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Trump rejects calls to rename Army posts

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump in a trio of tweets Wednesday afternoon appeared to quash any chance that the Army could change the names of 10 southern Army installations named for Confederate generals while he remains in the White House.

“[M]y Administration will not even consider the renaming of these Magnificent and Fabled Military Installations,” Trump wrote in his tweets, which did not mention the Confederacy. “Our history as the Greatest Nation in the World will not be tampered with. Respect our Military!”

Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy signaled this week that they were open to a “bipartisan conversation” on the potential renaming of

posts, as demonstrations spread across the United States aimed at addressing systemic racism in the country. It marked a dramatic change in stance for the Army, which has for decades defended the naming of those posts during the Jim Crow era. In late February, Army officials foot-stomped their unwillingness to consider the issue, saying that the names were rooted in the “spirit of reconciliation” and not meant to honor any particular cause.

Army officials said that McCarthy hoped to get congressional support before he committed to any changes, though the service has the power to change the names of its installations without the input of lawmakers or other federal officials.

But the conversation appeared to end Wednesday. A defense official, who spoke on

condition of anonymity, said Wednesday afternoon that it was unlikely McCarthy or Esper would challenge Trump on the issue.

White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany on Wednesday called the issue an “absolute nonstarter” for Trump, adding that the president would veto any legislation passed that included direction to rename one or all of the installations in question. She said that would include the National Defense Authorization Act, which is required to set annual Pentagon policy and funding.

In tweets, Trump singled out Fort Bragg, N.C., Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Benning, Ga., as “legendary” and “very powerful bases” that “have become a great part of the great American heritage and a history of winning, victory and freedom.”

Fort Bragg was named in

1918 for Gen. Braxton Bragg. Fort Hood was named in 1943 for Gen. John Bell Hood. Fort Benning was named in 1918 for Brig. Gen. Henry Benning. All three were slave owners who saw mixed results as military leaders, according to historians. Bragg, for example, was stripped of his command after losing the Battle of Chattanooga in Tennessee in 1863. Hood, too, would lose his command after a loss in the Battle of Nashville in late 1864.

The other posts named for Confederate generals are: Camp Beauregard and Fort Polk in Louisiana; Fort Gordon in Georgia; Fort A.P. Hill, Fort Lee and Fort Pickett in Virginia, and Fort Rucker in Alabama.

A petition on change.org calling for the renaming of the bases had more than 14,000 signatures Wednesday afternoon.

Milley says he was wrong to participate in church walk

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Army Gen. Mark Milley, the nation’s top military officer, said Thursday that he was wrong to accompany President Donald Trump on a walk through Lafayette Square that ended in a photo op at a church. He said that his presence “created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics.”

“I should not have been there,” the Joint Chiefs chairman said in remarks to a National Defense University commencement ceremony.

Trump’s June 1 walk through the park to pose with a Bible at a church came after authorities used pepper spray and flash bangs to clear the park and streets of largely peaceful protesters demonstrating in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing in Minnesota in police custody.

Milley said that his presence and the photographs compromised his commitment to a military divorced from politics.

“My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics,” Milley said. “As a commissioned uniformed officer, it was a mistake that I have learned from, and I sincerely hope we all can learn from it.”

His statement risked the wrath of a president sensitive to anything hinting at criticism of events he has staged. It comes as Pentagon leaders’ relations with the White House are still tense after a disagreement last week over Trump’s threat to use federal troops to quell civil unrest triggered by Floyd’s death.

After protesters were cleared from the Lafayette Square area, Trump led an entourage that included Milley and Defense Secretary Mark Esper to St. John’s Episcopal Church, where he held up a Bible for photographers and then returned to the White House.

Esper had not said publicly that he erred

by being with Trump at that moment. He told a news conference last week that when they left the White House, he thought they were going to inspect damage in the Square and at the church, and to mingle with National Guard troops in the area.

Milley’s comments at the National Defense University were his first public statements about the Lafayette Square event on June 1, which the White House has hailed as a “leadership moment” for Trump akin to Winston Churchill inspecting damage from German bombs in London during World War II.

The public uproar following Floyd’s death has created multiple layers of extraordinary tension between Trump and senior Pentagon officials. When Esper told reporters on June 3 that he had opposed Trump bringing active-duty troops on the streets of the nation’s capital to confront protesters and potential looters, Trump castigated him in a face-to-face meeting.

CENTCOM general: Conditions for Afghanistan exit not met

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. Central Command's top general said Wednesday that he cannot recommend a full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by mid-2021 unless the Taliban demonstrate they no longer support al-Qaida forces there.

The United States is on track to draw down its force size to about 8,600 troops by next month, a stipulation agreed to in the Feb. 29 accord signed with the Taliban, Marine Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the CENTCOM commander, said Wednesday. But the Taliban has yet to meet conditions laid out in that agreement, including cracking down on terrorist

groups, which McKenzie said would make him comfortable in recommending a full drawdown of American forces from Afghanistan by May 2021, a time marker also placed in that deal.

