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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Nominee: Navy culture is ‘tarnished’

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy is in “troubled waters” following years of leadership failures that led to scandals, ship collisions, and the health crisis aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, the nominee for the Navy’s top civilian job told senators Thursday.

Kenneth Braithwaite, the U.S. ambassador to Norway, listed some of the recent failings in his opening statement to members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that he believes have caused a breakdown in trust in Navy leadership. His list included the Fat Leonard scandal, the 2017 collisions of the USS Fitzgerald and USS John S. McCain, as well as “judicial missteps” and the coronavirus outbreak on the Roosevelt.

He said his number one priority, if confirmed as the 77th Navy secretary, would be to “restore the appropriate culture” in the service. Culture is what gives an organization a sense of belonging and good order and discipline, he said.

“[Navy] culture exists. I won’t say it’s broken. I think it’s been tarnished,” Braithwaite said. “I think the events over the last several years have helped see that occur.”

Braithwaite is a 1984 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and served in the Navy and then Navy Reserve for 27 years. President Donald Trump nominated him March 2 to be the next Navy secretary.

The Navy’s recent secretaries have been embroiled in controversies in the last several months.

Richard Spencer, the last Navy secretary, was fired Nov. 24 by Defense Secretary Mark Esper for his handling of the personnel decision for Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, who had been accused of committing war crimes. Spencer had gone around Esper to propose a different strategy to the White House on handling Gallagher and the Navy’s review determining whether Gallagher would be able to retire with his SEAL trident pin.

Thomas Modly resigned as acting Navy secretary April 7 after disparaging comments made to the Roosevelt’s crew about

the aircraft carrier’s former commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, were leaked online.

The Navy is investigating the coronavirus outbreak aboard the ship and the Navy’s response to help. The investigation was recently expanded by acting Navy Secretary James McPherson because of what he said are “unanswered questions.”

Braithwaite on Thursday was supportive of the additional time being taken to investigate the matter.

Referring to the actions and failings of his predecessors in handling personnel cases such as Gallagher and Crozier, Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., asked Braithwaite what he felt were his responsibilities in individual personnel decisions as the Navy secretary.

“Good order and discipline starts with the chain of command ... I believe that our commanders ... are vested with the responsibility to be accountable, as well as to lead those who serve under their leadership. And I believe they should be empowered to do such,” Braithwaite said.

Navy’s big frigate risks \$1.47 billion cost per ship

Bloomberg

The Navy truncated orders for its ill-fated Littoral Combat Ship because the small vessels were vulnerable to attack and too lightly armed. Now, a new report suggests that the frigate intended to replace it may cost 56% more than projected, partly because it’s bigger.

The service projects that 18 of 20 new frigates will cost an average of \$940 million each in inflation-adjusted dollars. The first two are estimated at about \$1 billion each because of one-time costs.

But the Congressional Research Service alerted lawmakers this week to “a potential issue” worth reviewing: the accuracy of Navy cost estimates considering that “ships

of the same general type and complexity that are built under similar production conditions” tend to have similar — and substantially higher — costs per ton of displacement.

CRS raised a warning because at 7,400 tons, the frigate to be built in Wisconsin by a unit of Italy’s Fincantieri is about three-fourths the size of an Arleigh Burke destroyer and carries many of the same weapons systems. The latest of the destroyers are estimated to cost \$1.9 billion apiece.

That could put the cost for most of the frigates at as much as \$1.47 billion each, “an increase of about 56%,” based on comparing their tonnage to the destroyers’, the research service said.

CRS suggested lawmakers

ask the Navy the basis for “its view that the frigate — a ship about three-quarters as large” as the destroyer, with installed capabilities that are “in many cases” similar — “can be procured for about one-half the cost.”

The frigate, to be equipped with guided missiles, is intended as a better-armed and more survivable successor to the Littoral Combat Ship, which detractors called the “Little Crappy Ship.” Nonetheless, the Navy has 35 of them on contract.

At a confirmation hearing on Thursday, Senate Armed Services Committee members may ask Kenneth Braithwaite, President Donald Trump’s nominee for navy secretary, whether achieving the administration’s

goal of a 355-ship fleet over the next decade, up from 299 today, is realistic in light of cost constraints.

Asked to comment on the CRS report, Capt. Danny Hernandez, spokesman for the Navy’s acquisition office, said the frigate is under “a fixed price” contract that “limits the government’s risk in contract execution” for any overruns. Hernandez said the Navy’s cost estimate is 1% higher than a separate one completed by the Pentagon’s independent analysis unit.

The CRS suggested lawmakers review how much “process improvements” at Fincantieri’s Wisconsin facility would permit frigates to be built in line with the Navy’s cost estimate.

Patriot shuffle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is pulling two Patriot missile batteries and some fighter aircraft out of Saudi Arabia, an American official said Thursday, amid tensions between the kingdom and the Trump administration over oil production.

The official said the decision removes two batteries that were guarding oil facilities in Saudi Arabia but leaves two Patriot batteries at Prince Sultan Air Base in the Saudi desert, along with other air defense systems and jet fighters.

