

## Allies ending Afghan mission ahead of US exit

By J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

KABUL, Afghanistan — Some NATO allies and other coalition countries that first deployed service members to Afghanistan in the war's early years are leaving months ahead of the Sept. 11 deadline set by the Biden administration for all U.S. forces to depart, several defense officials said.

The mission to "train, advise and assist" Afghan partners that coalition partners had engaged in is over, although informal assistance and advising continues with senior officials in the Afghan military and government.

The focus is now on withdrawal, which has prompted conflicting emotions from

America's partners in Afghanistan. More than 1,100 troops from 40 non-U.S. NATO and partner countries have been killed during the war, alongside more than 2,300 U.S. service members.

For Dutch troops at Camp Marmal near the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the bar where troops used to hang out has been dismantled, as has the monument to 25 of their comrades who died in the war. A soldier is collecting anything historically significant and sending some of the pieces to the Netherlands' Rijksmuseum.

There's a lot of work to do, said Capt. Marvin, commander of a unit in charge of the withdrawal. The captain insisted on being identified only by his first

name for security reasons.

A ceremony on May 16 represented the only real time for reflection amid the packing up.

Dutch troops could be out by sometime in July, the Dutch Defense Ministry said last week.

Troops from Austria, a non-NATO country that joined the coalition at the outset, also expect to be gone by July, the country's defense ministry said in a statement.

Portuguese soldiers who protect a base at Kabul's international airport will pull out by the end of May, although some high-ranking officers will remain, a military spokesman from Lisbon said.

Troops from Spain, New Zealand and Croatia have already departed, spokesmen for those

countries said.

Germany, which led the military efforts from 15 nations in Afghanistan's north, will be one of the last countries to leave, officials there have said.

Last month, German Defense Ministry spokesman David Helmbold told reporters in Berlin that a July 4 pullout date was being considered for its roughly 1,000 troops, The Associated Press reported. Other estimates from German officials have extended as far out as mid-August.

The Taliban have stepped up attacks and surrounded provincial capitals across the country as the withdrawal continues, said a report this week to Congress by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

## Marine convoy tests radio systems across America

By CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Marines have a line of trucks rolling across the U.S. as part of a test of radio communications systems tactics — but they're not on the citizens band.

The convoy headed west out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., on a four-week, 5,000-mile round-trip mission in early May, the 2nd Marine Logistics Group said. It drove to Twentynine Palms, Calif., and was on its way back home Wednesday, a spokesman said.

Along the way, the Marines in this 18-vehicle column have "experimented with tactics and procedures" for using high frequency radio systems to coordinate over vast distances.

Unlike the truckers on CBs in the 1970s hit song "Convoy," the Marines in trucks and tactical vehicles are using AN/PRC-150 "man pack" radios equipped with encryption. They're able to connect back to Lejeune from stops in places like Millington, Tenn., Albuquerque, N.M., and Williams,

Ariz. They stopped to see the Grand Canyon too.

The HF range from 3 and 30 megahertz has a history of use in the Marine Corps "going all the way back to the Navajo Code Talkers on Iwo Jima," said Staff Sgt. Coltin Davenport, regimental communications chief for Combat Logistics Regiment 2, as quoted in the 2nd MLG statement.

But it was largely considered "dead" amid the development of satellites, microwave antennas and fiber optics. Still, the ability to bounce HF waves off the upper atmosphere allows for transmission past mountains and the curvature of the Earth, an advantage over frequencies that need a clear line-of-sight path.

The use of HF "allows us to communicate over great distances without having to rely on other methods that the enemy can detect," Davenport said.

Their relative low-cost, reliability and ease of use has also made HF radios a favorite for criminals, drug traffickers and terrorists, said the National Security Agency's

Cryptologic Quarterly in a 1992 report. It predicted that HF would long remain useful to "great powers," developing nations and illicit enterprises.

Last year, the Marine Corps awarded a \$380 million contract to Rochester, N.Y.-based L3Harris Technologies Inc. to modernize its HF radios over five years to meet new NSA requirements for protecting top secret and less sensitive voice and data from enemy snooping.

The wideband-HF systems provide "long-haul communications, and the primary backup ... in a satellite communications-denied environment," Marine Corps Systems Command project officer Leigh King said in a statement about HF upgrades last May.

As for the cross-country trek, it may be the longest haul in the history of Marine Corps convoys, officials say, and by a long shot. In November, Combat Logistics Regiment 27 clocked a 916-mile convoy from Fort Drum, N.Y. to Lejeune, thought to be among the longest on record.

# DOD looks to boost vaccination rate

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon on Thursday issued a memo on ways to encourage and promote coronavirus vaccinations as the military wrestles with convincing service members who have not received the shots to do so.

The Defense Department is “moving into a new phase of our efforts” now that vaccine access has improved and “reaffirms support for initiatives to increase vaccination acceptance among all service members,” Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks and Air Force Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote in the memo.

Since January, the challenge for the military’s medical community was vaccinating all those who wanted the shot. Now, as the vaccine has become more widely available, the issue is with demand, Army Lt. Gen. Ronald J. Place, director of the Defense Health Agency, told reporters Thursday at the Pentagon.

To boost vaccination rates, Place said the department aims to spread information and “show people true data” about the vaccine to dispel concerns about its efficacy.