"If conditions would allow, we're prepared to go to zero" by May, McKenzie said in a video conference hosted by the Washington-based think tank Middle East Institute. "If asked my opinion, those conditions have not been fully met."

McKenzie's remarks come just weeks after news reports indicated President Donald Trump had demanded the Pentagon draw up plans to fully withdraw troops from Afghanistan by the Nov. 3 presidential election. Top Pentagon officials have pushed back on such an

option but will offer the president the plans, nonetheless, according to reports by The New York Times and The Washington Post, citing unnamed officials.

Trump, who has long called for a withdrawal from Afghanistan where U.S. troops have been fighting nearly 19 years, has not confirmed publicly that he ordered planning for a full drawdown. But on May 26, he told reporters that he wanted troops out "as soon as reasonable. Over a period of time, but as soon as reasonable."

On Wednesday, McKenzie reiterated the U.S. long-stated claim that it maintains troops in Afghanistan to ensure terrorist networks cannot use that country to plan attacks against Americans.

18-year-old Marine dies during the fitness drill

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An 18-year-old Marine died two weeks ago during physical training at Camp Lejeune, N.C., marking the third member of the service to die this year while exercising, according to a new Navy report.

Pfc. Ethan M. Moores collapsed May 27 during fitness training and died at the base's Naval Medical Center. Emergency services at the base administered CPR to Moores and transported him to the medical center, 1st Lt. Daniel Linfante, a spokesman for 2nd Marine Division, said Wednesday in a statement.

Moores is the second Marine to collapse and die during physical training in May. A sergeant collapsed May 8 in Oceanside, Calif., near Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, while on a run and died May 11 at a local hospital, according to the Navy's mishap summary report posted this week. The Marine Corps was unable to provide the Marine's name Wednesday. The third death also happened in California, as Marine Pfc. Tyrell J. Audain, 19, died April 15 after he collapsed during a physical fitness test at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms.

According to the Navy report, there were two deaths in fiscal year 2019 related to physical training in the Marine Corps, and three in fiscal year 2018. Since 2010, there have been about two to three deaths each year associated with physical training.

Moores was a machine gunner with 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in September 2018.

Bills call for panel to study renaming posts

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate's initial version of the 2021 Pentagon policy bill directs the establishment of a three-year commission charged with studying ways to strike honors to the Confederacy at military installations, Senate Armed Services Committee staffers said Thursday.

A draft of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act voted out of the committee Thursday morning would build an eight-person panel "to study and provide recommendations concerning the removal [of] names, symbols, displays, monuments and paraphernalia that honor or commemorate the Confederate States of America" from military posts, the committee said. That would include changing the names of 10 southern Army bases named for Confederate generals from the Civil War. President Donald Trump balked at that proposition on Wednesday as calls grew to strip those posts of their long-standing names amid nationwide demonstrations against racial inequalities.

Senate Armed Services Committee aides, who spoke Thursday on the condition of anonymity to discuss the bill before its contents are published, said the creation of the commission to study the

topic had bipartisan support, but not all members agreed. The topic was added into the bill on Wednesday, just days after Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy signaled he was open to starting a discussion about the names of the 10 posts. For years — and even as recently as late February — Army officials refused to consider changing the posts' names.

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the committee, told reporters on a conference call Thursday that he was among those who opposed its inclusion.

Inhofe avoided providing his personal opinion on installations carrying names of Confederate generals, but he said local communities and state officials should be directly involved in any process that could change long-standing installation names and have "veto authority" on any potential changes. The 10 posts in question have carried their names since the 1910s and 1940s.

"Sometimes we don't agree on some issues. This is one we don't agree on," Inhofe said just after praising how well Republicans and Democrats on the committee worked together to craft the bill. "My effort's going to be to allow the local communities ... to participate in whether or not they want to do this. So, we have a long ways to go on that issue."

IG reports find base housing still has mold, maintenance problems

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Cleaning mold, reducing toxic exposure and providing maintenance still need improvement in the military's ongoing efforts to provide safe housing for service members and their families, according to a watchdog report.

Officials for the Defense Department's inspector general reviewed eight housing-related IG reports issued from 2014 to 2017 for its latest audit released Tuesday. The report stated that while progress has been made across a wide variety of concerns, there is still room for service officials to improve the quality of barracks and family housing available on military bases.

In those eight reports, the IG made 110 recommendations and 19 remain open.

The audit took a deeper look at "a nonstatistical sample of 16 recommendations from five reports to assess whether policies and controls over the maintenance and inspection of government-owned and privatized housing were in place to ensure the safety of service members and their families," according to the report. Out of the 16 recommendations that were reviewed in the audit, 10 still remain open.

"While several corrective actions were taken related to health and safety policy for military housing, such as developing or revising DOD or service level housing policies and procedures, completing repairs and using a joint service working group to identify improvements in facility inspection and maintenance programs across the DOD, many deficiencies in radon and mold remediation, comprehensive inspections and repairs to identified health [and] safety deficiencies still existed," according to the report.