The decision scales back the American presence in Saudi Arabia just months after the Pentagon began a military buildup there to counter threats from Iran. About 300 troops that staff the two batteries would also leave Saudi Arabia, according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military

operations.

The move comes as the U.S. has sent Patriot systems into Iraq to protect American and allied troops there, who came under an Iranian missile attack earlier this year. The Army has a limited number of the systems, and they routinely must be brought home for upgrades.

Two other Patriot batteries that are in the Middle East region are also heading home to the U.S., in a planned redeployment for maintenance and upgrades.

It's not clear, however, whether the oil dispute or the struggle to parcel out the much-coveted Patriot systems was the key factor in the U.S. decision to pull systems out of the kingdom. Asked about the move Thursday, President Donald Trump said, "We're making a lot of moves in the Middle East and elsewhere. We do a lot of things all over the world, militarily

US pulling anti-missile systems from Saudi Arabia amid dispute

we've been taken advantage of all over the world."

He didn't provide details, but added, "This has nothing to do with Saudi Arabia. This has to do with other countries, frankly, much more."

When Saudi Arabia ramped up oil production and slashed prices this year, Republicans accused the kingdom of exacerbating instability in the oil market, which was already suffering because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The volatility and price crash in oil hurt U.S. shale producers, leading to layoffs in the industry, particularly in Republican-run states.

Some Republican senators warned in late March that if Saudi Arabia did not change course, it risked losing American defense support and facing a range of potential "levers of statecraft" such as tariffs and other trade restrictions, inves-

tigations and sanctions.

The U.S. official said a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile defense system will also remain in Saudi Arabia. The THAAD complements the Patriots by providing a defense against ballistic missiles traveling outside Earth's atmosphere.

The Saudi government and the Saudi Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment. State-run media in the kingdom similarly did not immediately acknowledge the troop removal.

The Pentagon announced last year that it would begin deploying forces and Patriot batteries to Prince Sultan Air Base, a former U.S. military hub. The move was one of the more dramatic signs of America's decision to beef up troops in the Middle East in response to threats from Iran.

Army bases ready for ban on under-21 tobacco sales

Stars and Stripes

Service members under 21 will not be allowed to buy tobacco products on base beginning in August, when a new Pentagon-wide policy goes into effect.

The rule affects the sale of cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, hookah tobacco, cigars, pipe tobacco and vaping supplies, such as e-cigarettes and e-liquids, the Army said in a statement released this week.

It takes effect Aug. 1 at all installations and facilities in the U.S., its territories and possessions and on Navy ships in U.S. ports, the statement said. Retailers are required to post signs alerting customers to the change by July 1, it stated.

The new policy implements legislation passed in December, which raised the minimum age for the sale of

tobacco products in the U.S. by three years from 18, providing no military exemption. That law took effect immediately but gave government officials about nine months to develop rules for its enforcement.

"Research has shown that raising the legal age of sale to 21 would likely reduce youth tobacco initiation and use," said Corey Fitzgerald, a public health social worker with the Army Public Health Center. "Nearly all smokers start as young children or young adults."

Those under the age of 25 make up the largest group of the roughly 23% of active duty soldiers who reported using tobacco, the center said in its 2018 Health of the Force report. The center's goal is to bring tobacco use throughout the service to zero by 2025, Fitzgerald said in the Army statement.

Air Force seeking gamers to compete at EVO 2020

BY THERON GODBOLD

Stars and Stripes

If you dominate at video games like Tekken and Street Fighter, the Air Force may want to recruit you to compete at this summer's Evolution Championship Series in Las Vegas.

The service plans on fielding its first-ever esports team at EVO 2020, the largest and longest running online fighting games tournament in the world, according to its website. The event is slated for July 31-Aug. 2 at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

The genre typically involves one-on-one, martial-arts style fighting. Games at this year's competition include Street Fighter V: Champion Edition; Dragonball FighterZ; Super Smash Bros. Ultimate; Tekken 7; SoulCalibur 6; Gran-

blue Fantasy: Versus; Samurai Showdown; and Under Night in Birth.

Many service branches are turning to esports as a recruiting tool. In March, the Navy launched a video gaming team called Goats&Glory that practices, streams and competes from a specially designed facility in Tennessee. The Army stood up its esports team last year and credited it as one of the reasons the service met its 2019 recruiting goal.

Airmen who want to compete at EVO 2020 must submit applications via the Air Force APPTRAC system by May 17.

Depending on the state of the coronavirus pandemic and the military stop travel orders in effect, the team could be in Las Vegas in late July to compete against gamers from around the globe.

Unemployment rate in US spikes to 14.7%

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. unemployment rate hit 14.7% in April, the highest rate since the Great Depression, as 20.5 million jobs vanished in the worst monthly loss on record. The figures are stark evidence of the damage the coronavirus has done to a now-shattered economy.

The losses reflect what has become a severe recession caused by sudden business shutdowns in nearly every industry. Nearly all the job growth achieved during the 11-year recovery from the Great Recession has now been lost in one month.

The collapse of the job market has occurred with stunning speed. As recently as February, the unemployment rate was a five-decade low of 3.5%, and employers had added jobs for a record 113 months. In March, the unemployment rate was just 4.4%.

