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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Esper fired after election called for Biden

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
AND COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper was fired by President Donald Trump on Monday, following recent speculation that his time as the top Pentagon official was drawing to a close.

The announcement was made on Twitter two days after the 2020 election was called in favor of his democratic opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris.

"Mark Esper has been terminated. I would like to thank him for his service," Trump tweeted Monday.

Trump stated in his tweet that Christopher Miller, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, would be the new acting secretary of defense "effective immediately." Miller

was sworn into his current position in August, according to his official biography.

Esper's dismissal comes some five months after rumors of Trump's ire with his second Senate-confirmed Pentagon leader first began circulating throughout Washington.

Esper ascended to the position July 23, 2019, after the department waited seven months for an official nomination following the resignation of Jim Mattis on Dec. 20, 2018. Mattis was Trump's first defense secretary and a popular figure among the troops. Mattis resigned due to disagreements with Trump on views regarding the importance of allies and approach to adversarial countries, according to his resignation letter.

Before becoming the Pentagon's top official, Esper had served as the Army secretary since Nov. 20, 2017. He is a 1986

graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served as an infantry officer with the 101st Airborne Division during the 1990-91 Gulf War, according to his official biography.

He retired in 2007 after more than 20 years with the Army, first on active duty and then with the National Guard and Army Reserve. Esper had been Raytheon's top lobbyist before becoming Army secretary.

News reports, citing unnamed administration officials, first signaled Esper's diminished standing with Trump in June, not long after the defense secretary publicly stated his opposition to using active-duty troops to quell civil unrest throughout the country. Esper, in a Pentagon news conference June 3, said he did not support invoking the Insurrection Act as civil unrest over systemic racism and police

brutality spread through all 50 states in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, in some cases growing violent.

Trump had flirted with invoking the rarely used statute that would allow him to deploy federal troops to conduct certain domestic law enforcement duties, and was reportedly angered by Esper's decision to take a public stance against it.

Last week, news outlets had also reported Esper had written a resignation letter in anticipation that his time as defense secretary was ending. It is not uncommon for administration officials to prepare a resignation letter, especially as an administration heads into a second term. But the news reports, citing unnamed defense officials, described the reasoning for Esper's preparation of a letter was in case Trump fired him.

Drugmaker says virus vaccine may be 90% effective

Associated Press

Pfizer Inc. said Monday that an early peek at the data on its coronavirus vaccine suggests that the shots could be a surprisingly robust 90% effective at preventing COVID-19, putting the company on track to apply for emergency-use approval from the Food and Drug Administration later this month.

The announcement, less than a week after an election that was seen as a referendum on President Donald Trump's handling of the crisis, was a rare and major piece of encouraging news lately in the battle against the scourge that has killed more than 1.2 million

people worldwide, including almost a quarter-million in the United States.

Confirmed cases in the U.S. were expected to eclipse 10 million on Monday, the highest in the world.

"We're in a position potentially to be able to offer some hope," Dr. Bill Gruber, Pfizer's senior vice president of clinical development, told The Associated Press. "We're very encouraged."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, said the results suggesting 90% effectiveness are "just extraordinary," adding: "Not very many people expected it would be as high as that."

"It's going to have a major impact on everything we do with respect to COVID," Fauci said.

Pharmaceutical companies and various countries are in a global race to develop a vaccine against the virus. Fauci said that the Pfizer vaccine and virtually all others in testing target the spike protein the coronavirus uses to infect cells, so the results validate that approach.

Pfizer's announcement doesn't mean for certain that a vaccine is imminent: This interim analysis, from an independent data monitoring board, looked at 94 infections recorded so far in a study that has enrolled nearly 44,000 peo-

ple in the U.S. and five other countries. Some participants got the vaccine, while others got dummy shots.

Pfizer did not provide any more details about those infections and cautioned that the initial protection rate might change by the time the study ends. Even revealing such early data is highly unusual.

"We need to see the data, but this is extremely promising," said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, former chief of the FDA's vaccine division. He ticked off many questions still to be answered, including how long the vaccine's effects last and whether it protects older people as well as younger ones.

4 astronauts arrive for 2nd SpaceX crew flight

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Four astronauts arrived at Kennedy Space Center on Sunday for SpaceX's second crew launch, coming up next weekend.

For NASA, it marks the long-awaited start of regular crew rotations at the International Space Station, with private companies providing the lifts. There will be double the number of astronauts as the test flight earlier this year, and their mission will last a full six months.

The crew of three Americans and one Japanese are:

■ Crew commander Mike Hopkins, 51, is an Air Force colonel and former space station resident who grew up on a hog

and cattle farm in Missouri.

■ Navy Cmdr. Victor Glover, 44, is the pilot and the lone space rookie; he's from the Los Angeles area and will be the first African American astronaut to move into the space station for a long stay.