Military housing, which is primarily managed by private companies, came under public scrutiny nearly two years ago

when Reuters published an investigation that revealed the sometimes dangerous conditions of homes on bases, such as rodent and insect infestations, mold growth from poorly repaired water intrusions and toxic levels of exposure to lead, asbestos and other hazards.

Since then, Congress has intervened and created a series of reforms to improve base housing.

Reports from the IG, as well as the Government Accountability Office, have played a role in identifying problem areas within base housing.

Open recommendations in Tuesday's audit report primarily involved the DOD, Army and Air Force, as well as the Navy's Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, D.C. Auditors allowed for affected agencies to provide feedback to the report prior to its public release. In some instances, there was agreement on what needed to be done and a timeline provided. Others refuted the IG's assessment.

The report cited that Army and DOD officials did not issue revised guidance for mold control and remediation and for radon evaluation and mitigation because of confusion over which office was responsible for implementing recommendations to issue policies and because issuing or updating guidance was not a high priority, according to the report.

At Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, the base commander did not take corrective actions to properly label electrical panels in a barracks because it was considered a low funding priority, according to the report. That commander, typically a Navy captain, also made repairs to poor lighting in barracks hallways and rooms, but the repairs did not resolve the issue.

The commandant's office for Naval District Washington responded in agreement with the findings and offered a timeline for resolution, according to the report.

Trump OKs embargo on tribunal workers probing US military

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump lobbed a broadside attack Thursday against the International Criminal Court by authorizing economic sanctions and travel restrictions against court workers directly involved in investigating American troops and intelligence officials for possible war crimes in Afghanistan without U.S. consent.

The executive order signed by the president marks his administration's latest attack against international organizations, treaties and agreements that do not hew to its policies. Since taking office, Trump has withdrawn from the Paris climate accord, the Iran nuclear deal and two arms control treaties with Russia. He has pulled the U.S. out of the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N.

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, threatened to leave the International Postal Union and announced an end to cooperation with the World Health Organization.

"The ICC was established to provide accountability for war crimes, but in practice it has been an unaccountable and ineffective international bureaucracy that targets and threatens United States personnel as well as personnel of our allies and partners," White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a statement.

The executive order authorized the secretary of state, in consultation with the treasury secretary, to block financial assets within U.S. jurisdiction of court personnel who directly engage in investigating, harassing or detaining U.S. personnel.

Russia, NATO hold parallel war games over Baltic Sea

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian combat jets have flown training missions over the Baltic Sea in parallel with NATO's drills in the region, the military said Thursday.

Russia's Baltic Fleet said in a statement that a dozen of its Su-24, Su-27 and Su-30 aircraft practiced strikes Thursday against marine targets in the Baltic Sea.

The fleet noted that the exercise coincided with NATO's BALTOPS 2020 maneuvers in the Baltics. It wasn't immediately clear how close to each other the parallel drills were held.

Russia-West relations plum-

meted to post-Cold War lows after the 2014 Russian annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, Moscow's support for a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine and other issues.

Moscow has repeatedly voiced concern over the deployment of NATO forces near Russian borders, describing it as a threat to its security. Russia and the alliance also have blamed each other for conducting destabilizing military exercises near the borders.

The United States and its NATO allies have repeatedly said that Russian fighter jets have performed unsafe maneuvers while shadowing their planes — accusations that the Russian military has rejected.

1.5M more laid-off workers seek benefits

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — About 1.5 million laid-off workers applied for U.S. unemployment benefits last week, evidence that many Americans are still losing their jobs even as the economy appears to be slowly recovering with more businesses partially reopening.

The latest figure from the Labor Department marked the 10th straight weekly decline in applications for jobless aid since they peaked in mid-March when the coronavirus hit hard. Still, the pace of layoffs remains historically high.

The total number of people who are receiving unemployment aid fell slightly, a

sign that some people who were laid off when restaurants, retail chains and small businesses suddenly shut down have been recalled to work.

The figures are “consistent with a labor market that has begun what will be a slow and difficult healing process,” said Nancy Vanden Houten, an economist at Oxford Economics. “Still, initial jobless claims remain at levels that at the start of the year might have seemed unthinkable.”

Last week’s jobs report showed that employers added 2.5 million jobs in May, an unexpected increase that suggested that the job market has bottomed out.

But the recovery has begun slowly.

Though the unemployment rate unexpectedly declined from 14.7%, it is still a high 13.3%. And even with the May hiring gain, just one in nine jobs that were lost in March and April have returned. Nearly 21 million people are officially classified as unemployed.

Even those figures don’t capture the full scope of the damage to the job market. Including people the government said had been erroneously categorized as employed in the May jobs report and those who lost jobs but didn’t look for new ones, 32.5 million people are out of work, economists estimate. That would have raised May’s unemployment rate to 19.7%.