The government's report Friday noted that many people who lost jobs in April but didn't look for another one weren't even counted in the unemployment rate. The impact of those losses was reflected in the drop in the proportion of working-age Americans who have jobs: Just

51.3%, the lowest on record.

In addition to the millions of newly unemployed, 5.1 million others had their hours reduced in April. That trend, too, means less income and less spending, perpetuating the economic downturn. A measure of what's called underemployment — which counts the unemployed plus full-time workers who were reduced to part-time work — reached 22.8%, a record high.

Though some businesses are beginning to reopen in certain states, factories, hotels, restaurants, resorts, sporting venues, movie theaters and many small businesses are still largely shuttered.

As companies have laid off tens of millions, lives have been upended across the country.

Job losses and pay cuts are raging across the world. Unemployment in the 19-country eurozone is expected to surpass 10% in coming months as more people are laid off. That figure is expected to remain lower than the U.S. unemployment rate. But it doesn't count many people who either are furloughed or whose hours are cut but who receive most of their wages from government assistance.

Esper: Pentagon ready for any new wave of virus

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Venturing beyond Washington for the first time since March, Defense Secretary Mark Esper got updated Thursday on the military's coronavirus battle plan and declared the Pentagon ready for any new wave of infections.

"We are preparing for a second wave and maybe more," said Esper, who took a variety of health precautions during his visit to U.S. Northern Command headquarters, including wearing a mask when social distancing wasn't possible. "We don't know what the trajectory of this virus will be."

He added, "We are preparing for the long haul."

Esper's visit comes as he faces criticism from some Senate Democrats who say the Pentagon approach to fighting the coronavirus pandemic has been slow and disjointed.

And it reflects President Donald Trump's push for a reopening of the country and demonstrations of the administration's shift from crisis management to rebooting a battered economy. Trump ended his isolation in the White House with a trip to Arizona on Tuesday to visit a face mask factory, and Vice President Mike Pence has made several recent trips.

Esper met at Northern Command with its leader, Air Force

Gen. Terrence O'Shaughnessy, and participated in a "virtual battlefield circulation" — speaking via video conference with deployed military personnel working in civilian hospitals in New York and Connecticut.

O'Shaughnessy is the most senior commander managing the far-flung military contributions to civilian agencies fighting the pandemic.

Esper offered high praise for the work of the thousands of active-duty medical specialists who pitched in at overloaded civilian hospitals.

"In my view it has been flawless," he said during the video chat. "You guys made a great difference."

Israel Rocha, chief executive of New York's Elmhurst hospital, told Esper that military health care professionals who helped out were invaluable and their arrival was greatly appreciated.

"It was a turning point," Rocha said.

"It literally was the cavalry arriving," Esper said.

The praise was in contrast to criticism from Congress.

A week ago, 10 Senate Democrats, including former presidential candidates Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, and Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, complained that he has taken a slow and disjointed approach to the coronavirus problem.

Democrats eye relief money for smaller cities, towns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—Eyeing a major expansion of federal assistance, top Democrats are promising that small- to medium-sized cities and counties and small towns that were left out of four prior coronavirus bills will receive hundreds of billions of dollars in the next one.

Those cities and counties, where the coronavirus has crippled Main Street and caused local tax revenues to plummet, are pushing hard for relief in the next rescue measure to avert cuts in services and layoffs of workers.

It's an effort that the large class of freshman House Democrats has rallied around,

along with many Republicans, and has the backing of key decision-makers like House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The initial number in an upcoming bill from House Democrats could total \$800 billion or more, though it's likely to shrink in any final measure negotiated with Senate Republicans and the White House. That would be more than the huge amounts delivered to the Paycheck Protection Program, the small business relief fund that is especially popular with Republicans.

An earlier, smaller installment of money to local governments was limited to cities with populations greater than 500,000. That

threshold channeled money to COVID-19 hot spots like New York City and Atlanta but passed over thousands of smaller jurisdictions packed into each of the 435 congressional districts.

Lowey has announced the upcoming, and fifth, coronavirus response bill will contain money for each county in the U.S., based on population, along with an equal amount of funding for municipalities.

"Unlike the initial CARES Act, I think it is vital we have separate programs for state and local governments, so there is less competition between governors, municipal leaders, and county executives," Lowey said in a recent letter to her colleagues. Pelosi, D-Calif., is encouraging the effort.

Official: Strict US border policy may stay

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. policy of quickly expelling migrants apprehended along the Mexican border may have to stay in place even after coronavirus quarantine restrictions ease around the country, a Trump administration official said Thursday.

Immigration advocates say the policy has deprived some people of the right to seek asylum. It is set to expire May 20, but the acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Mark Morgan, said it may need to be extended to protect public health.

Morgan said U.S. health authorities should consider that the virus may not yet have peaked in Mexico and Central America, along with the potential for it to spread in Border Patrol detention facilities and beyond, before determining whether pre-outbreak enforcement can resume.

“Even if we talk about the United States opening up it’s a phased approach,” Morgan told reporters on a conference call to discuss statistics showing a steep drop in border apprehensions. “We’re not going to go zero to 60 and it’s going to go back to the way it was pre-COVID overnight.”

Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Kentucky’s restaurants — left reeling with massive income losses amid the coronavirus outbreak — can resume limited dine-in service later this month under the next phase of business reopenings announced by Gov. Andy Beshear on Thursday.

The new phase includes June target dates for reopening movie theaters, fitness centers and campgrounds, the governor said at his daily briefing. By mid-June, he hopes to have a plan in place to reopen child-care centers at reduced capacity and to resume some youth sports.

Beshear announced the next timetable for business restarts on the same day that Kentucky

surpassed 6,000 coronavirus cases and its death toll approached 300.

Nebraska

LINCOLN — Nearly one out of six coronavirus cases in Nebraska have been linked to the state’s meatpacking plants, Gov. Pete Ricketts said Thursday amid criticism that not enough is being done to protect the health of their workers.

Ricketts said public health officials have linked about 1,005 of Nebraska’s 6,771 coronavirus cases to meatpacking plants. Nebraska’s small, mostly rural meatpacking communities have become some of the biggest hot spots both statewide and nationally, with Hall County surpassing the much larger Omaha area.

Asked whether he should have done more to prevent the spread of the virus in the plants, Ricketts said critics were trying to “Monday morning quarter back” on a disaster that the state hasn’t faced since the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak.

New Mexico

GALLUP — Traffic was almost nonexistent in this small New Mexico city, and just a handful of people waited their turn to get into grocery stores and other essential businesses. This place where rural residents from the largest American Indian reservation come to stock up on supplies is one of the nation’s worst coronavirus hot spots, and the governor extended a lockdown Thursday to try to stem the spread.

The emergency declaration for Gallup, a gateway to the Navajo Nation, runs through noon Sunday. Patients have filled intensive care beds as COVID-19 infection rates here and in the surrounding county make the area one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. Health officials say per capita infections are 12 times that of New Mexico’s largest city, Albuquerque.

Businesses will be closed from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. Residents must stay at home except for

emergencies. If they go out, they must wear face coverings to any essential business or government building.

Ohio

COLUMBUS — As he announced the reopening timetable Thursday for restaurants, bars, barbershops and salons, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine urged even Ohioans who may feel the coronavirus isn’t affecting them to keep adhering to state restrictions.

DeWine said young people and those in rural areas may be tempted to ease up, but that could lead to a surge in COVID-19 cases and a re-shuttering of businesses down the road.

Ohio bars and restaurants can fully reopen in two weeks, on May 21, with outside dining allowed a few days earlier, on May 15, DeWine announced.

Barbershops, hair salons, nail salons and day spas will also reopen May 15, he said.

Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG — The coronavirus death toll grew Thursday by more than 300 as Gov. Tom Wolf ordered most Pennsylvania residents to stay at home until June 4, extending a statewide edict he first imposed April 1 to slow the spread of the new virus.

The revised stay-at-home order, issued late Thursday to replace one that was set to expire at midnight, applies to all counties that remain under Wolf’s strictest lockdown orders — meaning that for now, millions of people face the prospect of at least another month at home.

At the same time, the governor is planning to allow more counties with relatively few virus infections to emerge from some pandemic restrictions.

Virginia

RICHMOND — An attempt by a Virginia church to prevent the state from barring gatherings of more than 10 people “would seriously un-

dermine” the state’s efforts to deter the spread of the coronavirus, attorneys for Gov. Ralph Northam argued Thursday in a legal filing.

Attorney General Mark Herring’s office made the arguments in a memo filed in response to a federal lawsuit brought by Lighthouse Fellowship Church of Chincoteague.

The church sued after its pastor was issued a criminal citation for having 16 people at a Palm Sunday service that authorities said violated Northam’s order barring gatherings of more than 10 people.

The U.S. Department of Justice has sided with the church. In a court filing, the DOJ argued that Virginia “cannot treat religious gatherings less favorably than other similar, secular gatherings.”

Lawyers for the church have said that during the service, those who attended maintained social distancing and had extensive sanitizing of common surfaces.

Wisconsin

MADISON — Republicans in more rural parts of Wisconsin joined with business owners to push for a regional reopening plan Thursday to give the economy a boost, as the Department of Workforce Development warned that the state fund that pays unemployment claims could run out of money in five months.

Meanwhile, Democratic Gov. Tony Evers said he worried that loosening restrictions meant to curb the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus in some parts of the state could lead to regional outbreaks. But he admitted that his next move will depend on how the Wisconsin Supreme Court rules in a case brought by Republicans challenging the authority of his health secretary to issue orders closing businesses.

Evers’ “safer at home” order that closed most nonessential businesses is set to run until May 26.

Justice Department drops case against Flynn in Mueller probe

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In an abrupt about-face, the Justice Department said it is dropping the criminal case against President Donald Trump's first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, abandoning a prosecution that became a rallying cry for the president and his supporters in attacking the FBI's Trump-Russia investigation.

The action Thursday was a stunning reversal for one of the signature cases brought by special counsel Robert Mueller. It comes even though prosecutors for the past three years have maintained that Flynn lied to the FBI in a January 2017 interview about his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

Flynn admitted as much, pleading guilty before later asking to withdraw the plea, and he became a key cooperator for Mueller as the special counsel investigated ties between Rus-

sia and Trump's 2016 political campaign.