“One of the reasons why I’m pounding a little hard on how effective it is in our community is because there’s a lot of people who think it’s not an effective vaccine,” he said. “This suite

of vaccines are incredibly effective.”

Of the approximately 1.5 million military medical beneficiaries who have been fully vaccinated, about 1,640 tested positive for the coronavirus while vaccinated — 24 of whom were hospitalized, but none died, Place said.

“If you do that math, that’s 99.9% effective for our beneficiaries of preventing breakthrough infection and 99.999% effective in preventing hospitalization,” he said.

The Pentagon in its memo also emphasized the power of information on increasing vaccination rates, urging leaders to continue engaging with service members regarding their vaccination concerns.

## Fort Stewart ceremonial grounds renamed for hero

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe’s name now graces the primary ceremonial grounds at Fort Stewart, Ga., which were renamed Thursday in honor of the fallen Iraq War hero by 3rd Infantry Division officials as they await word on a proposal to award the Medal of Honor to the soldier.

Long known as Marne Gardens — in honor of the 3rd ID’s nickname the Rock of the Marne — the now Cashe Gardens sits just outside the division’s headquarters near Fort Stewart’s main gate and hosts hundreds of ceremonies each year marking promotions,

command changes and other military milestones. Fort Stewart leaders have long planned to honor Cashe in some way on the post and renaming Marne Gardens in his honor seemed appropriate, Army Command Sgt. Maj. Quentin Fenderson said Thursday.

“Whenever a soldier comes here in the future they will think of the heroism of one of our own Dogface soldiers,” said Fenderson, who served with Cashe in Iraq and has since risen to become the 3rd ID’s senior enlisted leader. Third Infantry Division troops are nicknamed Dogface soldiers. “Anytime anyone wants to be inspired they will always have this garden in the Marne Division that shares a name with

this hero.”

Fenderson, other Fort Stewart officials and Cashe’s family members unveiled a sign Thursday at Cashe Gardens memorializing the revered soldier’s final battlefield act — when on Oct. 17, 2005, he repeatedly entered a burning Bradley Fighting Vehicle after it struck a roadside bomb to pull his subordinate soldiers to safety. Cashe suffered mortal burn wounds during the incident and died of them Nov. 8, 2005. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star medal for his actions, credited with saving multiple lives, but soldiers and members of his family for years have felt he deserved the Medal of Honor.

## Retired Ranger credits soldiers with earning Medal of Honor

By NIKKI WENTLING  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Col. Ralph Puckett, the 94-year-old retired Army Ranger who received the Medal of Honor on Friday, is a fair and honest leader and humble man who has greatly influenced the men he commanded and countless other Rangers he’s mentored over the past seven decades, his friends and family said Thursday.

One of those men, Master Sgt. Merle Simpson, said Puckett taught him and other soldiers to be better, to be like him. Simpson, 92, served under Puckett during the Korean War. When he found out earlier this month that Puckett would be

awarded the Medal of Honor, Simpson wondered why he hadn’t received it years ago.

“I thought time had run out,” Simpson said. “I didn’t think I would be here, let alone Ralph, who’s two years older. So this is all really something.”

Puckett is being awarded for actions he took more than 70 years ago, in November 1950. As a young first lieutenant in the Korean War, Puckett commanded the Eighth Army Ranger Company during a mission to seize “Hill 205” and defend it against a series of assaults by the Chinese.

“Throughout the attack, he’s wounded and could’ve been evacuated,” said Col.

John Locke, who spearheaded the effort to get Puckett the Medal of Honor. “He made his way around the perimeter, called in artillery fire and distributed all of his ammunition so his soldiers could keep fighting.”

Puckett risked his life over and over again, Locke said. But Thursday, Puckett credited Simpson and the rest of his company for earning the Medal of Honor.

“The people who earned that medal are the Eighth Army Rangers, like Merle Simpson, who did more than I asked and did the best they could,” Puckett said. “I want them to know they’re the ones who did the job. They did the fighting, and they’re the ones who deserve the credit.”

# Okinawa reports a record 207 new cases

By JOSEPH DITZLER  
*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — Okinawa prefecture reported its highest one-day number of new coronavirus infections Friday, the same day Japan approved two vaccines for distribution.

Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture, said 207 people had tested positive for COVID-19, the coronavirus respiratory disease, on Friday, surpassing its previous high, 203, set Wednesday, according to public broadcaster NHK and prefectural data. Also, a Naha City woman in her 90s died, bringing the pandemic death toll there to 148, according to NHK.

Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture, also confirmed its highest COVID-19 count thus far, 727 newly infected people, NHK reported Friday.

The Japanese government on Sunday may add Okinawa to the nine prefectures, including To-

kyo and Osaka, where a state of emergency is already in place, Kyodo News reported Friday. Emergency restrictions include bans on alcohol sales in restaurants, reduced hours for some businesses and, in Okinawa's case, would urge tourists to refrain from visiting the island prefecture.

Okinawa is home to tens of thousands of U.S. service members, Defense Department employees, contractors and their families.

Also Friday, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced the government has approved the Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines for distribution across the country. AstraZeneca filed for approval on Feb. 5 and Moderna filed for approval on March 5, according to a ministry news release.

Japan has lagged other developed nations in getting its population vaccinated. It requires a

domestic clinical trial of new vaccines, which can take up to a year and has slowed the nation's progress on inoculations during the pandemic, according to an April 29 report in Nikkei Asia. One vaccine, the two-shot Pfizer-BioNTech, has been available, thus far, and Japan has set up mass vaccination centers in some cities.

About 1.85% of Japan's population, 2.3 million people, are fully vaccinated, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

U.S. bases across Japan reported Friday that another five individuals had contracted COVID-19.

At Yokosuka Naval Base, 35 miles south of central Tokyo, one immunized person affiliated with the U.S. military came up positive after developing COVID-19 symptoms, according to a base news release. The base reported a false positive

Tuesday and removed that individual from its active case count. Five people with the disease are being monitored at Yokosuka.

At Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, one person was identified with the virus by public health authorities, according to a base Facebook post. Yokota has two active cases.

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni south of Hiroshima has discovered two individuals with COVID-19 since Thursday, according to a base Facebook post Friday. The two were not quarantined when they tested positive but were isolated afterward, according to the base.

Late Thursday, Kadena Air Base on Okinawa had one person there come up positive while quarantined following travel outside Japan, according to a base Facebook post. Contact tracing was underway, the base said.

## House narrowly OKs \$1.9B to fortify Capitol complex

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday narrowly approved \$1.9 billion to fortify the Capitol after the Jan. 6 insurrection, as Democrats pushed past Republican opposition to try to harden the complex with retractable fencing and a quick-response force following the most violent domestic attack on Congress in history.

The bill's 213-212 passage came a day after the House approved the formation of an independent commission to investigate the deadly mob siege by then-President Donald Trump's supporters, who battled police to storm the building in a failed attempt to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's election.

The two measures now face an uncertain outcome in the evenly divided Senate as most Republicans have objected to both. Ten-

sions are running high at the Capitol, with Democrats growing exasperated with Republicans who refuse to acknowledge the severity of the insurrection because of what appears to be their devotion to Trump — and fears of crossing him.

At the same time, the idea of bolstered security at the Capitol saddened many lawmakers who said they see no other choice because of the ongoing threats on Congress.

Together, the package of bills stemming from the domestic assault by Trump supporters on the Capitol reminded some lawmakers of the changes that emerged from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Then, a landmark commission investigated the attack's root causes and authorities hardened the security apparatus across the federal government.

## Lawmaker criticized for profiting during pandemic

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — In the early days of the pandemic, New Jersey Rep. Tom Malinowski scolded those looking to capitalize on the health crisis, saying it was “not the time for anybody to be profiting” from selling goods to combat the pandemic.

The two-term Democrat did not heed his own admonition.

Since early 2020, Malinowski has bought or sold as much as \$1 million of stock in medical and tech companies that had a stake in the virus response, records show. The trades were just one slice of as much as \$3.2 million in trades he did not properly disclose.

The issue of congressional stock trading took on a new urgency last year when at least three senators were the subject of inquiries about whether they

made financial decisions based on insider information. Though no one was charged, their dealings stirred outrage and highlighted the limitations of the Stock Act, a 2012 law intended to curtail congressional stock trading.

Malinowski snapped up securities at bargain prices after markets plunged — profiting when valuations recovered. In other cases, he sold shares before they fell substantially, according to an analysis of a list of Malinowski's 2020 trades released by his office.

“At no point in the last 25 years have I directed, suggested, or even asked questions about a particular trade being made by my brokerage firm,” Malinowski said in an interview Thursday.

He also said he was in the process of setting up a blind trust to hold his financial portfolio, which he will have no control over.

# Palestinians see cease-fire as victory

*Associated Press*

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Palestinians rallied by the thousands Friday after a cease-fire took effect in the latest Gaza war, with many viewing it as costly but clear victory for the Islamic militant group Hamas. Israel vowed to respond with a “new level of force” to any further hostilities.

The 11-day war left more than 200 dead — the vast majority Palestinians — and brought widespread devastation to the already impoverished Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. But the rocket barrages that brought life to a standstill in much of Israel were seen by many Palestinians as a bold response to perceived Israeli abuses in Jerusalem, the emotional heart of the conflict.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned against further attacks, saying, “If Hamas thinks we will tolerate a drizzle of rockets, it is wrong.” He vowed to respond with “a new level of force” against

aggression anywhere in Israel.

The Israeli leader, who has faced criticism from his hawkish base for ending the offensive prematurely, said Israel had done “daring and new things, and this without being dragged into unnecessary adventures.” He added that Israeli forces had caused “maximum damage to Hamas with a minimum of casualties in Israel.”

Israeli strikes killed more than 200 militants, including 25 senior commanders, and hit more than 60 miles of militant tunnels, Netanyahu said.

The truce faced an early test when clashes broke out between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police following Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a flashpoint holy site in Jerusalem that is sacred to Jews and Muslims. It was unclear what sparked the violence.

Protesters also clashed with Israeli troops in parts of the occupied West Bank,

which has seen violent demonstrations in recent days linked to Jerusalem and Gaza.

Thousands took to the streets of Gaza as the cease-fire took hold at 2 a.m. Young men waved Palestinian and Hamas flags, passed out sweets, honked horns and set off fireworks. Celebrations also broke out overnight in east Jerusalem and across the occupied West Bank. Israel captured all three territories in the 1967 war and the Palestinians want them for their future state.

Like the three previous wars, the latest round of fighting ended inconclusively. Israel claimed it inflicted heavy damage on Hamas with hundreds of bruising airstrikes but once again was unable to halt the rockets.

Hamas also claimed victory but faces the daunting challenge of rebuilding in a territory already suffering from high unemployment and a coronavirus outbreak.

# Greek firefighters battle forest fire for 2nd day

*Associated Press*

ATHENS, Greece — Greek firefighters were battling a major forest fire in the Corinth region west of Athens for a second day Friday, with more settlements evacuated overnight.

Civil Protection head Nikos Hardalias said Friday that nearly 9,900 acres of mostly forest in mountainous terrain had been burned. Dozens of houses were also destroyed, mostly holiday homes or small dwellings outside of villages.

The fire, which broke out late Wednesday

near the village of Schinos, was fanned by gale-force winds that blanketed the Greek capital about 44 miles to the west with acrid smoke throughout the day Thursday.

“During the night there were many fronts that were exceptionally dangerous for our forces,” said Hardalias, adding that three settlements and one monastery were evacuated as a precaution during the night.

More than 300 firefighters, ground teams, members of the military and volunteers were fighting the flames, while 21 water-dropping planes and helicopters were deployed at first

light Friday to assist from the air.

Despite “exceptionally difficult circumstances,” firefighting forces managed to prevent the flames from reaching a wildlife refuge south of the main fire, and from expanding further east toward the town of Megara, Hardalias said.

The fire destroyed power lines, causing local blackouts, and reached a nearby coastline. The Civil Protection Authority activated a cellphone-enabled alert service to help with evacuation efforts on Thursday and overnight to Friday.

# Spain returns thousands of migrants to Morocco

*Associated Press*

CEUTA, Spain — Over 6,600 of the more than 8,000 migrants who swam or jumped over border fences into one of Spain’s North African enclaves this week have been sent back to Morocco, authorities said Friday.

No fresh arrivals were recorded for the second day in a row in Ceuta, the Spanish city of 85,000 at the center of a diplomatic row between Spain and Morocco, after Moroccan authorities stepped up vigilance on their side of the border.

But in nearby Melilla, another Spanish

territory 220 miles west along the Mediterranean Sea next to Morocco, border security forces on both sides repelled groups of youths trying to get into Spain.

The Spanish government’s delegation in Melilla said a few dozen made it in.

Relations between the two Mediterranean neighbors have dipped to a low over Spain’s decision last month to grant entry for medical treatment to the man leading the movement that has fought for Western Sahara’s independence since Morocco annexed the vast territory in the 1970s.

Officials in Rabat say Polisario Front boss Brahim Ghali’s presence in Spain, where he entered with an Algerian passport baring a false name, is unacceptable. Ghali, who Morocco considers a terrorist, has been recovering from COVID-19 in a hospital in northern Spain since April 18.

He’s also been summoned for questioning by Spain’s National Court on June 1 in a lawsuit for alleged tortures and is being investigated for possible genocide in a separate case brought by dissident Sahrawi groups who oppose the Polisario.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Teens rescued from abandoned building

**MN** ST. PAUL — Three teenagers were rescued after being trapped in an abandoned building at a former automotive plant in St. Paul, according to police.

One of the teens was hospitalized with injuries suffered in a fall Wednesday. Officers responded to a 911 call about 2:20 p.m. from the former Ford Motor Co. plant.

Authorities said the teens were trapped in a confined area and needed help. According to St. Paul Deputy Fire Chief Roy Mokosso, six teens entered the abandoned building. Three made it out and called 911.

Mokosso says the old building is used by intruders as a place to drink, smoke or go urban exploring. He said it is sometimes inhabited by homeless people, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported.

### Hundreds line up for blooming 'corpse flower'

**CA** ALAMEDA — Residents of a San Francisco Bay Area city flocked to an abandoned gas station to get a whiff of a corpse flower — so-called because of the stench it emits when it blooms — after its owner decided to share the rare plant with his neighbors.

Solomon Leyva, a nursery owner in Alameda who deals in exceptionally rare plants, had been posting on social media about his *amorphophallus titanum*. When he saw a lot of interest in the giant blooming flower, he decided to wheel it to the abandoned building, where a line of people stretched down the block for most of the day, the

San Francisco Chronicle reported.

Leyva relaxed in a camping chair at the old Art Deco gas station and patiently answered the same questions again and again. He estimated that by 4 p.m., at least 1,200 residents had visited the flower.

### Man in plaza shooting sentenced to prison

**NH** MANCHESTER — A Maine man accused of firing a gun in a New Hampshire shopping plaza, saying he believed “zombies,” “droids,” and “drones” were trying to get him, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to at least two years in prison Wednesday.

Gordon Falt, 27, of Mount Desert, Maine, pleaded guilty to 13 counts of reckless conduct with a deadly weapon, being a felon in possession of dangerous weapons and other charges, WMUR-TV reported.