USS Kidd returns to sea after coronavirus outbreak

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

The USS Kidd got underway Wednesday from San Diego after being sidelined at port since late April dealing with a coronavirus outbreak.

The guided-missile destroyer is scheduled to return to its mission supporting counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific Ocean in the U.S. Southern Command’s area of responsibility, the Navy said in a statement Wednesday.

Kidd was one of the two Navy ships hit hardest by the coronavirus. The aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt spent two months in port on Guam contending with an outbreak that infected more than 1,150

sailors, killing one. The carrier returned to regular operations last week.

Kidd arrived at Naval Base San Diego on April 28 to provide medical care for those among the roughly 330 crew members who contracted the coronavirus, which causes the COVID-19 respiratory disease.

The Navy has not disclosed the exact number of Kidd crew members who tested positive.

A skeleton caretaker crew remained aboard the ship as its sailors went ashore for treatment and quarantine. On May 19, 90 sailors confirmed to be free of the virus relieved the caretakers.

The ship’s crew had begun a regimen of deep cleaning the ship even before docking in April, and it was thoroughly disinfected

while in San Diego, the statement said.

In an open letter to the San Diego region, Cmdr. Nathan Wemett, the Kidd’s commanding officer, thanked the local community for helping the crew with recovery and return to sea.

“Our priority was — and remains — to take care of our Sailors,” he said. “The San Diego region helped us do that by extending your collective arms and helping us respond to and recover from this insidious virus.

“With the care of military and local health professionals, as well as support from military leadership, shipmates along the waterfront, and area businesses, we fought this invisible enemy and cleaned our ship”

Moderna on track for large virus vaccine test in July

Associated Press

The first experimental COVID-19 vaccine in the U.S. is on track to begin a huge study next month to prove if it really can fend off the coronavirus, its manufacturer announced Thursday — a long-awaited step in the global vaccine race.

The vaccine, developed by the U.S. National Institutes of Health and Moderna Inc., will be tested in 30,000 volunteers — some given the real shot and some a dummy shot.

Moderna said it already has made enough doses for the pivotal late-stage testing. Still needed before those injections begin: results of how the shot has fared in smaller, earlier-stage studies.

But Moderna’s announcement suggests those studies are making enough progress for the company and the NIH to get ready to move ahead.

Moderna launched its vaccine test in mid-March with an initial 45 volunteers. The company said it has finished enrolling 300 younger adults in its second stage of testing, and has begun studying how older adults react to the vaccine. These initial studies check for side effects and how well people’s immune systems respond to different doses. But only the still-to-come huge trial can show if the vaccine works.

Worldwide, about a dozen COVID-19 potential vaccines are in early stages of testing. The NIH expects to help several additional shots move into those final,

large-scale studies this summer, including one made by Oxford University.

There are no guarantees any of them will pan out.

But if all goes well, “there will be potential to get answers” on which vaccines work by the end of the year, Dr. John Mascola, who directs NIH’s vaccine research center, told a meeting of the National Academy of Medicine on Wednesday.

Governments are beginning to stockpile hundreds of millions of doses of different vaccine candidates so they can be ready to start vaccinating as soon as scientists learn that one works.

In the U.S., a program called “Operation Warp Speed” aims to have 300 million doses on hand by January.

Many forces behind sharp rise in US cases

Associated Press

NEW YORK — States are rolling back lockdowns, but the coronavirus isn't done with the United States.

Cases are rising in nearly half the states, according to an Associated Press analysis, a worrying trend that could worsen as people return to work and venture out during the summer.

In Arizona, hospitals have been told to prepare for the worst. Texas has more hospitalized COVID-19 patients than at any time before. And the governor of North Carolina said that recent jumps caused him to rethink plans to reopen schools or businesses.

There is no single reason to explain all the surges. In some cases, more testing has revealed more cases. In others, local outbreaks are big enough to push statewide tallies higher. But experts think that at least some are due to lifting stay-at-home orders, school and business closures, and other restrictions put in place during the spring to stem the virus's spread.

The virus is also gradually fanning out.

"It is a disaster that spreads," said Dr. Jay Butler, who oversees coronavirus response work at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "It's not like there's an entire continental seismic shift and everyone feels the shaking all at once."

The virus first landed on the U.S. coasts, carried by international travelers infected abroad. For months, the epicenter was in northeastern states. More recently, the biggest increases have been in the South and the West.

The AP analyzed data compiled by The COVID Tracking Project, a volunteer organization that collects coronavirus testing data in the U.S. The analysis found that in 21 states as of Monday, the rolling seven-day average of new cases per capita was higher than the average seven days earlier.

Here's what's driving increases in some of the states

with notable upticks:

• **Arizona** — Republican Gov. Doug Ducey ended Arizona's stay-at-home order May 15 and eased restrictions on businesses. Arizona residents who were cooped up for six weeks flooded Phoenix-area bar districts, ignoring social distancing guidelines.

The state began seeing a surge of new cases and hospitalizations about 10 days later.