Thursday's action was swiftly embraced by Trump, who has relentlessly tweeted about the "outrageous" case and last week pronounced Flynn "exonerated," and it is likely to energize supporters of the president who have taken up the retired Army lieutenant general as a cause.

But it will also add to Democratic complaints that Attorney General William Barr is excessively loyal to the president and could be a distraction for a Justice Department that has sought to focus on crimes arising from the coronavirus.

"Attorney General Barr's politicization of justice knows no bounds," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said. She accused Barr's department of "dropping the case to continue to cover up for the president."

Shortly before the filing was

submitted, Brandon Van Grack, a Mueller team member and veteran prosecutor on the case, withdrew from the prosecution, a possible sign of disagreement with the decision.

After the Flynn announcement, Trump declared that his former aide had been "an innocent man" all along. He accused Obama administration officials of targeting Flynn and said, "I hope that a big price is going to be paid." Going further, he said of the effort to investigate Flynn: "It's treason. It's treason."

In court documents filed Thursday, the Justice Department said that after reviewing newly disclosed information and other materials, it agreed with Flynn's lawyers that his interview with the FBI should never have taken place because his contacts with the Russian ambassador were "entirely appropriate."

Father and son charged in killing of black runner

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Georgia authorities arrested a white father and son Thursday and charged them with murder in the February shooting death of a black man they had pursued in a truck after spotting him running in their neighborhood.

The charges came more than two months after Ahmaud Arbery, 25, was killed on a residential street just outside the port city of Brunswick. National outrage over the case swelled this week after cellphone video that appeared to show the shooting.

"This should have occurred the day it happened," said Akeem Baker, one of Arbery's close friends in Brunswick. "There's no way without the video this would have occurred. I'm just glad the light's shining very bright on this situation."

Gregory McMichael, 64, previously told police that he and his son chased after Arbery because they suspected him of being a burglar. Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper Jones, has said she thinks her son, a former football player, was just jogging in the Satilla Shores neighborhood before he was killed on a Sunday afternoon.

Benjamin Crump, an attorney for the slain man's father, Marcus Arbery, said it was outrageous that it took so long for arrests to be made.

"This is the first step to justice," Crump said in a statement. "This murderous father and son duo took the law into their own hands. It's a travesty of justice that they enjoyed their freedom for 74 days after taking the life of a young black man who was simply jogging."

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation said in a news release that Gregory McMichael and his son, Travis McMichael, 34, had both been jailed on charges of murder and aggravated assault.

Experts: 'Murder hornets' not worth hype

Associated Press

Insect experts say people should calm down about the big bug with the nickname "murder hornet" — unless you are a beekeeper or a honeybee.

The Asian giant hornets found in Washington state that grabbed headlines this week aren't big killers of humans, although it does happen on rare occasions. But the world's largest hornets do decapitate entire hives of honeybees, and that crucial food pollinator is already in big trouble.

Numerous bug experts told The Associated Press that what they call hornet "hype" reminds them of the 1970s public scare when Africanized honeybees, nicknamed "killer bees," started moving north from South America. While these more aggressive bees did make it up to Texas and the Southwest, they didn't live up to the horror-movie moniker. However, they also do kill people in rare situations.

This time it's hornets with the homicidal nickname, which bug experts want to ditch.

"They are not 'murder hornets.' They are just hornets," said Washington Agriculture Department entomologist Chris Looney, who is working on the state's search for these large hornets.

The facts are, experts said, two dead hornets were found in Washington last December, a lone Canadian live nest was found and wiped out last September and no live hornets have yet been seen this year.

Looney has a message for Americans: These hornets are not coming to get you. "The number of people who are stung and have to seek medical attention is incredibly small," he said in an interview.

While its nickname exaggerates the human health threat, experts said this hornet is especially big — two inches long — so it does carry more and stronger toxin.

"It's a really nasty sting for humans," said University of Georgia bee expert Keith Delaplane. "It's like the Africanized bee ... A dozen (stings) you are OK; 100 not so much."

Asian giant hornets at most kill a few dozen people a year, and some experts said it's probably far less.

In Japan, Korea and China, "people have coexisted with this hornet for thousands of years," said Doug Yanega, senior scientist at the University of California Riverside Entomology Research Museum.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Machete-wielding man punches officer in face

ND FARGO — Police say a man armed with a machete during an attempted robbery of a Fargo smoke shop fought with an employee and punched an officer in the face.

Police were called to multiple reports of a disturbance in the middle of a street Wednesday, according to officials.

The 20-year-old suspect attempted to rob Smoke 4 Less in Fargo and pulled out the machete when an employee confronted him, KFGO reported. The suspect fought with the employee and the struggle spilled out onto the street, according to police.

When an officer responded and tried to arrest the suspect, the officer was punched in the face. The officer was taken to the hospital, treated and released. Two bystanders stepped in and grabbed the man until other officers arrived and arrested him.

