canada. As of last week, fully vaccinated athletes in MLB who have valid work permits are no longer required to submit to a 14-day quarantine upon entry into Canada, but teams have players that are not vaccinated. A quarantine exemption and the protocols around that need to be worked out.

Another official familiar with the talks reiterated the team is expecting an answer Friday based on conversations with the government and said that is the club's deadline on the decision-wise. The official noted the team has a long homestand starting July 30 that represents more than 25% of the remaining games at a crucial juncture competitively. The Blue Jays are tied for third in American League East standings.

A third official, who spoke anonymously as they were also not authorized to speak publicly, said it would be preferable to have lead time in order to move what the club needs from Buffalo and prepare for Toronto operations, including ticket sales, although they've begun preparations at Rogers Centre in Toronto already.

If the Blue Jays are not given an exemption for the 10 game homestand that begins July 30 the next homestand begins August 20. Approval could come amid a federal election that's widely expected to be called next month. Providing exemptions for travel into Canada is politically sensitive. Nonessential fully vaccinated Americans and foreigners remain barred from entering Canada as the government works to get a high percentage of Canadians fully vaccinated by the end of July.