"It seems pretty clear to me that what we're seeing is directly related to the end of the stay-at-home order," said Will Humble, executive director of the Arizona Public Health Association.

It wasn't just that the order ended: There were no requirements to wear face masks, no major increases in contact tracing to spot and stop evolving outbreaks and no scale-up of infection control at nursing homes, he said.

"Those are missed opportunities that, if implemented today, could still make a big difference," said Humble, a former director of the state Department of Health Services.

Testing has been increasing in Arizona, which increases the chance of finding new cases. But the proportion of tests that come back positive has also been on the rise.

The AP analysis found that Arizona had a rolling average of fewer than 400 new cases a day at the time the shutdown was lifted, but it shot up two weeks later and surpassed 1,000 new cases a day by early this week. Hospitalizations have also risen dramatically, hitting the 1,200 mark last week.

The state also passed another grim milestone last week, recording its 1,000th death.

• **North Carolina** — In North Carolina, more testing plus more people out and about during reopening seem to be the main drivers of recent case upticks, said Kimberly Powers, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina.

On Saturday, the state recorded its highest single-day increase, with 1,370. While testing has grown in the last

two weeks, so has the rate of tests coming back positive.

"These trends moving in the wrong direction is a signal we need to take very seriously," said North Carolina's top health official, Mandy Cohen, who, along with Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, has urged the public to take precautions to protect themselves.

But some state residents are not on board.

"I think they should start opening stuff a little bit more," said Jason Denton, an electrician from Greenville who said that one of his main concerns was getting to the gym. "That's like my therapy."

• **Texas** — Few states are rebooting faster than Texas, where hospitalizations surged past 2,100 on Wednesday for the first time during the pandemic. That's a 42% increase in patients since Memorial Day weekend, when restless beachgoers swarmed Texas' coastline and a water park near Houston opened to big crowds in defiance of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's orders.

Texas' percentage of tests coming back positive has also jumped to levels that are among the nation's highest. State officials point to hot spots at meatpacking plants and prisons in rural counties, where thousands of new cases have cropped up, but have not offered explanations for a rise in numbers elsewhere.

Abbott, who has recently begun wearing a mask in public, has shown no intention of pumping the brake on reopening a state where conservative protesters in May pressured him to speed up the timeline on getting hair salons back in business.

• **Alabama** — In Alabama, outbreaks in nursing homes and poultry plants helped drive state numbers upward, though there was a drop more recently. But that may change — there is evidence of community transmission in the capital, Montgomery, which has become an emerging hot spot, said State Health Officer Scott Harris.

"I think reopening the economy gave a lot of people the

wrong impression ... that, 'Hey everything is fine. Let's go back to normal,'" Harris said. "Clearly, it is not that way. Really, now more than ever, we need people to stay 6 feet apart, wear face coverings and wash their hands."

Montgomery hospital intensive care units are as busy as during flu season.

"I can assure you that Montgomery's cases are not going down, and if our community does not take this seriously, the virus will continue to spread, and at some point, our medical capacity will reach its limit," Dr. David Thrasher, director of respiratory therapy at Jackson Hospital, said in a statement.

• **Arkansas** — Arkansas has also seen increases in cases, hospitalizations and the percentage of tests that come back positive. But the state's situation is a complicated story of different outbreaks at different times, said Dr. Nate Smith, director of the Arkansas Department of Health.

After a peak in April, levels were low until spikes began about three weeks ago — mainly in the cities of Rogers and Springdale in the northwest and in De Queen further south. The cases have been concentrated among Hispanics and those who work in chicken production facilities.

The chicken plants never were closed, Smith said. Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson on Wednesday said that the state will move into a new phase of reopening, starting Monday.

• **Looking ahead** — Experts are wondering what will happen in the next week or so in the wake of nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police.

The protests were outdoors, which reduces the likelihood of virus spread, and many participants have worn masks and taken other precautions. But it's still a lot of people close together, chanting, singing and yelling.

"Hopefully we won't see a big spike. But those data aren't in yet," Humble said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Fireworks explosion kills 1, injures another

PA COOPERSBURG — Federal and state authorities on Wednesday were trying to determine what caused two tractor-trailers filled with fireworks to explode in eastern Pennsylvania, killing one person and injuring another.

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agents joined state investigators in Lower Milford Township to comb through the trailers and a building that were destroyed by the series of blasts Tuesday. Neighbors reported the blasts shook their homes and black smoke rose from the scene.

The Lehigh County coroner has not released the name of the victim.

8 months for smuggler of sea cucumbers

CA SAN DIEGO — A Mexican woman who smuggled endangered sea cucumbers into the U.S. was sentenced Tuesday to eight months in prison.

A federal judge in San Diego sentenced Claudia Castillo, 49, of Tijuana, who previously pleaded guilty to conspiracy to import merchandise contrary to law. She also was ordered to pay \$12,000 in restitution to the Mexican government.