Bus driver credited with saving toddler

WI EAU CLAIRE — An Eau Claire transit driver is credited with saving a toddler from harm by plucking her from the middle of some traffic lanes.

The driver saw the 1-year-old in the street while driving his route, stopped the bus in the lane of traffic, got out and retrieved the young child, according to city officials. The driver, Mike Steinke, called dispatch to get help for the girl. Steinke said the child wasn't crying and let him pick her up and carry her to the bus.

Before a police officer arrived on scene, the child's mother realized something was wrong when she saw her front door open and a bus parked in the road.

Transit administrators said the mother went to the bus and was shocked, but appreciative, to find her daughter safe.

Policy change weighed on officers' tattoos

NE LINCOLN — Police officers in Lincoln won't have to cover up their tattoos for the next six weeks, and if the public approves, the policy change could become permanent.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported that the city is gauging public opinion about a potential policy change that would allow on-duty officers to have their tattoos visible. The proposal was unveiled this week on the police department's Facebook page.

Officer Erin Spilker said that after six weeks feedback from the community will be evaluated and presented to command staff, which will determine if the department should return to the policy that required officers to keep tattoos covered.

Rescuer falls, dies during recovery effort

NC CASHIERS — A search team member fell to his death while trying to help recover a body at the base of a North Carolina waterfall, according to emergency management officials.

Eldon Jamison, 71, was assisting in the search for hiker Chandler Manuel, 24, when he fell from a rope to the bottom of Whitewater Falls in Cashiers, the Jackson County Emergency Management Office said. Jamison was a 40-year member of the Glenville-Cashiers Rescue Squad, according to a statement from the crew.

The accident happened as nearly 20 climbers were repelling down the falls to look for Manuel, who fell into the water

Monday night, county officials said in a statement. A North Carolina National Guard helicopter team helped recover Jamison's body Tuesday evening and Manuel's body was found Wednesday afternoon, officials said.

Ex-police sergeant, twice arrested, resigns

RI TIVERTON — A former police sergeant who was arrested twice by Rhode Island State Police has resigned.

William Munroe, a former officer with the Tiverton Police Department, agreed retroactive to March 27 to leave his job, the Newport Daily News reported.

Munroe was arrested in 2018 on suspicion of stealing gasoline from the town at least 14 times. He pleaded no contest to misdemeanors in June 2019.

He was arrested again in July 2019 on suspicion of forging the town treasurer's signature about 30 times so he could withdraw about \$50,000 from his deferred compensation plan. Munroe pleaded no contest in March to misdemeanors in that case.

Munroe, 57, of Fall River, Mass., will receive a pension for his employment up to the day he was seen on tape stealing gasoline from town pumps. He will continue to receive health benefits until he is 65, standard for retiring officers.

Cops investigating anti-LGBTQ vandalism

OR PORTLAND — Portland police are investigating anti-LGBTQ vandalism at a Southwest Portland church.

Police were called to Hillsdale Community Church, United Church of Christ on Sunday after neighbors saw homophobic slurs and signs painted on

the building. Police then responded to the church Wednesday after a brick was thrown through a window, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. The brick had a piece of paper attached to it with homophobic slurs, according to the church's pastor, Rev. Gabrielle Chavez.

The church has flown a rainbow flag outside for years and similar vandalism has happened before, Chavez said.

Police: Driver reaches 105 mph with toddler

WA STANWOOD — A 3-year-old girl was safely returned to her family after she was a passenger in a high-speed chase spanning multiple counties, authorities said.

Washington State Patrol attempted to stop a vehicle believed to be speeding on Interstate 405 on Tuesday, The Daily Herald reported.

The 31-year-old driver, who is the toddler's father, reportedly pulled over briefly before speeding off toward Interstate 5, Trooper Heather Axtman said. Officers pursued because they learned a child was inside and that the vehicle's registered owner had protection orders against two children, Axtman said, adding they later learned the orders were for two other children.

Troopers attempted to stop the vehicle with spike strips, but the driver swerved around them, reaching speeds up to 105 mph, authorities said. The man was stopped about 50 miles later when officers used a technique to get the truck to spin out, disabling the engine, Axtman said. Officers found the girl buckled in the front seat without a child car seat.

The driver was arrested for investigation of multiple charges, troopers said.

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Ravens' All-Pro S Thomas threatened at gunpoint by wife

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The lawyer for the wife of Baltimore Ravens safety Earl Thomas said she is being subjected to an “unfounded ongoing investigation” by Texas police after she allegedly pointed a gun at her husband’s head upon finding him in bed with another woman last month.

According to a police affidavit, Nina Thomas tracked down her husband at a short-term rental home in Austin in the early morning hours of April 13 and found him and his brother, Seth, in bed with two women.

The affidavit says Nina Thomas admitted to pointing the pistol at Earl Thomas’ head “with the intent to scare him.” She had taken the magazine out of the gun and disengaged the safety, but police noted “she was unaware the gun had a round in the chamber.”

Nina Thomas struck Earl Thomas repeatedly with her free hand before her husband eventually wrestled the 9 mm Beretta from her grasp, the affidavit said. At that point, he told the woman with whom he was romantically linked to call the police.