■ Shannon Walker, 55, a Houston-born-and-raised physicist, also has lived before on the space station; her husband, retired astronaut Andrew Thomas, helped build the outpost.

■ The Japanese Space Agency's Soichi Noguchi, 55, another former station resident, will become the first person in decades to launch on three kinds of rocketships; he's already flown on a U.S. space shuttle and Russian Soyuz.

US Marine on Okinawa arrested in taxi incident

**By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI**

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — An Okinawa-based Marine was arrested on a robbery charge over the weekend after he allegedly choked a taxi driver and stole and crashed the vehicle.

Lance Cpl. Jamison Michael Bissett, 20, of Camp Hansen, was taken into custody at a local hospital Sunday morning where he had been treated following the crash, an Ishikawa Police Station spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone Monday.

Police allege Bissett took approximately \$100 from the taxi driver's change purse. The driver was not injured in the incident.

"The taxi was totaled by the [crash]," the police spokesman said.

Bissett denies the charge, the spokesman said.

Marine officials did not re-

spond to requests seeking comment Monday.

According to police, Bissett hailed a cab Saturday evening in Chatan and asked to be taken to Camp Hansen. Around 10:10 p.m., about 3½ miles south of Yaka Interchange on the Okinawa Expressway, Bissett allegedly reached around from the backseat and began choking the driver, the police spokesman said.

The driver stopped the car in the middle of the road and fled the vehicle to seek help, the spokesman said. Police allege Bissett then stole the taxi and continued north.

He apparently lost control of the vehicle near the Yaka Interchange exit and crashed into the median, the spokesman said. He was found by police in the driver's seat bleeding from his forehead.

Bissett was treated for a minor head injury at a hospital in central Okinawa and arrested at 9:35 a.m. Sunday, the spokesman said.

Biden likely to quash GI exit from Germany

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany

— President-elect Joe Biden is expected to kill the Trump administration's plan to withdraw U.S. forces from Germany soon after taking office in January, in a move that would reset the NATO alliance after four years of tension with Washington, analysts said.

"I think that'll be one of the most significant and quickest national security policy reversals come January 20, 2021," said John R. Deni, a professor at the U.S. Army War College.

The proposal by President Donald Trump to pull some 12,000 troops out of Germany, moving some elsewhere in Europe and others to the U.S., was "short-sighted," "fiscally irresponsible" and likely to be ineffective at getting Germany to pay more for its defense — the reason cited by Trump for calling for the troops to be relocated, Deni said.

A timeline for putting the plan into action was still in the works as U.S. European Command, itself slated to relocate from Germany to Belgium under the initiative, hashes out details.

But it could all be moot now, analysts said.

"One of the biggest changes in foreign policy that Joe Biden will make as president will be in U.S. policy on NATO," said Jorge Benitez, a NATO expert with the Washington-based Atlantic Council.

"The Biden administration will reset and revive relations with our NATO allies," he said.

Michele Flournoy, considered the front-runner to serve as defense secretary in a Biden presidency, has said Trump's plan to pull thousands of troops out of Germany would cost more to implement than leaving them where they are.

"Our allies were completely surprised by this punitive troop

withdrawal from Germany," Flournoy said during the Aspen Security Forum in August.

Trump made low defense spending levels among European allies, especially Germany, the top issue in his dealings with NATO.

While Trump has taken credit for getting allies to step up spending during his tenure, critics have noted that it has risen annually since 2014, the year Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine. That year, allies agreed that all members should meet the 2% spending level by 2024.

Ten of 30 members are projected this year to hit the alliance spending benchmark, a NATO report released last month said.

Spending is up significantly for only three members — Greece, the United Kingdom and the U.S. — who hit the target in 2014, the report said.

At a major NATO summit in Brussels in 2018, Trump threatened to quit the alliance over the issue, stoking fears that a second Trump term would spell the end of NATO.

"Someone said, 'Sir! ... would you leave us if we don't pay our bills?'" the Atlantic Council quoted Trump as saying in Charleston, W.Va., in August 2018, a month after the summit. "They hated my answer. I said, 'Yeah, I would consider it.'"

U.S. complaints about insufficient European investment on defense go back to NATO's founding in 1949. But Trump has hammered at the issue more than any other U.S. president.

Biden is expected to take a different tack and tone than Trump, analysts said.

"I don't expect President-elect Biden to continue using the 2% goal as a club to berate our allies like they're a bunch of 5-year-olds, to tie U.S. willingness to defend an ally to whether that ally's met the goal," Deni said.

US cases near 10M, no decline in sight

Bloomberg

Close to 10 million Americans have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 10 months, and with the start of winter just a month away, and the public increasingly likely to spend more time cooped up inside, the virus shows few signs of slowing down.

Infections are setting sequential daily records and expected to soar further as cold weather grips northern U.S. states, schools and businesses try to reopen, people move their daily activities inside and the holidays spur gatherings, health officials and experts said.