Castillo acknowledged that in 2018 and 2019, she conspired to smuggle or have others smuggle bags containing the sea animals from Mexico to a self-storage unit in San Ysidro, according to the U.S. attorney's office in San Diego. From there, the animals could be transported for sale.

The worm-like sea cucumbers are eaten as a delicacy, especially in China. Authorities estimated the smuggled animals had a market value of \$40,000 to \$95,000.

Police probing car dealership break-ins

MI PLAINFIELDTOWNSHIP — Burglars have targeted another western Michigan car dealership.

The Kent County sheriff's office was investigating a Wednesday morning break-in at a Kia dealership in Plainfield Township after the lobby door was shattered, WOOD-TV reported.

It wasn't immediately clear if anything was stolen.

An Infiniti dealership and a Chevrolet and Toyota dealership were broken into overnight Monday. Both are in Grand Rapids.

At least six dealerships in Plainfield Township, Grand Rapids and Kentwood were broken into over the weekend, according to the television station. One person has been arrested.

Ex-VA worker admits role in bioweapons hoax

NV LAS VEGAS — A former VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System employee has pleaded guilty to creating a bioweapons hoax by placing envelopes containing a white powdery substance on coworkers' desks almost a year ago, authorities said Tuesday.

Phuong Tang, 40, of Las Vegas, could face a maximum of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine at sentencing June 23, U.S. Attorney Nicholas Trutanich said.

Court documents say Tang was a podiatry clinic technician at the Department of Veterans Affairs facility in North Las Vegas, where police hazardous materials and counterterrorism teams were summoned on July 12 after two envelopes were found containing a white powdery substance. The powder was later determined to be

baking soda and smelling salts, and Tang admitted to investigators that he put the envelopes on the desks.

Prosecutors noted that Tang had been due to meet with supervisors that day about unexplained absences from work, and he had spoken earlier about employees getting a day off if someone left powder-filled envelopes at the clinic.

Endangered wolves welcome 7 pups at zoo

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Two endangered Mexican gray wolves housed at the Albuquerque zoo are the proud parents of seven pups, officials announced Tuesday.

The pups recently came out of their den for the first time.

The ABQ BioPark is part of a nationwide captive-breeding network that supports the recovery of the endangered predators in the Southwest. The goal of the program is to make the most genetically diverse matches to improve the health of Mexican wolves.

Police: Ex-mayor charged with ramming car

LA KENNER — A former Louisiana mayor was arrested and accused of ramming the back of a woman's car during an argument over allegedly stolen property, authorities said.

Former Kenner Mayor Phil Capitano, 54, was charged Sunday with aggravated criminal damage to property after a car chase with Jennifer Ramsey, the ex-girlfriend of Capitano's nephew, news outlets reported.

Kenner police spokesman Lt. Michael Cunningham said Capitano's nephew called Capitano and said Ramsey was stealing "disputed community property" from his home.

Ramsey, 39, tried to leave

the apartment parking lot but Capitano used his vehicle to block her in and stop her from leaving with the property, Cunningham said.

Ramsey maneuvered around Capitano's car and drove off, Cunningham said. Ramsey called police and accused Capitano of ramming into her vehicle, but Capitano said Ramsey slammed on her brakes, police said.

US challenges planned Titanic expedition

VA NORFOLK — The U.S. government will try to stop a company's planned salvage mission to retrieve the Titanic's wireless telegraph machine, arguing the expedition would break federal law and a pact with Britain to leave the iconic shipwreck undisturbed.

U.S. attorneys filed a legal challenge before a federal judge in Norfolk late Monday. The expedition is expected to occur by the end of August.

The Atlanta-based salvage firm RMS Titanic Inc., plans to recover the radio equipment from a deck house near the ship's grand staircase. The operation could require a submersible to cut into the rapidly deteriorating roof if the vehicle is unable to slip through a skylight.

U.S. attorneys argue that federal law requires the firm to get authorization from the secretary of commerce before conducting research or salvage expeditions "that would physically alter or disturb the wreck."

The Titanic was traveling from England to New York when it struck an iceberg and sank in 1912. About 1,500 people died when the ship sank about 400 miles off the Canadian province of Newfoundland.

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Attending games will be a new experience

Associated Press

Dayton Moore remembers so clearly the vast sections of empty seats inside Kauffman Stadium when he took over as general manager of the Kansas City Royals, and he remembers just as vividly — nearly a decade later — how those seats filled and fans roared as the long-suffering club won the World Series.

Those dueling memories make the thought of playing games in empty stadiums hard for Moore to fathom.

“I know how much strength all players draw from the fans and environment,” he said, when asked about plans to play a shortened season without crowds, “and you need that support to get through an entire Major League Baseball schedule.”

As lockdowns are lifted and restrictions eased, sports are finally starting to emerge in the coronavirus pandemic. But in virtually every situation, fans are not yet being allowed to attend and the only consensus for now is that there could be a long period of empty or nearly empty seating. Some U.S. universities are modeling for 25% capacity for the upcoming football season or maybe half-full arenas for the ensuing basketball season.

“I think for most sports, a reduced crowd wouldn’t negatively impact the overall experience, especially in a situation like baseball or even the NFL,” said Katy Lucy, a digital marketing agent from Atlanta whose fandom is split between all things Georgia Bulldogs and the Washington Capitals. “But it would be different for sure for those who attend in person.”

Count her family among those who would pause before heading to the ballpark.

“For me personally, I’m not sure I would feel comfortable attending a live sporting event until there is a known treatment or widely available vaccine,” Lucy said. “I trust the institutions to put the proper measures in place; however, making sure that they are enforced is another matter.”

Many college and pro sports teams already were dealing with declining ticket sales. Watching at home or streaming games are factors, as is the changing social makeup of fan bases. Dynamic pricing, increases in parking and concession prices, and a push toward luxury seating have exacerbated the problem.

Major League Baseball attendance has declined six of the past seven seasons. In college football, 13 of the 130 schools that played in the Football Bowl

Subdivision reported average crowd sizes of 50% or less last season. Even the NFL has seen an increase in empty seats despite its generally rock-solid popularity.

So as coronavirus concerns linger, how are teams going to lure fans back when stadiums do reopen?

Loyalty and engagement apps, widespread around the major leagues and colleges even before the pandemic, will become even more common and interactive as teams try to recapture lost revenue. There also will be more behind-the-scenes content and enhancements available via smartphones that will only be available to those in the stadium or arena, offering fans something unique over fans watching at home.

“Fans want that experience to be top-notch, period. That’s why teams are thinking about this,” said Britton Stackhouse Miller, senior vice president at Fortress U.S., a developer of engagement and integration systems with clients in European soccer, baseball, the NBA, NFL and NHL.

Temperature checks, hand sanitizer distribution stations and touchless vending will become the norm for a while. Even concessions will change, though one big difference

— gulp — could lead to a lot of grumbling.

“If you don’t sell beer, the number of visits to the bathroom drops dramatically,” said Marc Ganis, the director of sports consulting firm SportsCorp. “So for a time we may have to think about not selling beer.”

It won’t just be the vast oceans of bench seats left open, either. Many experts believe those hardy fans will be the first to return. It’s the corporate suites from which many colleges and pro franchises derive so much of their gameday revenue that may end up being empty until long after games have resumed. Economic woes may last for some time.

For fans who stay home, leagues are looking for ways to keep them engaged, too.

When Germany’s top soccer league returned without fans, broadcaster Sky knew it had a problem with silence coming through the TV. Engineers created “carpet audio” from previous games between the same teams.

“This was the only idea that we thought could be most respectful to the fans,” said Alessandro Reitano, vice president of sports production for Sky Deutschland. “To be honest, it’s a major success.”

Truex ends 2020 slump with Martinsville win

Associated Press

MARTINSVILLE, Va. — Martin Truex Jr. used a trip to NASCAR’s shortest track to end a lengthy losing streak on the day the stock car series at long last banned the Confederate flag.

Truex cruised down the stretch and won his first NASCAR Cup race of the season on Wednesday night in the first race under the lights at Martinsville Speedway.

Truex, the 2017 Cup champion, has been one of NASCAR’s biggest winners over the last three years, but failed to find victory lane for Joe Gibbs Racing over the first 10 races of this season. He won 19 times from 2017-2019.

“I knew we were going to get one soon,” Truex said. “Hopefully we can get on a

roll.”

Tick tock. The time ran out on the losing streak.

Truex won the Martinsville grandfather clock on the paperclip-shaped track at just 0.526 miles. He won for the first time with new crew chief James Small.

“It’s huge for him and his confidence and for the way people look at him,” Truex said. “I think it’s huge. I knew all along that he was capable. I know he’s going to be an amazing crew chief for a long time to come.”

Ryan Blaney, Brad Keselowski, who has two wins this season, and Joey Logano made it a 2-3-4 finish for Team Penske.

The race started shortly after NASCAR said the Confederate flag would be be

prohibited from all NASCAR events and properties.

Martinsville capped a stretch of seven straight Cup races since it resumed without fans at the track. That streak ends Sunday when 1,000 Florida service members, representing the Homestead Air Reserve Base and U.S. Southern Command in Doral, are allowed to attend the Cup race at Homestead-Miami Speedway as honorary guests and view the race from the grandstands. The following week at Talladega Superspeedway, up to 5,000 fans will be allowed to attend the race. NASCAR says all fans will be screened before entering, required to wear face coverings, mandated to social distance at six feet, and will not have access to the infield.

Manfred: '100%' there will be a season

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred says there is a "100%" chance of big league ball this year.

Major League Baseball will make another proposal to start the pandemic-delayed season in empty ballparks, but Manfred vowed Wednesday to unilaterally order opening day if an agreement is not reached.

"I can tell you unequivocally we are going to play Major League Baseball this year," he said.

Manfred insisted the chance of playing this year was "100%."

The players' association made its second proposal Tuesday, asking for an 89-game regular season and 100% of prorated salaries. MLB's plan a day earlier was for a 76-game season, would guarantee 50% of prorated salaries and hinge 25% in additional money on the postseason's completion.

"It will be a another significant move in the players' di-

rection in terms of the salary issue that has kept us apart," Manfred said during an interview with ESPN before that network's coverage of the amateur draft.

"We're hopeful that it will produce reciprocal movement from the players' association, that we'll see a number other than 100% on salary and some recognition that 89 games, given where we are in the calendar in the course of the pandemic is not realistic," he said.

MLB has threatened a shorter schedule if players insist on 100% of their prorated salaries. The union likely would file a grievance, contending a longer schedule was economically feasible and asking arbitrator Mark Irvings to award damages.

There has not been a big league schedule of fewer than 80 games since 1879. Both MLB and the union have proposed expanding the playoffs from 10 teams to as many as 16 this year and next,

but that enlarged postseason

is contingent on a deal.

"I would prefer to negotiate a new agreement with the MLBPA that gets us more games and resolves the issues that have separated us amicably," Manfred said. "But at the end of the day, we negotiated for the right in March to start the season on a number of games that we select in these particular circumstances. And if we have to, we'll exercise that right."

A March 26 agreement called for prorated salaries in exchange for \$170 million in salary advances and a guarantee of service time even if no games were played.

Manfred wouldn't divulge when he would order a shorter schedule. MLB initially proposed 82 games and the union responded with 114. While players want to extend the postseason deep into November, teams fear a second wave of the coronavirus would jeopardize the postseason. The playoffs alone generate \$787 million in broadcast revenue — before

selling any games caused by an expansion.

"Each and every day that goes by, we lose the capacity to play at least one game, and that's really the time pressure that's significant at this point in time," Manfred said.

The players' association declined to comment on Manfred's remarks.

MLB claims each additional regular-season game in empty ballparks causes a \$640,000 loss because 40% of revenue is tied to gate. The union has disputed MLB's figures but claims it has not been given the data it needs to make a full evaluation.

"Some owners have mentioned that owning a team isn't very NET profitable.. You know what other company isn't very NET profitable? Amazon," tweeted Washington pitcher Max Scherzer, a member of the union's eight-player executive subcommittee.

Manfred told MLB Network the sides were "very, very close" to agreement on health protocols.

Tigers take Torkelson with first pick of baseball draft

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Spencer Torkelson slugged his way through college, bashing baseballs all around the country with eye-popping power.

All those impressive drives made the decision easy for the Detroit Tigers, who selected the Arizona State star with the No. 1 pick in the Major League Baseball amateur draft Wednesday night.

But while Torkelson was long considered the favorite to go first overall, the surprise came when he was announced as a third baseman by Commissioner Rob Manfred. Detroit plans to move Torkelson to the hot corner from first base, where he played for the Sun Devils.

"It shows the amount of respect they have for me as an athlete," a smiling Torkelson said on the MLB Network broadcast. "I'll take it and run

with it. I like to label myself as a baseball player, and you give me a bat, a ball and a glove, and you know what? I'm just going to want to win."

Arkansas outfielder Heston Kjerstad went No. 2 to Baltimore, which took Oregon State catcher Adley Rutschman with the top pick a year ago.

Shortened dramatically because of the coronavirus, the draft gave fans the closest thing they've had to a live big league baseball event since spring training was stopped in March. It came as owners and players continue contentious labor negotiations aimed at starting an abbreviated, pandemic-delayed season this summer — likely with no crowds in ballparks.

Not long before the first pick, Manfred said there is a "100%" chance MLB will play this year.

After having the worst re-

cord in the majors last season, Detroit opened the draft for the second time in three years. The Tigers took Auburn right-hander Casey Mize in 2018, and now they've got a powerful bat that could anchor their lineup for years to go along with an arm they hope is a future ace.

With power to all fields and a great eye at the plate, the 6-foot-1, 220-pound Torkelson established himself as college baseball's top slugger after going undrafted out of high school. He hit 54 home runs at Arizona State, two shy of the school record set by Bob Horner — who was drafted No. 1 overall in 1978.

Torkelson likely would have obliterated that mark if his college season hadn't been halted after just 17 games because of the pandemic. The Petaluma, Calif., native hit .340 with six homers and 11 RBIs this year.

As the top overall pick, the slot value for his signing bonus is \$8,415,300.

"We know he can play first. But our scouts strongly feel that he can play third base, and that's our intent at this point," Detroit general manager Al Avila said on the ESPN broadcast. "He's exactly the type of player we hoped would be there for us to get with the top pick. Obviously, he's one of the most productive hitters in college history."

This year's draft originally was scheduled to take place for the first time in Omaha, Neb., as a lead-in to the College World Series. Instead, the COVID-19 outbreak caused MLB to make some drastic changes, including holding the draft remotely — much like the NFL did in April — and shaving it from three days with 40 rounds to only two days and five rounds.