Nina Thomas was arrested on a felony charge of burglary of a habitation with the intent to commit aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. The incident was first reported by TMZ.

After getting word that the episode would soon be made public, Earl Thomas acknowledged late Wednesday in a video on his Instagram account that there was “an altercation between me and Nina.”

“It’s really not anybody’s business. It’s (ticking) me off that it got out, but it’s the world we live in today,” he said in a since-deleted video. “Stuff like this happens. We try to live the best life we possibly can, but sometimes it doesn’t go as planned.”

Jonathan D. “Jay” Goins, the lawyer for Nina Thomas, said she “was wrongfully arrested.”

“We have already gathered information which controverts every single allegation made on the night in question,” Goins said.

Earl Thomas, who turned 31 Thursday, earned his seventh Pro Bowl selection last season. He signed a four-year deal with the Ravens in April 2019 and was an integral part of a defense that helped Baltimore finish with an NFL-best 14-2 record in the regular season.

In a statement, the Ravens said: “We became aware of the situation when we read and saw it on the reports late last night and early this morning.”

Nina Thomas told police she tracked her husband’s whereabouts to the rental home through his Snapchat account, which showed several videos of Earl with the other woman. Two women who Nina brought to confront her husband were also arrested on burglary charges: her sister and her best friend, the ex-spouse of Seth Thomas.

Upon arrival at the home, police found Nina Thomas with a knife in her hand chasing her husband, who had the pistol, around a vehicle, the affidavit said. The two complied when ordered to drop their weapons and drop to the ground.

Police said the sister took a video of the altercation with her cellphone. The footage showed Nina Thomas pointing the gun at her husband’s head from less than a foot away with her finger on the trigger and the safety disengaged, the affidavit said.

It states that Earl Thomas told police that he was “romantically involved” with the other woman for “3-4 months and that he was working on his relationship with his wife.”

Earl Thomas was not arrested.

Chiefs host Texans to open NFL season

Associated Press

The Kansas City Chiefs will open defense of their Super Bowl championship by hosting Houston on Sept. 10 in the NFL’s annual kickoff game — pending developments in the virus pandemic, of course.

The Texans won a regular-season game at Arrowhead Stadium in 2019, then blew a 24-0 lead in the divisional round of the playoffs.

Another highlight of the opening weekend will have Tom Brady’s regular-season debut with Tampa Bay against Drew Brees at New Orleans on Sept. 13 — the first matchup of 40-plus quarterbacks in NFL history.

The opening of SoFi Stadium in the Los Angeles area that Sunday night has the Rams hosting the Cowboys.

Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas will debut on Monday night, Sept. 21, with the Raiders facing Brees and the Saints.

All of the 32 teams released their schedules early Thursday evening, with the full 2020 list scheduled to be revealed by the league a bit later.

The Chiefs, who won their first Super Bowl in a half-century last February, need baseball’s Royals to move their game for Sept. 10, which now is part of a doubleheader two days earlier. The teams’ stadiums share parking lots.

The NFL schedule, not to mention offseason activities and the preseason, has to be considered tentative given the current prohibition on large gatherings.

But Commissioner Roger Goodell has said the league is planning for a normal season, albeit while making contingency plans.

“The league and the clubs have been in contact with the relevant local, state and federal government authorities and will continue to do so,” NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said.

The traditional Monday night doubleheader on opening weekend will have Pittsburgh at the New York Giants, which has a

rookie head coach in Joe Judge, and Tennessee at Denver.

“The number one positive is we’re getting ready to play football, so that’s the biggest thing,” Judge said. “Once you get the schedule, it starts moving a little bit faster in your mind in terms of preparing.”

Top overall draft pick Joe Burrow and the Bengals start off against the sixth overall selection in April’s draft, Justin Herbert and the Chargers, at Cincinnati. The Bengals also will face the other highly rated rookie quarterback Tua Tagavailoa and the Dolphins in Week 13.

New England, without Brady at QB for an opener for only the second time since 2001 — he was suspended for the first four games of 2016 — hosts Miami on the opening Sunday.

Thanksgiving games will have Houston at Detroit, Washington at Dallas, then one of the league’s fiercest rivalries with Baltimore at Pittsburgh in the night game.

Late-season Saturday games will be scheduled but with undetermined matchups for flexibility, something the NFL has done previously.

Certain to draw heavy early season interest will be the past two league MVPs, Patrick Mahomes and Lamar Jackson, facing off in Week 3 on Monday night at Kansas City. The Chiefs and Ravens each have five prime-time games, as do New England, Dallas, Green Bay, Tampa Bay, defending NFC champ San Francisco, and the Rams.

Detroit and Washington have no prime-time outings.

There’s one Friday night contest, on Christmas, when Minnesota visits New Orleans.

Every team has two home and two away games in the first month of the schedule. Whether that’s a quirk or by design is unknown.

The season ends Jan. 3 with all divisional matchups, as in recent years. Then follow the playoffs, with the Super Bowl slated for Feb. 7 in Tampa, Fla.

Blood, sweat and swabs: UFC cautious

Associated Press

Even before they check in to the hotel, every fighter, coach, cameraman, journalist and UFC employee arriving in Jacksonville, Fla., is immediately directed to a screening station. Their temperatures are taken, and their fingers are pricked for a coronavirus antibody test.