As of Monday morning in New York, the U.S. had recorded 9.97 million infections since the start of the pandemic, accounting for roughly a fifth of the more than 50 million cases worldwide.

While Democrat Joe Biden's election victory is likely to lead to more aggressive steps to contain the virus from Washington policymakers, any changes will take time to have a noticeable effect on transmission levels

after he is sworn in as president in January.

"Our saving grace this summer was that we could be outside," said Gregg Gonsalves, an epidemiologist at Yale School of Public Health and co-director of the Global Health Justice Partnership. "We have no respite this winter in large parts of the country. It's going to be bad."

From the very beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S., public health officials warned about an expected rising tide of cases during the COVID-19 pandemic's first full winter. Governments urged individuals to embrace a handful of measures that could help dampen the danger.

Yet with limited national leadership on measures such as testing, masks and contact tracing, state and local governments have been left to corral the virus. After months of curtailed socializing and entertainment, fatigue has set in, making it even harder to follow through with the few existing protective measures.

Biden names advisory board in virus response

Associated Press

WILMINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden on Monday cheered news about the promising development of a coronavirus vaccine but cautioned Americans need to be aggressive about mask wearing and social distancing as infections continue to surge around the country.

The Democrat's transition team also unveiled members of Biden's coronavirus working group tasked with developing his administration's pandemic response — something Biden says he wants to put in motion as soon as he takes office in January.

As Biden unveiled his coronavirus advisory board — led by former Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner David Kessler and Yale University public health care expert Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith — Pfizer announced promising results from a vaccine trial.

The company, which developed the vaccine with the German drugmaker BioNTech, said it is on track to file an emergency use application

with U.S. regulators later this month.

Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris were scheduled to receive a briefing from the newly-formed advisory board Monday morning and Biden planned to deliver an address on the pandemic after the meeting.

While Biden greeted the news with cautious optimism, President Donald Trump took to Twitter to herald the moment with all caps exuberance: "STOCK MARKET UP BIG, VACCINE COMING SOON. REPORT 90% EFFECTIVE. SUCH GREAT NEWS!"

After declaring victory Saturday, Biden quickly pivoted from a bitter campaign battle to reining in the pandemic that has hit the world's most powerful nation harder than any other.

Biden announced the members of his advisory board will develop a blueprint for fighting the pandemic. It includes doctors and scientists who have served in previous administrations, many of them experts in public health, vaccines and infectious diseases.

Tropical Storm Eta dumps rain on already flooded Fla.

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Torrential rain from Tropical Storm Eta caused dangerous flooding across Florida's most densely populated urban areas on Monday after it made landfall in the Florida Keys. Cars were stranded and entire neighborhoods were swamped as flash floods rose in areas where the water had no place to drain.

The system's wide reach and heavy rains posed a serious threat across South Florida, an area already drenched from more than 14 inches of rain last month. Eta could dump an additional 6 to 12 inches, forecasters said.

"In some areas, the water isn't pumping out as fast as it's coming in," warned Miami Dade Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz.

Eta's center hit land late Sunday as it blew over Lower Matecumbe, in the middle

of the chain of small islands that form the Florida Keys. It was moving into the Gulf of Mexico early Monday near where the Everglades meet the sea, with maximum sustained winds of 65 mph. It was centered south of Naples, moving west-northwest at 13 mph.

Forecasters said it could re-intensify into a minimal hurricane as it slowly moves up the southwest Gulf Coast, centered just far enough offshore to maintain its strength while dumping vast amounts of water across the lower third of the Florida peninsula.

Fort Lauderdale Mayor Dean Trantalis called it a 100-year rain event, drenching already saturated streets.

"Once the ground becomes saturated, there's really no place for the water to go," Trantalis said. "It's not like a major hurricane. It's more of a rain event, and we're

just doing our best to ensure that the people in our community are being protected."

City officials dispatched some 24 tanker trucks with giant vacuums to soak up water from the past few weeks. Some older neighborhoods simply don't have any drainage. The city passed out 6,000 sandbags to worried residents over the weekend, but water seeped into homes and stranded cars in parking lots and along roadways.

Randi Barry, 36, woke up Monday to flooded streets outside her home in Fort Lauderdale, and joined her neighbors in helping people whose cars were stuck in high water.

"There are a lot of people with their doors open, getting furniture up to higher ground and trying to get water out of their homes," Barry said. "Everyone is helping each other out a lot. Floridians are really resilient."

Ongoing election vote tally shatters turnout records

Associated Press

With votes still being counted, turnout in the 2020 presidential election has hit a 50-year high, exceeding the record set by the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama — an extraordinary engagement in what amounted to a referendum on President Donald Trump's leadership.

As of Sunday, the tallied votes accounted for 62% of the eligible voting-age population in the U.S. That's a 0.4 percentage point increase so far over the rate hit in 2008 when the nation elected its first Black president.

The sheer number of votes also set records, although that's a less remarkable milestone given the country's growing population. So far 148 million votes have been tallied, with Democrat Joe Biden winning

more than 75 million — the highest number for a presidential candidate in history. Trump received more than 70 million — the highest total for a losing candidate.

The numbers are certain to rise as election officials continue to count more ballots. But election experts and partisans already are debating the forces behind the swell of civic participation. Some pointed to the numbers as evidence of what happens when states expand the time and the ways voters can cast ballots, as many states did this year. Others noted the extraordinary high passions Trump provoked — both for and against.

The result: the highest turnout since 1968, according to data from The Associated Press and the United States Elections Project, which tracks turnout. Experts think the 2020 rate

could hit heights not seen since the beginning of the 20th century before all women were allowed to vote.

"It's hard to imagine we can get higher than this," said Michael McDonald, a political scientist at the University of Florida who runs the Elections Project.

An Associated Press analysis shows that some of the biggest turnout increases to date occurred in states that liberalized their mail-voting rules.

But the record high participation, to Democrats' surprise, did not always help them. The party lost House seats and failed to win enough Senate seats outright to take control of the upper chamber — that now rests on runoffs in Georgia. They also failed to turn a single state legislature from Republican control.

Russia quiet after talk of US election interference

The Washington Post

MOSCOW — The reaction in Russia to Joe Biden's projected victory was a mixture of delight over the enduring U.S. political divides and relief that the rifts weren't as widely attributed to Moscow's interference this time.

There was also notable silence from the Kremlin: As other world leaders rushed to congratulate the president-elect, President Vladimir Putin remained silent more than a day after Biden's acceptance speech, a snub that could forecast chilly future interactions between the two.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin isn't making any statements because "there will be certain legal proceedings which were announced by the incumbent president and that's why we believe it would be correct to wait for the official announcement," referencing President Donald Trump's refusal to concede the race as he pursues legal action to contest the voting tallies.

U.S. intelligence agencies have said that Russia used cybertrickery, disinformation and other methods in the 2016 election to boost candidate Donald Trump and was working to do the same for him as president ahead of the 2020 vote. Russia has repeatedly denied that.

"It seems that there is already one loser in the presidential race — that is the procedure itself and, ultimately, democracy," Konstantin Kosachev, head of the foreign affairs committee in the upper house of the Russian parliament, wrote on Facebook.

"However, withdrawal from the main agenda the issue of 'Russian meddling' may prove to be, if not a positive, at least a stabilizing factor, and it will no longer be used by opponents in domestic political squabbles," Kosachev added.

Trump urged to work with Biden team

Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. — President Donald Trump is facing pressure to cooperate with President-elect Joe Biden's team to ensure a smooth transfer of power when the new administration takes office in January.

The General Services Administration is tasked with formally recognizing Biden as president-elect, which begins the transition. But the agency's Trump-appointed administrator, Emily Murphy, has not started the process and has given no guidance on when she will do so.

That lack of clarity is fueling questions about whether Trump, who has not publicly recognized Biden's victory and has falsely claimed the election was stolen, will impede Democrats as they try to establish a government.

There is little precedent in the modern era of a president erecting such hurdles for his successor. The stakes are especially high this year because Biden will take office amid a raging pandemic, which will require a comprehensive government response.

"America's national security and economic interests depend on the federal government signaling clearly and swiftly that the United States government will respect the will of the Ameri-

can people and engage in a smooth and peaceful transfer of power," Jen Psaki, a Biden transition aide, tweeted Sunday.

The advisory board of the nonpartisan Center for Presidential Transition also urged the Trump administration to "immediately begin the post-election transition process and the Biden team to take full advantage of the resources available under the Presidential Transition Act."

Biden, who was elected the 46th president on Saturday, is taking steps to build a government despite questions about whether Trump will offer the traditional assistance.

Biden was also launching agency review teams, groups of transition staffers that have access to key agencies in the current administration. They will collect and review information such as budgetary and staffing decisions, pending regulations and other work in progress from current Trump administration staff at the departments to help Biden's team prepare to transition.

But that process can't begin in full until the GSA recognizes Biden as president-elect.

The GSA's leadership is supposed to act independently and in a nonpartisan manner, and at least some elements of the federal government already have begun implementing transition plans.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Limited-edition guitars stolen at truck stop

IN FORT WAYNE — An Indiana retailer of musical instruments is seeking the public's help after a pallet of limited-edition guitars worth tens of thousands of dollars were stolen from a suburban Indianapolis truck stop.

Sweetwater Sound, which sells music instruments and audio equipment, said the pallet of new Gibson Adam Jones 1979 Les Paul Custom Silverburst guitars, valued at an estimated \$95,000, were stolen Oct. 30 from a semi-truck at the Flying J Travel Center in Whiteland, just south of Indianapolis.

The guitars were headed to Fort Wayne, where the company is headquartered, said Phil Rich, Sweetwater's chief supply chain and merchandising officer.

Helicopter delivering heart crashes on roof

CA LOS ANGELES — A helicopter delivering a donated human heart to a hospital in East Los Angeles crashed on the roof, but the three people aboard escaped without serious injuries, authorities said.

The private air ambulance crashed on the helipad at Keck Hospital of the University of Southern California in Boyle Heights. But there was no fire and no significant fuel leak, the Los Angeles Fire Department tweeted.

The pilot received minor injuries and two other people aboard didn't report any medical problems and declined treatment, fire spokeswoman Margaret Stewart said.

"The donated organ that was being transported was safely retrieved by LAFD firefighters

and handed over to USC-Country Hospital staff," the Fire Department tweeted.

Nativity scenes on public property banned

DE REHOBOTHBEACH — Nativity scenes or other religious displays will not be allowed on public property in Rehoboth Beach for the third year in a row.

The city's commissioners and mayor voted to keep a ban on "private holiday displays," the Daily Times of Salisbury (Md.) reported. But officials authorized funding of up to \$10,000 for a "holiday display that celebrates the cultural diversity" of the city.

Commissioners said the display will be on a prominent location this holiday season.

Any displays on public property will be removed at the owner's expense.

15-foot great white shark tracked off coast

FL KEY LARGO — Florida got a visit from its scariest snowbird just in time for its winter tourist season — a 2,000-pound, 15-foot great white shark.

A research group has been tracking the female shark since 2019 off Nova Scotia, Canada. Scientists said the tracker pinged off Vero Beach, the Bahamas and Key Largo in the Florida Keys in recent days. In August, she was still enjoying the cool waters off Nova Scotia, according to the nonprofit Ocearch.

The shark appeared to be making a similar journey as two other large female great whites and might be pregnant. Scientists hope she could lead them to her birthing place, ac-

cording to a Facebook post by Ocearch, which has been tracking the shark.

She is named Unama'ki, which means "Land of the fog" in the language of the Mi'kmaq, the indigenous people of Nova Scotia.

The Tampa Bay Times reported Unama'ki is one of the largest sharks Ocearch has tagged in the North Atlantic. The largest was a 16-foot female tagged in 2012.

Fishing boat sunk off coast as artificial reef

SC CHARLESTON — An old fishing boat and some concrete erosion structures are the latest things wildlife officials are sinking to create artificial reefs in the ocean off South Carolina.

The 65-foot fishing trawler and the concrete blocks were added to the C.J. Davidson Jr. Reef off Georgetown, the Department of Natural Resources said in a news release.

They join a large barge and 20 Army vehicles in about 50 feet of water as wildlife officials hope fish and other marine life will thrive in the nooks and crannies.

Scientists are especially interested in observing what happens with the concrete structures originally designed as erosion control.

3 charged in break-in at science museum

VA RICHMOND — Three men were charged with felonies, and authorities are seeking a fourth man following an investigation of a break-in at the Science Museum of Virginia during a night of riots and looting, Virginia Capitol Police said.

A news release from police said warrants listing four felony counts each were obtained for Makel Daizon Al-Qadafi, 19; Zakeye Navon Turner, 18; Sherod Antoine Jenkins Jr., 19; and Allen Hargrove Jr., 25. All four are from Richmond and are charged with single counts of grand larceny, burglary, conspiracy to trespass or commit larceny and injury to any property.

Investigators determined someone gained access to the museum May 31 by smashing a basement window. The thieves made off with electronics and caused damages totaling \$5,000.

Tracking devices found on 2 officials' cars

MO JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri Gov. Mike Parson's office said law enforcement authorities are investigating after tracking devices were placed on the vehicles of two administration officials.

The devices were found on the vehicles of Drew Erdmann, Missouri's chief operating officer, and Sarah Steelman, commissioner of the Office of the Administration, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

The Office of Administration procures goods and services for the state, while the chief operating officer oversees the management and distribution of state resources.

Mike Bland, a private investigator, said he put the devices on the vehicles as part of a job for John Wall, who is affiliated with Asymmetric Solutions. It bills itself as providing security, private policing and intelligence support for the military, law enforcement and civilians.

From wire reports

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Elliott claims first Cup Series crown

Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — The new face of NASCAR circled Phoenix Raceway for a celebratory lap of his finest achievement. Chase Elliott, NASCAR's most popular driver, was now a Cup champion, too.

He came upon teammate Jimmie Johnson, who banged doors with Elliott. Then the seven-time champion, in his final race, gave Elliott a fist bump.

The torch has officially been passed.

Elliott did what Dale Earnhardt Jr. could not and parlayed the popularity gleamed off his Hall of Fame father into a NASCAR championship. The son of "Awesome Bill from Dawsonville" Georgia solidified himself as the new face of Hendrick Motorsports, of Chevrolet and of NASCAR on the day the greatest driver of this generation called it a career.

Elliott drove from the back of the field to victory lane at Phoenix to win for Hendrick and Chevrolet, which had been shut

out of the title race since Johnson won his seventh and final crown in 2016.

"I just never would have thought that this year would have gone like it has," Elliott said. "I mean, NASCAR Cup Series champion, are you kidding me? Unreal."

He shared a long hug with Johnson, who joined Elliott for the victory celebration.

"Oh my gosh, I mean, to share a moment like that, Jimmie's last race, to win and lock the championship," said Elliott, "those are moments you can only dream, you know, and this is a dream."

"Just hoping I don't ever wake up."

Elliott's car failed pre-race inspection and the penalty cost him the pole when he was sent to the rear. But he raced his way through traffic in the first stage and then took control of the championship. Elliott led seven times for a race-high 153 laps.

Johnson finished fifth — his

best result since August — in his final ride in Hendrick's No. 48 Chevrolet.

"My heart is full," said Johnson, who is tied with Hall of Famers Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt with seven titles. His 83 victories rank sixth on the career wins list and his stretch of five consecutive titles from 2006-2010 is a NASCAR record.

Asked what he will remember about his 686th race, Johnson said it will be Elliott's breakthrough.

"Chase Elliott won his first championship. I'm so happy for that guy," he said. "I can recall going snowboarding with Bill out in Colorado and Chase was maybe 8 years old on skis, super quiet, wouldn't say much."

"To watch him grow up and to be around him and to give him some advice from time to time has really been meaningful for me. I think more about him winning a championship more than anything."

Elliott, who turns 25 this

month, has followed his father's footsteps. Bill Elliott won the 1988 championship and 16 times was voted by the fans NASCAR's most popular driver.

Chase Elliott became the fan favorite in 2018 after Earnhardt Jr. retired. He's the first most popular driver to win the championship since his father won his only title.

The Elliotts joined Lee and Richard Petty and Ned and Dale Jarrett as just the third father-son combination to win a NASCAR Cup title. The Elliotts, along with Hall of Famer Tim Flock, are the only three drivers from Georgia to win the title.

Hendrick Motorsports extended its NASCAR record with a 13th championship.

Elliott passed Joey Logano with 42 laps remaining and pulled away in a race Elliott controlled even as the four title contenders ran 1-2-3-4 most of the afternoon.

Johnson, 7-time Cup winner, is 5th in final race

Associated Press

Jimmie Johnson strode into the final news conference of his NASCAR career wearing a black hat with "One Final Shot" on the front. Told he was the first driver in the room after Sunday's race at Phoenix Raceway, the seven-time Cup champion had a quick response.

"I won something this year," he said.

Johnson closed out one of the greatest careers in NASCAR history by finishing fifth at Phoenix — first among the drivers not in the Cup playoffs.

The 45-year-old spent some of the final moments in his No. 48 car pumping his fist and shouting from the window at Hendricks Motorsports teammate Chase Elliott after the 24-year-old won his first Cup championship.

After his final news conference, Johnson tossed cans of beer to his crew and toasted former crew chief Chad Knaus back out on the track.

A solid finish to a stellar career.

"It was nice to be competitive out there, but my bucket's full," Johnson said. "NASCAR has been so wonderful for me. This

journey has been more than I could have dreamed of or expected. Last couple years weren't as I would have dreamed up, but I've experienced the highest of highs and worked with the greatest of people."

Johnson announced last year this would be his final NASCAR season so he could spend more time with family, run a partial IndyCar season next year and pursue other ways to keep the adrenaline flowing.

Knaus also ran his final race Sunday — he's moving to an executive role with Hendricks Motorsports — as did Clint Bowyer, who finished 24th.

Bowyer is headed to the Fox Sports booth after 15 full Cup seasons and 10 career wins. A former Xfinity Series champion, he won races for Chevrolet, Toyota and then Ford after replacing Hall of Famer Tony Stewart in the No. 14 when he retired in 2016.

A solid career, just not like Johnson's.

Johnson and Knaus teamed up to dominate NASCAR for more than a decade in the No. 48, pulling in a record-tying seven championships, including a staggering stretch of five straight. Hall of Famers Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt are the only

other drivers with seven championships.

Labeled boring early in his career, Johnson proved to be anything but, becoming a popular pitchman, fan favorite and one of the most well-liked drivers on the circuit.

When Johnson's final race was over, the respect was evident as crewmembers from every team lined the wall to high five the popular driver before he rides off into the sunset.

"That respect from my peers and respect from my industry is something I'll never, ever forget," Johnson said.

Johnson clinched his final title in 2016 and won his last race the following year, putting his career-ending winless streak at three years after Sunday's race at Phoenix. He failed to reach the playoffs his final season in part because of a positive COVID-19 test in June that caused him to miss the first of 685 Cup races.

Johnson led 103 combined laps in 36 races this season — none at Phoenix.

He started 26th in his career finale and gradually worked his way toward the front at a track where he's won four times.

Brees, Saints roll past Bucs, Brady

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Drew Brees vs. Tom Brady, and the battle for supremacy of the NFC South, was a one-sided affair.

Brees threw for 222 yards and four touchdowns, regaining the NFL career TD pass lead and lifting the New Orleans Saints into first place with a 38-3 rout of Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday night.

The three-time defending division champions won their fifth straight game, intercepting Brady three times and completing a season sweep of the Bucs (6-3), who also suffered a double-digit loss at New Orleans in Week 1.

"Each time you can win and find different ways to win, I think it just builds confidence and creates momentum," Brees said.

"Obviously, tonight was a great night," he added. "All the way around, in all three phases, it was pretty exceptional."

The Saints (6-2) weren't perfect — turning the ball over twice themselves — however

the offense was extremely efficient with receivers Michael Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders back in the lineup, and the defense played its best game of the season.

Brees was 26-for-32 passing, including first-half TD throws of 14 yards to Tre'Quan Smith, 8 yards to Adam Trautman and 12 yards to Sanders, who missed the previous two games while on the COVID-19 list.

The 41-year-old added a 3-yarder to Josh Hill to make it 38-0 with just over nine minutes remaining.

"We knew this was a big game, divisional opponent, Tampa's playing extremely well," said Brees, who lost a fumble on the Bucs' only sack but did not throw an interception.

"Obviously we've been a little short-handed over last few weeks ... Tonight, it was good to get everybody back, get them back in the mix," Brees added. "We wanted the spread the ball around, we wanted to play complementary football. I can't say enough about our defense, they just played phenomenal."

Brees regained the league career TD pass lead with 654, three more than the 43-year-old Brady, who had thrown for 17 touchdowns and just one interception over his previous six games. New Orleans intercepted Brady twice in a 34-23 season-opening win, with Janoris Jenkins returning one for a TD.

Defensive Tackle David Onyemata and safeties Marcus Williams and Malcolm Jenkins picked off Brady this time — the last on a throw the six-time Super Bowl threw wildly into the middle of the field as scrambled to avoid a relentless pass rush.

"We didn't play well in any phase of the game," Brady said.

"Everyone's got to do a lot better," the Tampa Bay quarterback added, "and it starts with me."

Brady was sacked three times and finished 22-for-38 for 209 yards, including three completions for 31 yards to Antonio Brown, who made his debut for the Bucs in his return

from an eight-game suspension for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy.

Tampa Bay ran the ball just five times, including Blaine Gabbert's kneel-down on the final snap of the night.

The Saints scored on five of their first six possessions to build a 31-0 halftime lead, and the Bucs were fortunate the biggest first-half deficit of Brady's career wasn't larger.

Jared Cook fumbled at the Bucs 2 with New Orleans looking to build on an early 7-0 lead. But with Tampa Bay's offense sputtering and one of the league's stingiest defenses unable to slow down Brees, the Saints pressed on.

"That's the most complete game we've played ... It's poetry in motion when we get going like that," New Orleans running back Alvin Kamara said.

Brady's first interception, ending a Bucs franchise-record streak of 200 consecutive pass attempts without a pick, led to Kamara's 1-yard TD run that made it 28-0 midway through the second quarter.

Grieving Allen shines in Bills' defeat of Seahawks

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Josh Allen set aside his grief over the death of his grandmother to enjoy one of the most productive games of his three-year career.

Though Allen made no mention of his loss immediately following the Buffalo Bills' 44-34 win over the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday, coach Sean McDermott revealed Allen's grandmother had died a day earlier while praising his quarterback's resolve.

"Josh was emotional," McDermott said.

"He said he wanted to play and you know, he just felt like was going to have to compartmentalize for the better part of 24 hours to get through the game, and that's what he did," McDermott added. "It was a big, big win, and a great, great thing for him to play like he played. Just a mentally tough man."

Allen got the Bills' offense off to such a productive start, not even Russell Wilson and the high-scoring Seahawks could keep pace. Starting with a three-play, 45-yard scoring drive, Allen threw touchdown

passes on three of Buffalo's first four possessions. He later added a rushing TD.

He finished 31-for-38 and equaled his career best with 415 yards passing. The AFC East-leading Bills are 7-2 through nine games for the first time since 1993, a season that ended with Jim Kelly-led Buffalo making its fourth consecutive, and last, Super Bowl appearance.

Allen deflected any praise, noting the defense forced Wilson to turn over the ball four times, and special teams contributions.

"As a whole team, we took care of business today," Allen said. "Sitting here, 7-2, we're excited with what we can do and how we can play."

Allen's 24 completions and 282 yards passing in the first half alone were both the most by a Bills player since at least 1991.

Seattle (6-2) blew an opportunity to match its best record through eight games. The team was 7-1 in 2013.

Working with an early 17-0 advantage, Buffalo's defense went into attack mode

and rattled Wilson, who was sacked five times, threw two interceptions and lost two fumbles.