The Lee Market Place plaza was busy with shoppers at the Market Basket and other stores in October when shots were heard. Shoppers were placed on lockdown in the grocery store and shops for about two hours during a standoff. No one was injured. Falt surrendered after two hours.

### 1 worker killed, 2nd is injured in elevator plunge

**NY** NEW YORK — A construction worker was killed and another was injured Wednesday in an elevator plunge in the Bronx, authorities said.

Firefighters responded to a five-story building at 20 Bruckner Blvd. in the Mott Haven section shortly after 8 a.m. for a report of an elevator collapse, a

Fire Department spokesperson said.

Two workers were inside the elevator when it dropped several floors, the spokesperson said. One of the workers was killed and the other was taken to a hospital.

The building is a former ice factory that is being renovated for commercial use. An email seeking comment was sent to the developer of the project, MADD Equities.

The city Department of Buildings is investigating the elevator plunge.

### Dozens of motorhomes destroyed in blaze

**CA** CANYON LAKE — Dozens of motorhomes were destroyed Wednesday in a fire that erupted in a storage yard near a Southern California lake, authorities said.

The blaze was reported just after 2:30 p.m. near Canyon Lake, a reservoir in Riverside County southeast of Los Angeles, the county Fire Department said.

Thirty to 40 recreational vehicles were destroyed and a firefighter received non-life threatening injuries, the Fire Department said.

No other injuries were reported.

### Man on land survey mauled by bear, rescued

**AK** ANCHORAGE — An Alaska man conducting a land survey in a wooded area was mauled by a bear but survived the attack and is being treated for his injuries at a hospital, authorities said.

Authorities believe a brown bear mauled the 61-year-old man near the small community

of Gulkana but could not find the bear after the attack, Alaska State Troopers said in a statement.

The man was located by officials and taken by troopers and other rescue workers to a road, where he was eventually flown to an Anchorage hospital for treatment.

Authorities did not describe the man's injuries or condition and did not identify him but said he is from the tiny Alaska community of Chitna.

### Officials seek to curb dog attacks against sheep

**NV** RENO — U.S. Forest Service officials in Nevada have started to crack down on its leash laws after recent reports of dogs attacking sheep used for wildfire reduction on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Officials said dogs at Whites Creek and Thomas Creek trails must be leashed within a mile of trailheads through June 30 to reduce the risk of attacks, the Reno Gazette-Journal reported.

The U.S. Forest Service's Carson Ranger District has deployed sheep in the Arrowcreek and Carson City areas for the last decade to reduce the amount of forest fuel that could spark wildfires. It contracts with Gardnerville-based Borda Land & Sheep Co.

The sheep are used to remove cheatgrass, a highly flammable invasive species, and other vegetation on more than 1.5 square miles south of Reno and about 500 acres west of Carson City.

However, District Fuels Specialist Steve Howell said there is at least one sheep attack a year.

— From wire reports

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# Butler, Heat are ready for anything

Associated Press

This was not the season the Miami Heat envisioned.

They spent 65% of the season mired in seventh place or lower in the Eastern Conference standings. They spent two weeks spanning late January and early February in 13th place. It took until Game 37 — just past the midway point — to get over .500 for the first time. They couldn't shoot. They couldn't stay healthy. They couldn't escape COVID-19.

Somehow, they're not complaining.

"This has been a really enjoyable season — and that includes all of the adversities and incredible challenges," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

The next challenge is here, and how Miami handles this one will determine if the season gets even more enjoyable or if it ends. The defending East champions wound up as the No. 6 seed and were expected to open the postseason on Saturday against the third-seeded Milwaukee Bucks, one of the teams they beat in last season's playoffs on their way to the NBA Finals.

Milwaukee took the regular season series 2-1, which likely serves as a confidence

boost to the Bucks. At the same time it likely doesn't seem daunting to the Heat considering that Jimmy Butler — who simply willed Miami's run to the finals last season — didn't play in any of those three games. He was expected to play Saturday, and the Heat's chances largely rest on what he can do.

"We're ready for anything," Butler said. "You leave the past in the past. All the wins, all the losses, all the mishaps, all the great fortune ... it's a different time of the year right now. You're supposed to be playing your best basketball, be healthy and the first one to 16 wins. So, we've got to start with the first four."

It wasn't the easiest path for the teams that ended last season looking like the NBA's elite.

The four teams that went deepest in the restart bubble at Walt Disney World last year, and therefore had the shortest offseasons entering this season, all had their challenges. The Heat — one of the NBA's best three-point shooting teams last season — fell to the bottom half of the league in that department this season. Boston and the reigning champion Los Angeles Lakers both needed to win play-in tournament games to

earn the No. 7 seeds in the East and the West postseason. Denver started 17-15 before winning 30 of its final 40 games to take the West's No. 3 seed.

But an up-and-down year is looking up for Miami. The Heat won 11 out of 12 games in one midseason stretch and still sat at 28-28 with 16 games remaining. The Heat went 12-4 from there, for one simple reason.

"We got healthy," center Bam Adebayo said.

And now they're off to start defending the East title, with five of their six leading scorers from last season's series against Milwaukee still in Heat uniforms. They no longer have Jae Crowder, who averaged 15.2 points in 33 minutes in those five games against the Bucks last season, but virtually every other member of the rotation from that matchup is back.