And then comes the part that reduces even the world's most fearsome cage fighters to squirming schoolchildren: a long swab is pushed deep into the back of their nasal cavities.

"That thing in the nose, that was the second time I did it, and it wasn't good at all," laughed 6-foot-4, 255-pound Francis Ngannou, who will fight fellow heavyweight title contender Jair Rozenstruik on the main card at UFC 249 on Saturday night.

"It's too weird. I think I'd rather take a punch than take that."

The UFC is returning to action this weekend after an involuntary eight-week pause while the coronavirus pan-

demic upended President Dana White's determination to keep fighting amid a devastating public health crisis. The mixed martial arts promotion is holding three shows in eight days in a fan-free arena in Florida, where state officials were willing to allow it.

These unique conditions required the UFC to come up with unprecedented health and safety precautions. They're collected in a 25-page document written over the past six weeks by the UFC's executives and physicians.

With no blueprint for keeping athletes safe while they compete amid a pandemic, the UFC consulted regulatory officials and outside experts to develop its protocols. They were also helped by Jeffrey Davidson, the UFC's chief physician, who had already dealt with COVID-19 cases in his other job as head of the emergency department at Valley Hospital in Las Vegas.

The work was done remotely, since the people in charge of figuring out a way for fighters to compete safely couldn't work

in the same room safely.

"We know we've got a great plan in place," UFC chief operating officer Lawrence Epstein said. "I'm sure we'll learn something about how we can do things better or differently or more efficiently, but the key is making sure everything is proceeding as scheduled and trying to figure out whether or not there are ways we can enhance things, or become more efficient. We'll be keeping a close eye on everything that happens, and we'll see how things go. But so far, so good."

The UFC stages shows around the globe each year, and the promotion has plenty of experience in dealing with each location's unique rules, or creating new testing protocols for everything from HIV to doping.

That experience provided a framework, but the UFC still had to fill it in with details. Their guiding principles were minimization of the size of their endeavor, along with constant social distancing — except inside the cage, of course.

The UFC has trimmed the number of people involved in running an MMA show to an absolute minimum — less than half of the usual 300-plus people, according to Epstein. The promotion also required everyone involved to adhere to isolation and strict social distancing standards whenever possible for the entire week, both in the hotel and in VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena.

Everybody working the event, even perhaps some referees, will be wearing masks and gloves. The cage floor, inevitably sprinkled with sweat and blood, is supposed to be disinfected constantly.

The broadcast crew will sit apart from each other at three different tables. Joe Rogan won't conduct his traditional post-fight interviews in the octagon, with the fighters instead putting on a sanitized headset backstage after leaving the cage. Even people working in the broadcast trucks at the pay-per-view event will be separated by plastic barriers and social distancing practices.

IndyCar gets green light to open season in Texas

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — IndyCar has gotten the green flag to finally start its season, which it will do in Texas with a nighttime race June 6 without spectators.

The race at Texas Motor Speedway was the next one on the schedule that hadn't been postponed or canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic. IndyCar and track officials announced the details Thursday, heavy with safety precautions along with financial concessions from both sides to make it happen.

There will be a condensed schedule, with practice, qualifying and the race taking place on the same day. There will be strict access guidelines limiting the number of personnel on site, with a health screen-

ing system administered to all participants and personal protection equipment provided to everyone entering the facility.

TMS president Eddie Gossage had previously indicated he didn't want to run an IndyCar race without fans, given that tracks don't get a cut of the TV revenue for those races like they do for NASCAR events.

"For a race track with the IndyCar race, the gate is your single largest revenue source. So that's a big deal to do it without fans in the stands, and I didn't want to do that," Gossage said. "But at the end of the day, we worked something out. ... We're paying IndyCar; we're just not paying as much. So both of us compromised, and both of us are losing money."

While Gossage wouldn't reveal any figures, he said it was

good to get things going in the sport again. He joked that one concession he got from Roger Penske was 10 minutes in the motorcoach of the series' new owner to "search between the cushions to kind of help bridge the gap on our financial issues."

Texas has held IndyCar races since the 1½-mile track opened in 1997, longer than any facility in the series other than Indianapolis Motor Speedway. TMS hosted two races a year from 1998-2004, including the series finale the last six years of that stretch.

IndyCar President Jay Frye said the series worked with Gossage and public health officials on a plan to "ensure the safety of our event participants."

Gossage said IndyCar was chartering two planes to fly drivers and team members

from Indianapolis to the Fort Worth Alliance Airport the morning of the race, and back home that night. The planes would be sanitized before and after each flight, as will the buses that will take everyone to and from the airport and track.

Social distancing protocols will be in place and carefully maintained. There are two 64-bay garages on the infield at Texas, and both will be utilized to give the 24 expected teams plenty of room for separation.

IndyCar was in St. Petersburg, Fla., preparing to run its March 15 season opener without spectators before the escalating pandemic forced the postponement of that race and the cancellation of races at Long Beach, Calif., Barber Motorsports Park in Alabama and the Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas.