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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Congress looks to address bonus paybacks

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congress is set to take key steps over the coming week to address the public scandal over efforts by the California National Guard to recoup wartime re-enlistment bonuses from thousands of soldiers.

House and Senate lawmakers could approve an annual defense policy bill that requires a review of all cases of recoupment in the state between 2004 and 2015 and give a waiver unless it can prove soldiers “knew or reasonably should have known” they were ineligible for the benefit.

Meanwhile, the House Armed Services Committee is calling top National Guard officers and Pentagon officials to testify Dec. 7 on the recoupment of bonus and education benefits.

The California National Guard sparked public outrage in October for pursuing repayment of bonuses worth \$15,000 or more from about 9,700 soldiers who had re-enlisted during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the service’s effort to boost troop numbers.

California lawmakers had pressed for some financial relief for troops to be added to the National Defense Authorization Act,

a sprawling piece of legislation that sets defense policy for the coming year.

A group of more than 100 House members — mostly Democrats — also sent a letter to the chamber’s leadership asking they move quickly to pass a law giving troops some relief from repaying the money.

The proposed NDAA bill unveiled by lawmakers this week states the Guard should review all California recoupment cases by July and “shall evaluate the evidence in a light most favorable” to soldiers who have repaid bonuses or are facing repayment, according to a copy of the bill obtained by Stars and Stripes.

The bill must still pass Congress, and a vote in the House is expected this week followed by a final vote in the Senate next week. Before becoming law, it must also be signed by President Barack Obama.

A waiver should be granted “unless the board makes an affirmative determination, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the member knew or reasonably should have known that the member was ineligible for the bonus pay, special pay, student loan repayment, or other special payment otherwise subject to recoupment,” according to the bill.

The change could remove some of the

burden from soldiers fighting recoupment efforts.

The Defense Department would have to help wipe clean any bad credit ratings related to waived cases by contacting credit reporting agencies and telling them the debt was invalid.

The bill also calls for new militarywide protections for soldiers and retirees in such cases. The DOD would not be allowed to garnish wages or retirement pay of servicemembers who unknowingly received any overpayments unless the recollection effort is done within 10 years.

Audits of recoupment cases and reports to Congress would be required annually during the next decade.

Congress could have a full report on the California bonus repayments by August if the NDAA passes.

However, the House Armed Services Committee will look more closely at the issue next week. Lt. Gen. Timothy Kadavy, director of the Army National Guard, and Maj. Gen. David Baldwin, adjutant general of the California National Guard, are set to testify to the committee about the bonuses, along with Peter Levine, who is performing the duties of the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

Biggest military pay raise in 5 years is in NDAA bill

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Troops would get their biggest pay raise in years under the final version of Congress’ annual defense policy bill unveiled Tuesday.

The 2.1 percent increase included in the National Defense Authorization Act would break a five-year trend of raises that have fallen below the private sector. The higher pay would go into effect Jan. 1 if the bill is passed by Congress, and it could receive an initial vote in the House on Friday.

The massive \$618.7 billion

policy bill also includes \$3.2 billion to boost troop numbers and bolster Marine Corps and Air Force aviation, a military health care overhaul and a requirement to study whether women should be included in the military draft.

The NDAA was hashed out during months of negotiations between the House and Senate, which had disagreed about an \$18 billion spending increase for the military. The proposal was pared down in the final bill but the \$3.2 billion increase could run into opposition from Democrats, who have demanded any additional defense spending be matched with dollars for do-

mestic programs.

Military pay raises have been kept below 2 percent since 2011.

The language in the NDAA overrides President Barack Obama’s order to set pay raises at 1.6 percent in 2017, which was a slight increase over the president’s decision to keep raises at 1.3 percent this year.

The bill also freezes a drawdown in the Army, keeping its end strength at 476,000, and boosts Reserve forces by 4,000. The Marine Corps would get 3,000 more troops, according to a briefing on the bill by senior aides with the House Armed Services Committee.

The House aides said the additional \$3.2 billion will also help fill gaps in military readiness — especially for the Air Force and Marine Corps, which have maintenance and training problems with F-18 fighter jets and CH-53 helicopters.

Tricare, the military’s health care program, would be overhauled to shore up its financial future and expand some access to health care facilities, according to the House briefing.

The House and Senate conference committee rejected a proposal to require women between 18 and 25 years old to register with the Selective Service.

Carter calls on Congress to rethink DOD funding

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Secretary of Defense Ash Carter on Tuesday urged Congress to reconsider what he called an “unacceptable” plan to extend the Pentagon’s current funding levels through May, arguing that decision would add risk to ongoing military operations overseas.

It is “unprecedented and unacceptable, especially when we have so many troops operating in harm’s way,” Carter wrote Tuesday in a letter addressed to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan.

Congress funds all federal agencies on a yearly basis — from Oct. 1 of one year to Sept. 30 of the next year. However, in the last several years, the House and Senate have failed to reach an agreement on defense spending before Sept. 30.

Instead, lawmakers have passed short-term resolutions to keep funds set at the previous year’s levels for a few months, usually through December, while they worked out a budget agreement.

Last spring, Carter proposed a \$582.7 billion defense budget that included a request for an additional \$3.4 billion to increase U.S. forces in Europe and more than \$7 billion for counterterrorism operations.

It also included \$1.8 billion to purchase 45,000 GPS-guided smart bombs to replenish stocks run down by the air campaigns in Iraq and Syria.

Early in November, House and Senate Republican leaders announced they would not pass any funding bills for 2017 until President-elect Donald Trump takes office. Instead, Congress plans to fund the government at last year’s levels for the first six months of the 2017 fiscal year, essentially ending any influence by President Barack Obama.

Coalition faces carrier shortage

By CHRIS CHURCH
Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE CHARLES DE GAULLE — France will continue to support the fight against the Islamic State group even after its only aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle, heads home in December to conduct a maintenance period expected to last more than a year.

The loss of the Charles de Gaulle leaves the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State without one of its most powerful and potent weapons after a vital turning point in the campaign.

French President Francois Hollande had twice extended the nuclear-powered warship’s latest deployment, pushing its depot period back until after the vessel’s return home in mid-December.

“France wanted to intensify its efforts within the coalition in this period, which is a turning point of the fight,” said Rear Adm. Olivier Lebas, commander of Task Force 473.

“Everywhere Daesh is losing territory ... and it’s a turning point also because we started the fight in Mosul,” he said, using an alternative name for the Islamic State group. “Daesh is enduring tremendous pressure. It’s very important to maintain this high pressure to take advantage of this positive momentum in the theater.”

The 42,000-ton carrier, known in the navy by its nickname “Le Grand Charles,” has played a crucial role in Operation Chammal, the French anti-Islamic State campaign in the Middle East.

The 24 multirole Rafale M fighter-bombers onboard tripled the number of jets France is using to conduct strikes and reconnaissance missions over Iraq and Syria as part of the operation. The ship’s ability to maneuver closer to the conflict and choose from where it conducts strikes adds a flexibility the ground-based aircraft don’t have. Over the past two years it’s operated from the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian

Gulf.

“Precision strikes from the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle have decimated Daesh, enabling Iraqi security forces to close in on and begin the liberation of Mosul,” the public affairs office for the U.S.-led coalition said in a recent statement.

Since September 2015, French air forces — both the air force and naval aviation — have conducted more than 5,200 missions and 1,000 strikes, destroying 1,600 targets, French officials say. They’ve conducted 100 strikes since the beginning of the Mosul battle.

The timing of the carrier’s departure comes as Iraqi and Kurdish coalition partners on the ground continue pushing deeper into Mosul. In Syria, government forces and their Russian allies are advancing into rebel areas of Aleppo, while Kurdish-led rebel groups are working on isolating Raqqa, the Islamic State’s de facto capital.

The French are not the only ones facing a shortage of carriers.

The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower is also scheduled to finish its deployment in the near future. Barring any extension or scheduling changes, the coalition may not have the assistance of a carrier until early next year, when the USS George H.W. Bush is scheduled to arrive in theater.

That would leave the Admiral Kuznetsov, the flagship of the Russian navy, as the only carrier in the region. The Russians, however, have mainly focused on fighting rebel groups trying to overthrow the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad rather than confronting the Islamic State.

Refueling and important maintenance for the Charles de Gaulle, which occurs every 10 years, cannot be postponed any longer, said Lebas.

“It’s like your car,” he said. “When you have no fuel left in your tank, you have to stop to refuel. Even if you want to continue, you have to stop.”

France plans to maintain its pressure on the Islamic State and will find other ways of assisting the coalition with other assets, depending on what the coalition needs, Lebas said. He couldn’t speak to specifics about what the French could do.

The French currently have 12 Air Force Rafale assisting the campaign. They also deployed artillery forces on the ground near Mosul in September.

Lebas said there are two key focuses to keep French naval pilots up to date while the Charles De Gaulle is sidelined. The pilots must maintain their operational capability and theater knowledge by deploying and flying in conflict areas, and they must maintain their ability to fly from carriers at sea.

The French navy is looking at a number of possibilities to maintain those capabilities, though no decisions have been made yet.

The major terrorist attacks around France in 2015 are still fresh in the minds of the crew, some of whom are completing their third deployment in less than two years.

Since gunmen opened fire in the Charlie Hebdo magazine headquarters in January 2015, 200 people have been killed in terrorist attacks throughout France, including 130 in a massive coordinated attack in Paris in November 2015.

“The attacks in Paris are a very big part of the crew’s determination, the crew’s will, the crew’s resilience,” said Charles De Gaulle commanding officer Capt. Eric Malbrunot. “Everybody knows why we have the deployments, why we have been extended ... It’s very clear in everyone’s minds why we are here.”

'The flames were right in my backyard'

Rain hits fire-ravaged Smoky Mountains towns as death toll climbs to 4

Associated Press

GATLINBURG, Tenn. — Thunderstorms dumped much-needed rain on eastern Tennessee overnight as thousands of people waited anxiously for news about their homes after wildfires tore through this resort community, killing at least four people.

Officials confirmed a new fatality Wednesday, saying the victim was found at a motel. A mandatory evacuation order remained in place for Gatlinburg as firefighters monitored a few remaining hot spots in the area near the Great Smoky Mountains.

There were severe thunderstorm warnings for the area, ahead of a line of storms moving across the Southeast. Those storms had already spawned possible tornadoes in parts of Alabama and Tennessee, killing five people and injuring more than a dozen. Officials in the Gatlinburg area were worried about mudslides, rock slides and high winds knocking trees onto power lines, perhaps creating new fires.

Tod Hyslop, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said the region had

received about an inch of rain and the forecast calls for thunderstorms to pick up in the afternoon and taper off by early evening.

"The rain is going to help with the suppression of some of the active fires. The rain may help prevent some of the further brush fires. But I also want to say that unless that rain penetrates deep enough into that duff, into that leaf clutter, then those hot spots can still arise," Gatlinburg Fire Chief Greg Miller said.

At the Rocky Top Sports World complex on the outskirts of town, Wolf McLellan, 30, stumbled into the Red Cross shelter after a day of wandering the streets. He was forced to evacuate the hotel where he was staying. He grabbed his guitar, two computers and his Social Security card and tried to flee with his dog, Kylie.

"She was too scared to move with the smoke and sirens and she just stood there. I didn't want to drag her. I couldn't drag her," he said. "I figured the humane thing to do would be to just cut her loose."

Tracy Mayberry lives in a house next door to the motel. He said a tree fell on his house and

when he went outside to investigate "the flames were right in my backyard." He put his wife and 12-year-old into the car and left. He doesn't know if his house is still standing.

"Everything we own is in the house. I mean, we got the clothes on my back and maybe one more outfit," he said. "It's been devastating, I'll say that. It's been crazy. All you can do is keep breathing, keep your head up and keep going."

The fire picked its spots as it tore through the Gatlinburg area: It destroyed at least 150 buildings but left others intact.

By Tuesday evening, almost nothing remained of the Castle, perhaps the largest and most iconic home overlooking Gatlinburg. Entire churches disappeared. So did the Cupid's Chapel of Love wedding venue, though its managers promised to move scheduled weddings to a sister venue, Chapel at the Park.

Officials surveying early damage said the Westgate Smoky Mountain Resort & Spa, with more than 100 buildings, is likely entirely gone.

Fanned by hurricane-force winds Monday night, the flames reached the doorstep

of Dollywood, the theme park in nearby Pigeon Forge named after country music legend and local hero Dolly Parton. The park was spared any significant damage and will reopen Friday.

Much remained uncertain for a region that serves as the gateway into the Great Smoky Mountains, the country's most visited national park. Search-and-rescue efforts continued in areas that have been unreachable because of downed power lines and trees.

A somber reality set in for Gatlinburg, a city of about 4,000 residents that draws more than 11 million visitors a year. But even Gatlinburg Mayor Mike Werner, who lost his home in the fire, remained steadfast that his city will recover.

"We're more concerned about everybody else. We're concerned about a lot of the families that may not have been insured," he said.

"A lot of the families that don't know where to go or what's next. We want to give that positive message that everything, absolutely, is going to be OK."

Police officer who killed suspect in NC won't be charged

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A Charlotte police officer who shot and killed a black man at an apartment complex, touching off several nights of unrest in the city, will not face charges, a North Carolina prosecutor announced Wednesday.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg District Attorney Andrew Murray said Officer Brentley Vinson's actions in killing Keith Lamont Scott were justified.

Scott's family has said he was not armed. However, at a lengthy news conference Murray displayed a nearby store's

surveillance video showing the outline of what appeared to be a holstered gun on Scott's ankle, and he gave extensive details about other evidence that Scott was armed.

Plainclothes officers had gone to the complex about 4 p.m. on Sept. 20 looking for a suspect with an outstanding warrant when they saw Scott — not the suspect they were looking for — inside a car with a gun and marijuana, department spokesman Keith Trietley has said in a statement.

Officers saw Scott get out of the car with a gun and then get back in, police said. When of-

ficers approached, they said, Scott exited the car with the gun again. At that point, officers deemed Scott a threat and Vinson fired his weapon.

Scott, 43, was pronounced dead at Carolinas Medical Center. An autopsy report from Mecklenburg County authorities says Scott died of gunshot wounds to the back and abdomen. Vinson, who is also black, had been with the department for two years at the time of the shooting. He has been on administrative leave, which is standard in police shootings.

Scott's family has said he did not have a gun, but detec-

tives recovered a firearm at the scene, police said.

Body camera and dashcam recordings released earlier by the police department did not conclusively show that and city officials were criticized for the length of time it took to release police video of the shooting.

Scott's final moments also were recorded by his wife, Rakeyia, in a video shared widely on social media. She can be heard shouting to police that her husband "doesn't have a gun." She pleads with the officers not to shoot before a burst of gunfire can be heard.

Castro's ashes on journey to Santiago

Associated Press

HAVANA — Fidel Castro's ashes began a four-day journey across Cuba on Wednesday from Havana to their final resting place in the eastern city of Santiago.

A small, Cuban-flag covered cedar coffin containing the remains of the 90-year-old leader was taken out of Cuba's Defense Ministry just after 7 a.m. and placed into a flower-bedecked trailer pulled by a green military vehicle for the more than 500-mile procession. The ashes will be interred Sunday, ending the nine-day mourning period for the man who ruled the country for nearly 50 years.

The route traces in reverse the victory tour Castro and his bearded rebels took after overthrowing the forces of strong-

man Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Carpenter Rene Mena, 58, said his mother had taken him out of his Havana home as a baby to see Castro arrive.

"It's an irreparable loss," said Mena, who was waiting on the Malecon coastal boulevard holding a Cuban flag. "He fought for us, prepared us, educated us."

Outside Havana, the caravan will pass through rural communities significantly changed by social and economic reforms he adopted. Many residents now have access to health care and education. But many of those towns are also in a prolonged economic collapse, the country's once-dominant sugar industry decimated, the sugar mills and plantations gone.

Thousands of Cubans lined the streets of Havana, some sleeping on sidewalks over-

night, to bid goodbye to Castro. Many had attended a massive rally Tuesday night at Havana's Revolution Plaza, where the presidents of Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and South Africa, along with leaders of a host of smaller nations, offered speeches paying tribute to Castro, who died Friday night.

The crowds at the rally and along Wednesday's procession route were a mix of people attending on their own and groups of Cubans organized by government workplaces, where attendance was not strictly obligatory but with strong pressure to attend. Some groups of government workers slept on the streets because all public transport had been commandeered to move people to Castro-related activities.

Trump vows to leave empire, focus on US

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump said Wednesday he's leaving his business empire to focus on being the nation's 45th president, declaring he can successfully avoid conflicts of interest between governing and profiting in the private sector.

"I will be leaving my great business in total in order to fully focus on running the country in order to make America great again," he tweeted in a series of missives sent before dawn. "While I am not mandated to do this under the law, I feel it is visually important, as president, to in no way have a conflict of interest with my various businesses."

Trump did not provide any details about how he planned to separate from his businesses, though he said legal documents were being prepared. He has previously said that he'd leave his business operations to his three eldest children — Donald Jr., Eric and Ivanka.

Trump senior adviser Kellyanne Conway said Wednesday the three are expected to "increase their responsibilities" in the Trump Organization.

Ethics experts have pushed

for Trump to fully exit the ownership of his businesses using a blind trust or equivalent arrangement.

"Otherwise he will have a personal financial interest in his businesses that will sometimes conflict with the public interest and constantly raise questions," Norman Eisen, President Barack Obama's chief ethics lawyer, and Richard Painter, who held the same post for President George W. Bush, said in a joint statement Wednesday.

Trump was also moving forward with his Cabinet selections, choosing former Goldman Sachs executive Steven Mnuchin as treasury secretary and billionaire investor Wilbur Ross for commerce secretary.

Mnuchin, 53, led Trump's finance operations during the presidential campaign. But he has no government experience, which could prove a political hurdle. If confirmed by the Senate, Mnuchin would play a central role in shaping Trump's tax policies and infrastructure plans. He would also lead an agency tasked with implementing international economic sanctions.

No clear impeachment path in South Korea

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean President Park Geun-hye's conditional resignation offer appears to be causing cracks in what previously had been a strong push for her impeachment, with opponents now struggling to set a date for a vote to strip her of power.

Park offered Tuesday to leave office if parliament arranges a safe transfer of power, triggering an immediate backlash from opposition parties, which called the overture a stalling tactic to help the president navigate through a political scandal involving her shadowy confidante.

Leaders of the country's three main opposition parties met Wednesday and agreed to stick with their plan to try to vote on an impeachment motion as early as Friday. But they also said they'd meet again if that plan does not work, meaning they're bracing for the possibility that a Friday vote might not take place.

Much of their hesitation to pick a clear date is due to the fact that there are not enough opposition lawmakers to pass an impeachment through parliament, and they would need

help from dissenters in Park's Saenuri Party. The three opposition parties and anti-Park independent lawmakers have a total of 172 seats in the 300-seat National Assembly. A passage of an impeachment motion requires at least 200 votes in favor. About 40 ruling party lawmakers have expressed their willingness to vote to oust Park.

But after Park's resignation offer Tuesday, made in an address to the nation, anti-Park lawmakers gathered and agreed it would be best for Park to resign in April after the installation of a neutral Cabinet that can help ensure a stable power transfer until a new president is elected, according to the office of Hwang Youngcheul, one of the lawmakers who attended the meeting.

They said they would still take part in a possible impeachment vote on Dec. 9 if details for an April resignation aren't worked out, Hwang's office said.

If impeached, Park's presidential powers would be suspended until the Constitutional Court makes a ruling. The court would have 180 days to deliberate.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cops say woman killed threatening husband

MO ADVANCE — Authorities in southeast Missouri said a woman killed her husband by running him down with a car after he threatened to kill her and a child.

The Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Office said in a Facebook post that the 45-year-old Delta man died Saturday after abducting his wife and child. The post said he threatened to kill himself as well as the woman and the youngster.

After driving around with them, he returned to a residence, and the wife was able to escape and get into another vehicle. The post said she ran him down "before he could shoot her."

The name of the man wasn't immediately released. The woman is being treated for injuries sustained during the assault.

As flight lands, woman jumps onto plane wing

TX HOUSTON — Authorities said a woman jumped from an emergency exit door onto the wing of a plane after it landed at a Houston airport, and she took off running toward the terminal before being caught.

Authorities said the woman was a passenger on a United Airlines flight from New Orleans that landed in Houston on Monday afternoon and was near the gate. She opened the emergency door and jumped onto the plane's wing and to the ground at George Bush Intercontinental Airport.

The woman was detained, and police said she was taken to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation.

Authorities said she won't

face charges.

Man leaves package of dog poop for thieves

NV LAS VEGAS — A Las Vegas man is trying to repel thieves from his home by leaving an unpleasant package at his doorstep.

KSNV-TV reported that Eric Snow baited potential thieves Saturday with a bag full of his German shepherd's poop. His neighborhood has been targeted by thieves looking for package deliveries in recent weeks, and Snow said things are "getting worse."

The Army veteran caught two men on surveillance video driving up to his residence in a green car to steal the pungent package. The dog-poop-filled parcel was Snow's way of fighting back against the criminals.

Snow's neighbor, Sandra Goodwin, said she hopes the prank will teach thieves that the neighborhood is fed up with them.

Cops: Driver with kids in car travels 123 mph

CT EAST HARTFORD — Connecticut State police have charged a man they allege was driving 123 mph with three young children in his car.

Ricardo Torres, 41, was arrested Saturday on charges of reckless driving, risk of injury to a minor and reckless endangerment. He was released after posting \$5,000 bail.

Police said Torres, of Terryville, was clocked going 123 mph in a 55 mph zone on Interstate 84 in East Hartford.

Police said a woman was in the passenger seat and children ages 5, 9 and 12 were in the back. Torres is due in court Dec. 13.

Armed robber ties up manager, steals \$10K

CA LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles police said a robber armed with a handgun and wearing a motorcycle helmet tied up a store manager and made off with more than \$10,000 in cash from the Guitar Center in Northridge.

Sgt. Brian Eldridge said the suspect, believed to be male, zip-tied the manager in his office and then took off with the cash after the store closed late Saturday.

Eldridge told the Daily News that investigators are looking through surveillance video to try to get a description of the suspect.

Convicted in porn case, man admits to arson

PA PHILADELPHIA — A former Philadelphia-area volunteer firefighter already sentenced to 28 years on child pornography convictions has now pleaded guilty to setting three fires with a 17-year-old accomplice.

The Delaware County Daily Times reported that John Corcoran IV, 21, of Glenolden, faces potentially decades in prison when he's sentenced Dec. 12. He pleaded guilty last week to three counts each of corruption of minors and conspiracy to commit arson for fires set in vacant homes from May to July 2014.

Corcoran was sentenced Oct. 14 in federal court in Philadelphia after pleading to 21 child pornography counts in July.

Corcoran still faces 223 child molestation and related charges in state court. County prosecutors say the former Goodwill Fire Company No. 1 member molested more than a dozen boys he lured with toys and money.

Burglary at marijuana shop delays opening

AK ANCHORAGE — A break-in at an Anchorage marijuana store has delayed the store's opening by a few weeks.

KTVA-TV reported that the owners of Enlighten Alaska said they will not be able to open as expected on Dec. 17 due to the burglary on Thanksgiving.

The owners said that when they went to the store Friday, they found someone had taken about \$5,000 worth of items from the shop, including electronics, tools and the store's Wi-Fi router.

Co-owner Evan Levinton said the Anchorage Police Department is investigating the break-in.

Family settling in with rare identical triplets

MO FENTON — A suburban St. Louis family is settling in after their rare set of identical triplets came home from the hospital.

KSDK-TV reported that Jessica Kennedy gave birth to the babies Nov. 2 at Missouri Baptist Medical Center in St. Louis. After nearly three weeks in the neonatal intensive care unit, the babies left the hospital last week.

Kennedy and her husband, Ben, have two older children. They conceived the triplets naturally and were stunned to learn during Jessica's pregnancy that they were expecting not one child but three. The boys are named Reed, Knox and Finn.

Kennedy said her family is "hoping for the best" and would "just have to play it by ear and see how it goes."

From wire reports

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Browns still cling to hope in bye week

By TOM WITHERS

Associated Press

BEREA, Ohio — Amid this season of depression and despair, the Browns haven't lost hope.

And as he and his teammates prepare for a much-needed bye week following 12 straight losses, rookie wide receiver Corey Coleman looked to the future and offered a shred of optimism.

"I've been winning my whole life," he said. "But the tables are going to turn. It can't get any worse."

Sadly, there's still another level of misery for the Browns (0-12), now four losses from joining the 2008 Detroit Lions as the only teams in NFL history to complete a 16-game schedule without a win. They can avoid that notoriety with a victory that has remained elusive so far.

This is new territory for Coleman and Cleveland's 17 other rookies, who in addition to adjusting to life as paid professionals, are getting their first real taste of failure as athletes.

"It's tough around here," Coleman said Monday, a day after the Browns fell 27-13 to the New York Giants, Cleveland's 15th straight loss dating to last season. "But we're going to continue to keep on working. I'm going to continue to keep on working.

Nobody's given up, and that's what's really good about this locker room and the older guys leading us and stuff, nobody's showing any signs of quitting."

Browns coach Hue Jackson won't let them.

Jackson, who became emotional while discussing the agony of his first season in Cleveland following Sunday's game, said he's determined to get win No. 1 before the 2016 season ends. The Browns will take some time off, but Jackson has no plans to decompress.

"I honestly do not know how to," he said. "I need to teach myself how to do it. I know my kids would like for me to do it. I just think what is important is to just keep searching. I owe our fan base and our organization and these players an opportunity to win a game. The next one up is Cincinnati. We are going to do whatever it takes to get ourselves in that 'W' column."

Jackson has spent the season shuffling quarterbacks and another switch could be on the horizon.

Robert Griffin III, out since breaking a bone in his left shoulder in the opener, returned to practice last week and could play in Cleveland's final four games. He was cleared Tuesday for contact.

Jackson acknowledged that Griffin, who has made just one start since the end of the

2014 season, might be able to jump-start the Browns' offense, which has scored just 39 points in the past four games.

"We have to find a way to get the ball in the end zone better than what we have, and if somebody can do that better, then we are going to play him," Jackson said.

The Browns want to get another look at Griffin before heading into an offseason when they'll need to make major personnel decisions, none more important than at quarterback. They have two first-round draft picks, and it's possible they'll use one on their next QB.

That's down the road. Of more immediate concern for Jackson is getting his team to finish this dreadful season on a positive note.

Jackson extracted some positives from Sunday, but he won't be satisfied until the Browns win and that's why he briefly choked up Sunday. He received numerous sympathetic texts, but joked that he deleted them all.

The losing has hurt, but hasn't changed him.

"I am what I am," Jackson said. "What you guys see in me is what you are going to get. I am not a phony and I am human like everybody else, so that is just part of it. You might see more of it than that over the course of time here."

Rookies help strengthen Steelers' defense

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The learning curve is starting to level off for Javon Hargrave, Artie Burns and Sean Davis. That hardly means it's flat. Not by a long shot. Still, the game is beginning to slow down for the three Pittsburgh Steeler rookies, all of whom have made significant plays on a defense that's picked it up during the team's modest turnaround.

"I get so excited when we're in the huddle," said Davis, a safety. "I see us and there's not a drop off."

Exactly what the Steelers (6-5) had in mind when they used each of their first three picks in the 2016 draft to give an underperforming unit a needed jolt of youth and talent, even if they didn't anticipate relying on them to become regulars quite so soon. Yet there was Burns, the 25th overall

pick last spring, picking up his second career interception against the Browns on Nov. 20. There was Hargrave, a third-rounder from South Carolina State, falling on a fumble in the end zone for a score in the same game. There was Davis, a second-round safety, making a touchdown-saving tackle against Indianapolis that set up one of Pittsburgh's two goal line stands in a 28-7 victory on Thanksgiving.

"You've got to go with what you got," defensive coordinator Keith Butler said last week. "It's not like you've got a lot of choices."

Maybe, but all three have found their legs following a shaky start, particularly Davis, who was forced to split time at safety and nickelback early in the season. By Davis' own admission, it was a bit much too soon.

"You have to study watch-

ing the same film but it's two different aspects," Davis said. "I'm not running away from it, but it's hard. I'm trying to learn everything, trying to learn two different positions. It got a little tough so they backed up. I'm handling my job well. Maybe they'll be giving me a little bit more moving forward."

It seems Davis is already there. He was the only Steeler to be on the field for every defensive snap against the Colts, a very tangible vote of confidence from Butler and head coach Mike Tomlin.

"They rewarded me and put me out there," Davis said. "I'm just going to continue to do what I'm doing, keep my head down, stay humble and continue to work."

Not that he has much choice, particularly for a club still trying to escape the rubble of a nightmarish four-game losing streak that threatened to derail

a once promising season. Solid if hardly spectacular victories over the winless Browns and Andrew Luck-less Indianapolis stopped the slide. The Steelers weren't exactly dominant but maybe that's a good thing. After spending most of the first five weeks winning with style, Pittsburgh opted for a more substantive approach in games they absolutely had to have.

The defense picked up 11 sacks over the two games — nearly doubling the Steelers' season total — and forced a pair of fourth quarter interceptions against the Colts, the kind of "splash" plays Tomlin covets. A far more difficult task awaits on Sunday when Eli Manning, Odell Beckham Jr. and the streaking New York Giants (8-3) visit Heinz Field. It's a measuring stick of sorts to see just how far the kids have come and if Pittsburgh's recent return to normalcy is for real.

Buckeyes No. 2 in latest CFP rankings

Associated Press

Ohio State held firm at second in the College Football Playoff rankings, putting the Buckeyes in position to become the first team to be selected to the final four without winning its conference.

The second-to-last rankings were released Tuesday night and Alabama was No. 1, followed by Ohio State, Clemson and Washington. The Crimson Tide, Tigers and Huskies all play conference championship games this weekend and presumably would be in good shape to make the playoff if they win. The final rankings and playoff pairings will be released Sunday.

Unbeaten Alabama is probably in good shape to make the playoff even if it loses to Florida in the Southeastern Conference title game Saturday.

Michigan dropped to five after losing to Ohio State. Wisconsin was sixth and Penn State was seventh. The Badgers and Nittany Lions will play for the Big Ten title in Indianapolis on Saturday.

Huskies vs. Wolverines

Assuming the Buckeyes are a lock, and it looks good for them, and Clemson doesn't get upset by Virginia Tech in the ACC title game, the debate for the committee when it gathers

in Texas on Saturday night to watch games and discuss the only rankings that matter will be Pac-12 or Big Ten.

Can Michigan, or maybe the Big Ten champion with two losses, edge a Washington team that would finish 12-1 by beating Colorado on Friday night in the Pac-12 title game?

"There is a small separation between these two teams," selection committee chairman Kirby Hocutt said of Michigan and Washington. At one point Hocutt added that the difference between the Wolverines and Huskies was "razor thin."

It looks like not only does the committee not mind putting one Big Ten team without a conference championship in the playoff, but it is also comfortable with two. Michigan at 10-2 has victories against both Penn State and Wisconsin.

Penn State's plight

A Wisconsin victory in the Big Ten title game would eliminate the controversy. The Badgers lost to Ohio State during the regular season.

Penn State fans, however, are already cranking up the complaints. The Nittany Lions beat Ohio State in October. Add a Big Ten title and Penn State is bound to feel slighted.

Conference titles and head-to-head results are essentially used by the committee like tie-

breakers when teams are very close. The Buckeyes and Nittany Lions are not in the committee's eyes. At least not yet.

"The selection committee recognizes the head-to-head win, but in this particular case, it hasn't been the distinguishing point in our evaluation of those two teams," he said.

Sugar Bowl

Assuming Alabama is in the playoff, the Southeastern Conference sends its next highest ranked team to the Sugar Bowl to face the Big 12 champion, which will be decided when No. 9 Oklahoma and No. 10 Oklahoma State play in Norman on Saturday.

No. 14 Auburn is that SEC team right now. Florida is 15th, so a good performance — even in a loss — against the Crimson Tide might get the Gators to New Orleans on a two-game losing streak. A Florida loss would leave every SEC team other than Alabama with at least four losses.

But the contract with the Sugar says the SEC gets the spot, mediocre or not.

Orange Bowl

Louisville beat Florida State by 43 points in September, but the Cardinals have stumbled down the stretch and now the Seminoles are 12th and the Cardinals are 13th.

If that order holds — and there is no reason to think it won't because neither is playing — and Clemson goes to the playoff as the ACC champion, then Florida State will represent the conference in the Orange Bowl.

Hocutt said Florida State has played one of the toughest schedules in the country while Louisville has beaten only one team with a winning record (Florida State). He said the Seminoles are playing better lately.

Group of five

The highest-ranked conference champion from outside the Power Five is getting a Cotton Bowl bid and at this point it looks as if it will be No. 17 Western Michigan if the unbeaten Broncos defeat Ohio in the Mid-American Conference championship game Friday night.

The next highest ranked Group of Five team is No. 19 Navy (9-2), which will play Temple for the American Athletic Conference championship on Saturday at home.

Don't consider WMU a lock. Hocutt said the committee is still concerned about the Broncos' weak schedule. But it looks promising for coach P.J. Fleck's team.

Allen leads No. 5 Blue Devils past Michigan State

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Grayson Allen keeps putting up huge numbers for No. 5 Duke. Imagine how much more impressive they might be if he were healthy enough to practice.

Allen scored 24 points, Luke Kennard added 20 and the Blue Devils beat Michigan State 78-69 on Tuesday night in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

Allen has been dealing with lingering foot injuries for the past two weeks, with coach Mike Krzyzewski saying he

hurt his toe before the Penn State game on Nov. 19 and limped through the Rhode Island game the next day. He checked out of the Appalachian State game early three days ago when he reinjured the toe.

"Grayson does not practice one second," Krzyzewski said. "So when he's out on that court, it's a gutty performance. ... That kid has played unbelievably, and he's limping."

No. 2 Villanova 82, Penn 57: Kris Jenkins hit six 3s and scored 22 points and Josh

Hart had 12 points and nine rebounds to lead host Villanova.

No. 4 Kansas 91, Long Beach State 61: Lagerald Vick scored a career-high 23 points on near-perfect shooting, Svi Mykhailiuk had 14 and host Kansas rolled to a victory over Long Beach State.

No. 7 Xavier 85, North Dakota State 55: Trevon Bluiett scored 15 of his 23 points during Xavier's dominant first half, and the host Musketeers remained unbeaten.

No. 10 Creighton 93, Buf-

falo 72: Marcus Foster scored 22 points, Justin Patton had season highs of 21 points and 10 rebounds and host Creighton pulled away in the second half.

No. 17 Wisconsin 77, No. 22 Syracuse 60: Ethan Happ had 24 points and 13 rebounds, zone-busting guard Bronson Koenig scored 20 points and host Wisconsin beat Syracuse.

Valparaiso 65, No. 21 Rhode Island 62: Alec Peters scored 27 points to help host Valparaiso knock off Rhode Island.

Antetokounmpo, Bucks stun Cavaliers

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — After building a big third-quarter lead against the defending NBA champions, the Milwaukee Bucks poured it on in the fourth.

And when the Cleveland Cavaliers pulled their starters, including LeBron James, midway through the final period, the young Bucks still didn't let up.

"We didn't let them off the hook. We were attacking," said Giannis Antetokounmpo, who tied a career high with 34 points while the Bucks stunned the Cavaliers 118-101 on Tuesday night.

"They are the champs, but this is a great win."

Bucks coach Jason Kidd had high praise for Antetokounmpo,

who was often matched up against James.

"He's getting better with hard work," Kidd said. "He was going against the best player in the world."

Antetokounmpo added 12 rebounds and five assists while Milwaukee ended Cleveland's four-game winning streak. Jabari Parker had 18 points and Michael Beasley had 17 off the bench for the Bucks.

Nets 127, Clippers 122 (2OT): Sean Kilpatrick scored 31 of his career-high 38 points after the third quarter and host Brooklyn stopped a seven-game losing streak.

Los Angeles started the game without Blake Griffin, ended it without the ejected coach Doc Rivers and dropped its third straight game by blowing an 18-point lead.

Magic 95, Spurs 83: Serge Ibaka had 18 points and visiting Orlando took advantage of a sloppy night by its opponent to snap San Antonio's nine-game winning streak.

San Antonio committed a season-high 19 turnovers in its worst scoring performance of the season. The Spurs have four home losses in the first two months of this season after falling just once at AT&T Center in 2015-16.

Evan Fournier scored 13 points and Nikola Vucevic had 12 to help the Magic snap a four-game skid.

Pelicans 105, Lakers 88: Anthony Davis had 41 points and 16 rebounds, helping host New Orleans dominate short-handed Los Angeles.

Jrue Holiday scored 22 points in his first start this sea-

son, helping New Orleans snap a two-game skid.

Jazz 120, Rockets 101: Gordon Hayward scored a season-high 31 points, helping host Utah beat Houston for its season-best fourth straight win.

Utah started strong en route to a season high for scoring. Rodney Hood had 10 points during a 20-5 first-quarter run after trailing 16-9, and Houston never led again. Hood finished with 19 points.

Pistons 112, Hornets 89: Tobias Harris scored 24 points, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and Marcus Morris each had 18 points and visiting Detroit beat Charlotte for its third straight win.

Kemba Walker had 23 points for the Hornets, who were playing their fourth game in five nights.

Rangers rally from two goals down to beat Hurricanes

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Rick Nash came up big in the third period for the New York Rangers.

Nash tied the score with a highlight-reel goal in the opening minute of the third and then set up Jimmy Vesey's winner later in the period to rally the Rangers from two goals down for a 3-2 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes on Tuesday night.

After cutting a 2-0 first-period deficit in half in the second, Nash tied it 24 seconds into the third as he raced up ice, breezed past two Hurricanes defenders and stuck a backhand off the crossbar and in to tie it.

Then, with 5:12 remaining in regulation and the Rangers on a power play, Nash slipped the puck under Carolina goalie Cam Ward across the front of the goal to Vesey, and the rookie forward converted with the go-ahead score.

"I think when you're a leader and you're expected to be one of the top players, you try to do that every night," Nash said. "Some nights it's there, some

nights it's not. ... But I know that's part of my game, that I have to help these guys and lift them when things aren't going right."

Vesey's goal was his eighth of the season and first since Nov. 12.

Nick Holden also scored and Henrik Lundqvist stopped 19 shots to help the Rangers snap a four-game skid at home (0-3-1).

Viktor Stalberg scored twice in the first period in his return to New York for the first time since leaving the Rangers to sign with Carolina in the offseason. Cam Ward finished with 25 saves as the Hurricanes lost for the third time in four games.

"For two periods we were by far the better team and didn't allow much of anything aside from the one goal and a couple other chances on the break," Stalberg said. "Other than that, they didn't have any zone time. We were putting pressure on them every single shift. Frustrating ending here."

On the tiebreaking goal, the Rangers had the man-advantage because Hurricanes de-

fenseman Ron Hainsey was serving a double-minor for hooking and unsportsmanlike conduct. Vesey converted 95 seconds into the four-minute power play.

"You're going to get calls and you're going to get calls against you," Stalberg continued. "It is what it is. We're not happy about it, but we should find a way to kill it off."

Sabres 5, Senators 4: Jack Eichel had a goal and an assist in his season debut as visiting Buffalo beat Ottawa.

Blackhawks 2, Panthers 1 (SO): Richard Panik and Artemi Panarin scored in a shootout, and host Chicago ruined Tom Rowe's debut as interim coach for Florida.

Flyers 3, Bruins 2 (SO): Shayne Gostisbehere scored in the ninth round of a shootout to lift host Philadelphia past Boston.

Jets 3, Devils 2: Mark Scheifele and Patrik Laine each scored his 13th goal of the season to help host Winnipeg beat New Jersey.

Canucks 5, Wild 4: Sven Baertschi scored with 2:35 left

in regulation to help host Vancouver beat Minnesota.

Ducks 2, Canadiens 1: John Gibson made 39 saves and host Anaheim got goals from Rickard Rakell and defenseman Cam Fowler to beat NHL-leading Montreal.

Sharks 2, Coyotes 1 (OT): Brent Burns scored a power-play goal 19 seconds into overtime and San Jose wrapped up a successful homestand.

Red Wings 3, Stars 1: Anthony Mantha scored the go-ahead goal midway through the second period and host Detroit beat Dallas.

Maple Leafs 4, Oilers 2: Auston Matthews scored his 10th goal of the season as Toronto got just its second road win of the season in Edmonton.

Predators 5, Avalanche 3: Ryan Johansen and Austin Watson each had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Nashville past Colorado.

Blue Jackets 5, Lightning 1: Josh Anderson had a goal and two assists, Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 26 shots and host Columbus cruised past Tampa Bay.