"I truly believe we have a different group of guys, who've been battled-tested and been through a lot, ups and downs — and stayed even and pretty much consistent throughout it all and can fight through adversity," Heat guard Kendrick Nunn said. "I definitely have full confidence that we'll be ready."

# Wizards beat Pacers for East's No. 8 seed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After one loss back when the Washington Wizards were struggling through a coronavirus-disrupted, injury-depleted and defense-optional stretch of the season that put them 15 games below .500, Russell Westbrook gathered his teammates to speak his mind.

According to coach Scott Brooks, Westbrook delivered a "very passionate, very direct talk" that essentially amounted to: We will not miss the postseason.

Might have seemed far-fetched at the time. Turns out Westbrook was true to his word.

Westbrook nearly produced a triple-double Thursday night, Bradley Beal scored 25 points and the Wizards reached the NBA playoffs as the Eastern Conference's No. 8 seed by

overwhelming the Indiana Pacers 142-115 in the play-in round Thursday night.

Washington led by as many as 38 and now faces Joel Embiid and the No. 1 seed Philadelphia 76ers in the first round, marking quite a turnaround for Brooks' crew, which was 17-32 before going on a 17-6 run over the regular season's last six weeks.

"Russell has an edge, guys, and I think the world should appreciate that," said Brooks, who also coached Westbrook at the start of the point guard's pro career with the Oklahoma City Thunder. "He gives you everything. He's a hooper. And sometimes, he's an angry hooper. But he's a hooper that just plays the right way and plays hard."

Asked about his locker room chat when things looked bleak, Westbrook said: "We were struggling and everybody was

doubting us on the outside and we had to knuckle up."

That they did, thanks in no small part to the 2016-17 league MVP.

A little more than a week after breaking Oscar Robertson's career record for most regular-season triple-doubles, Westbrook finished Thursday with 18 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds, and it was Beal — second in the NBA in scoring two years in a row — whose three-pointer opened up a 30-point lead at 98-68 with about four minutes left in the third quarter.

"We weren't able to sustain some of their punches," Indiana's Doug McDermott said.

Beal and Westbrook heard "M-V-P!" chants during trips to the foul line, as did reserve center Robin Lopez in an appreciative if more tongue-in-cheek way, from a giddy crowd

capped at 5,333 — a quarter of the arena's capacity — because of COVID-19 concerns.

Beal skipped the last period entirely. Westbrook sat out the last 8 minutes and tossed his shoes to a fan.

"They got on a roll. They got two elite players on that team and they're at home," said Malcolm Brogdon, who led Indiana with 25 points. "Once guys like that get their confidence going in the second quarter and start rolling, there's not much you can do."

The Wizards lost the 7-vs.-8 game at the Boston Celtics 118-100 Tuesday, and Westbrook was hardly himself.

He shot 6-for-18. He had only five assists, less than half of his league-leading average of 11.7.

"Just wasn't feeling my best when my team needed me the most," he said. "Today I did a better job."

# Windy, wild start for PGA Championship

Associated Press

Opening Day at the PGA Championship essentially wound up a draw.

Good shots were rewarded, bad ones predictably punished and the Ocean Course in Kiawah Island, S.C. — reliably backed up by stiff breezes off the Atlantic — came out of it looking like anything but a pushover. Canadian Corey Connors posted a 5-under 67, but it came on a day when the field averaged 75 and a quartet of pre-tournament picks landed right on that number or worse: Rory McIlroy and Justin Thomas (75), Dustin Johnson (76) and Daniel Berger (78).

For all that, no one's feelings were badly bruised ... except maybe Bryson DeChambeau's. He recovered from four straight bogeys to finish at even-par 72, but appeared still out of sorts afterward. Recounting his round in a press conference, DeChambeau mixed up some holes, acknowledged he struggled with the heat and some bad

breaks and found it nerve-wracking trying to constantly factor in the wind speed and direction, even on short putts.

The woe-is-me litany continued until a reporter, citing DeChambeau's practice and preparation fetish, seemed genuinely concerned about his health, asking, "Are you close to a point of exhaustion?"

"No, I'm not like at wit's end or anything ... but this golf course takes it out of you," DeChambeau said. "This is the most difficult golf course that I've played on Tour, and that is a straight-up fact for me."

A half-dozen players, including majors specialist Brooks Koepka, were two shots back at 69, and mixed into the group of eight players at 70 were defending champion Collin Morikawa, former U.S. Open champion Gary Woodland and improbably, perhaps, 50-year-old Phil Mickelson.

Lefty started 3-over through six holes, but made up a lot of ground with a 32 on the back nine, where the field averaged 38.

"It's very fair," Mickelson said, "even though it's tough."

How tough?

At the par-3 14th, Jordan Spieth, who wound up shooting 73, could be heard pleading with his tee shot to stay on the putting surface: "Sit! Sit, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit ... PLEASE!"

"It's there," someone on the tee box reassured him. But a heartbeat later, aided by the wind, his ball keeps rolling, slides off the back of the green and down into a swale.

"Damn," Spieth says the second after that, "you've got to be kidding me."

Hardly. Yet that was far from the strangest moment of the day. That belonged to Sebastian Munoz, who was hardly the only golfer to pull his tee shot well left and off the 18th fairway. The difference is that he had to retrieve his from a plastic trash bag set up in front of the grandstand on that side.

# Montreal takes Game 1, Toronto loses Tavares

Associated Press

TORONTO — Paul Byron broke a tie with a short-handed goal from his knees with 7:16 left and the Montreal Canadiens beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 2-1 on Thursday night in Game 1 of the first-round series between Original Six rivals.

The game was marred by an early collision that sent Toronto captain John Tavares off the ice on a stretcher to a hospital.

Tavares crashed into Montreal's Ben Chiarot 10:29 into the first period and was hit in the head by Corey Perry's knee as he fell. Maple Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe said Tavares was conscious and communicating well and would remain hospitalized overnight to undergo further tests.

Toronto newcomer Nick Foligno fought Perry immediately after the faceoff to resume play.

"Our captain's laying on the ice," Foligno said. "It's nothing more than that. Perry obliged. It just addresses the situation and everyone moves on."

The Canadiens stunned the

Maple Leafs with the short-handed winner. With Tomas Tatar off for high-sticking and Toronto looking to take the lead, Byron raced past Rasmus Sandin, with the rookie defenseman dragging down the Montreal forward. From his knees, Byron then chipped the puck past goalie Jack Campbell.

Carey Price made 35 saves and Josh Anderson had a first-period goal for the Canadiens. They finished the regular season fourth in the all-Canadian North Division, 18 points behind the first-place Maple Leafs.

"New ballgame now," Price said. "We had struggles through the season, but got to the playoffs. It's a new season."

William Nylander tied it for Toronto early in the second, and Campbell made 28 saves in his playoff debut.

Game 2 is Saturday night in Toronto. The teams last met in the playoffs in 1979.

**Panthers 6, Lightning 5 (OT):** Ryan Lomberg scored on a breakaway 5:56 into overtime to cap a furious comeback and lift Florida to a win at Tampa Bay in

Game 3.

Radko Gudas gained possession off a faceoff deep in his own zone and flicked the puck ahead to Lomberg, who barreled in on goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy to cut the Lightning's lead to 2-1 in the best-of-seven series.

The Lightning took a 5-3 lead into the final period, then yielded a power-play goal to Patric Hornqvist early in the third and Gustav Forsling's equalizer with 3:07 remaining.

Gudas, Alex Wennberg and Sam Bennett also scored for Florida. Sergei Bobrovsky, a 5-4 loser in Game 1, replaced Chris Driedger at the start of the third period and stopped all nine shots he faced for the victory.

Brayden Point, Anthony Cirelli, Ross Colton, Steven Stamkos and Alex Killorn scored for the Lightning.

Game 4 is Saturday at Amalie Arena.

**Penguins 5, Islanders 4:** Brandon Tanev broke a tie with 3:36 left and Pittsburgh won at New York in Game 3 to take a 2-1 series lead.

Jeff Carter scored twice, Kris

Letang had a goal and two assists, and Jason Zucker also scored for the Penguins. Tristan Jarry stopped 26 shots.

Cal Clutterbuck scored twice, Scott Mayfield had a goal and two assists, and Anthony Beauvillier also scored for the Islanders. Semyon Varlamov finished with 22 saves.

Game 4 is Saturday at Nassau Coliseum.

The capacity was expanded to 6,250 fans for New York's first home playoff game since Game 2 of the Eastern Conference semifinals against Carolina on April 28, 2019.

**Golden Knights 5, Wild 2:** Reilly Smith capped Vegas' three-goal second-period surge with the go-ahead score to help Vegas take a 2-1 series lead at Minnesota.

Mark Stone had two goals, Patrick Brown and William Karlsson also scored, Nick Holden had two assists and Marc-Andre Fleury made 14 saves.

Ryan Hartman and Joel Eriksson Ek scored for the Wild.

# Germán gives Yankees another gem

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Domingo Germán pitched seven scoreless innings, Gio Urshela and Aaron Judge delivered RBI singles as pinch-hitters in the seventh inning and the New York Yankees followed Corey Kluber's no-hitter by beating the Texas Rangers 2-0 on Thursday.

New York won its sixth straight series and at 25-19 moved a season-high six games over .500. Yankees pitchers have thrown seven shutouts in the team's first 44 games for the first time since 1967.

"They can pitch, man," manager Aaron Boone said of his rotation. "Obviously the bullpen's been there to complement them and been terrific all year, as well. I love where the starters are at right now and the way they're throwing the ball as a group."

Germán (4-2), who allowed six hits with five strikeouts as New York finished the four-game series with 22 consecutive scoreless innings.

Chad Green pitched a perfect eighth, and Aroldis Chapman struck out two in the ninth for his 11th save. John King (4-3) was the loser.

**Red Sox 8, Blue Jays 7:** J.D. Martinez hit a go-ahead, two-run homer in a three-run ninth inning, and Boston rallied to beat Toronto in Dunedin, Fla.

Alex Verdugo had an RBI grounder before Martinez connected on his 250th homer. The two-out drive came off Rafael Dolis (1-1), making his second appearance since returning from a right calf injury.

Martinez shouted and repeatedly pumped his fists while rounding the bases. He stopped a 12-game homerless drought Wednesday.

Phillips Valdez (2-1) went 1½ scoreless innings and Matt Barnes worked the ninth to get his 10th save in 11 chances. After walking Rowdy Tellez, Barnes struck out Danny Jansen with a 98 mph full-count fastball.

Boston (27-18) held onto the AL East lead.

**Dodgers 3, Diamondbacks 2:** Will Smith hit a tiebreaking, solo home run in the seventh inning, Albert Pujols slugged a two-run shot, his first for Los Angeles, in a win over visiting Arizona to complete a four-game sweep.

Smith sent the first pitch from Merrill Kelly (2-5) into the lower left-field seats leading off the seventh, giving the Dodgers a 3-2 lead. Smith sparkled on defense, too, throwing out pinch-runner Tim Lincecum at second to end the eighth.

Pujols hit an 0-1 pitch from Kelly to right

field in the second. It was Pujols' 668th career home run, most among active players and fifth all-time. The hit was his 3,256th, breaking a tie with Eddie Murray for 13th on the all-time list.

David Price opened a bullpen game for Los Angeles, his first start since Sept. 1, 2019. The left-hander, who opted out last season because of the pandemic, allowed three hits and struck out one in two innings. He was followed by Jimmy Nelson, Alex Vesia, Joe Kelly, Victor Gonzalez (1-0), Blake Treinen and closer Kenley Jansen, who earned his 10th save.

**Rays 10, Orioles 1:** Joey Wendle homered twice, Rich Hill (3-1) combined with his bullpen on a two-hitter and Tampa Bay extended its winning streak to seven with a road win.

The Rays outscored the Orioles 32-14 during its first three-game sweep at Camden Yards since May 17-19, 2013. Tampa Bay is 26-19 and seven games over .500 for the first time this year.

Baltimore has lost 10 of 12 and at 17-26 is a season-high nine games under .500. Dean Kremer (0-4) gave up four runs, five hits and four walks in three innings.

**Giants 19, Reds 4:** Steven Duggar hit his first career grand slam in a nine-run third inning and Brandon Crawford drove in six runs for major league-best San Francisco, which outscored host Cincinnati 33-9 in the series and improved to 28-16.

Darin Ruf had four hits, including a two-run homer in third. Crawford hit a three-run homer in the fifth.

Johnny Cueto (3-1) gave up one run and five hits in five innings against his former team, exiting with a 14-1 lead. Tyler Mahle (2-2) yielded seven runs, seven hits and two walks in two innings.

**Cubs 5, Nationals 2:** Ian Happ homered twice and drove in three runs, putting host Chicago ahead to stay with a two-run shot in the third inning. He also led off the fifth with his sixth homer.

Josh Bell and Kyle Schwarber hit back-to-back homers for Washington in the first, but Joe Ross (2-4) lasted just 3⅓ innings and allowed four runs — two earned — in his second straight loss.

Justin Steele (2-0) got four outs before departing because of right hamstring tightness, and Craig Kimbrel earned his ninth save.

**Astros 8, Athletics 4:** Martín Maldonado homered and drove in three runs, helping visiting Houston to move ahead of Oakland

for the AL West lead.

Alex Bregman, Michael Brantley and Yuli Gurriel also had run-scoring hits for the Astros in the rubber match of a three-game series. Houston is 21-9 against division opponents, including 7-3 against the Athletics, and at 26-19 has sole possession of the division lead for the first time since before play on April 9.

Luis Garcia (2-3) gave up two runs and three hits in five innings. Cole Irvin (3-5) allowed five runs and eight hits in five innings.

**Angels 7-3, Twins 1-6:** Phil Gosselin hit a three-run double for host Los Angeles and Taylor Ward added a two-run homer to back Alex Cobb (2-2), who allowed one run and four hits over five innings of a doubleheader opener to beat Lewis Thorpe (0-2),

Miguel Sanó hit a grand slam off Griffin Canning (3-3) in the first inning of the second game and José Berríos (4-2) yielded three runs and three hits over five innings, remaining unbeaten in five starts. Hansel Robles, who struggled as the Angels' closer in 2020, pitched the seventh for his second save.

Twins manager Rocco Baldelli watched the second game from a suite while serving a one-game suspension. The doubleheader was necessitated by a COVID-19 outbreak among the team while it was in Anaheim last month, forcing the postponement of two games.

**Marlins 6, Phillies 0:** Sandy Alcantara (2-3) tossed two-hit ball over six innings and Adam Cimber, Ross Detwiler and Zach Pop each pitched a scoreless inning in a three-hitter at Philadelphia.

Phillies starter Vince Velasquez was a late scratch because of a numb right index finger, forcing Philadelphia into a bullpen game. The first three pitchers all gave up runs, and the Phillies lost for the fourth time in five games.

Miguel Rojas hit a go-ahead solo shot off David Hale (0-2) in the third. Garrett Cooper had a two-run homer against Matt Moore in the third and added an RBI triple in the sixth.

**Pirates 6, Braves 4 (10):** Kevin Newman hit a tiebreaking single in the 10th, Adam Frazier had four hits and Pittsburgh won at Atlanta.

With the score 4-all and Ben Gamel starting the 10th on second base under the extra-innings rule, Frazier singled Gamel to third off Jacob Webb (1-2) and Newman singled for a 5-4 lead.