"What I will tell you is I don't recognize that game. We haven't seen us look like that, and it's a game that I don't have any place in my brain for it," said Seahawks coach Pete Carroll, who confirmed after the game that he has signed a multiyear contract extension. "We just don't turn the ball over like that, but we did today and they capitalized on all of it and just made us pay."

Wilson finished 28-for-41 for 390 yards with two touchdowns, but has seven turnovers in the past three games.

The turnovers weren't the only problem. Seattle became the NFL's sixth team to score 25 or more points in each of its first eight games, but the defense surrendered 420 yards — the fifth time this season an opponent has topped 400 yards.

The 44 points allowed were the most in Carroll's 11 seasons with the Seahawks and the most for the franchise since a 48-10 loss at Green Bay on Dec. 27, 2009.

NFL roundup

Dolphins, Tagovailoa stop Cardinals

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Tua Tagovailoa threw for 248 yards and two touchdowns in his second NFL start and the Miami Dolphins rallied in the fourth quarter to beat the Arizona Cardinals 34-31 on Sunday.

Miami (5-3) has won four straight. The Cardinals (5-3) had their three-game winning streak snapped.

The 22-year-old Tagovailoa was on the winning end of an action-packed duel with Arizona quarterback Kyler Murray, who finished with 283 yards and three touchdowns. Murray also had 106 yards rushing on 11 carries.

Arizona's Zane Gonzalez was short on a 49-yard field goal attempt that would have tied the game with 1:53 left.

Tagovailoa was more productive in his second start after throwing for 93 yards against the Rams last week. He showed great poise during two scoring drives in the fourth quarter. The left-hander also made some plays with his feet, extending drives with scrambles. He finished with 35 yards rushing.

Chiefs 33, Panthers 31: Patrick Mahomes threw for 372 yards and four touchdowns, Travis Kelce and Tyreek Hill each went over 100 yards receiving, and host Kansas City held on to beat Carolina when Joey Slye missed a 67-yard field-goal attempt wide right on the final play.

The Chiefs (8-1) were left clinging to the lead when Christian McCaffrey, just back from his ankle injury, scored from a yard out with 1:26 to go. The Panthers' onside kick was recovered by Kansas City, but they used their three timeouts to get the ball back, and Teddy Bridgewater's 23-yard pass to Curtis Samuel with 9 seconds remaining gave them hope.

Carolina (3-6) tried to get a bit closer with a pass to McCaffrey, but the incompletion brought on Slye, who had plenty of leg with the wind behind him. His kick dropped just outside the uprights, though, allowing the Chiefs to escape.

Raiders 31, Chargers 26: Justin Herbert's pass to Donald Parham Jr. for a 4-yard touchdown on the final play of the game was overturned after a replay review, and Las Vegas held on to win at Los Angeles.

Derek Carr threw two touchdown passes for the Raiders (5-3), who improved to 4-1 on the road. Herbert was 26-for-42 for 326 yards and two touchdowns for the Chargers (2-6), all of whose losses have come by seven points or less.

This time, Los Angeles got the ball on

its 25 with 4:37 remaining and drove to the Las Vegas 4. Herbert found Parham in the right corner of the end zone, but after a replay review, the touchdown was overturned when it was determined the tight end did not maintain possession.

Steelers 24, Cowboys 19: Ben Roethlisberger threw all three of his touchdown passes after shrugging off a knee injury, rallying Pittsburgh to a win at Dallas.

The Steelers are 8-0 for the first time in the storied franchise's history despite an upset bid from the Cowboys, who were the biggest underdogs they've been at home in at least 31 years.

Garrett Gilbert was the fourth different starting quarterback in five games for Dallas (2-7), throwing a touchdown pass in his first career start and bringing some life to the offense for a team that lost its fourth straight game without Dak Prescott.

Pittsburgh erased a 10-point deficit in the fourth quarter with three scoring drives, the last two aided by Cowboys penalties that kept drives alive. The go-ahead score was an 8-yarder to Eric Ebron with 2:14 remaining.

Ravens 24, Colts 10: Lamar Jackson turned up the tempo in the second half, and Baltimore broke the NFL record for consecutive 20-point games in its win at Indianapolis.

After Gus Edwards' 1-yard plunge gave the Ravens the lead midway through the third quarter, Jackson sealed the win with a 9-yard TD run.

Baltimore has (6-2) have scored 20 or more points 31 straight times — breaking a tie with Denver, which set the mark from 2012-14.

Titans 24, Bears 17: Ryan Tannehill threw two touchdown passes, and host Tennessee never trailed as it beat Chicago to snap a two-game skid.

The Titans (6-2) avoided their longest skid since Tannehill took over as starting quarterback and stayed atop the AFC South going into Thursday night's division showdown against Indianapolis.

They got big help from an undermanned and struggling defense missing three-time Pro Bowl linebacker Jadeveon Clowney with an injured knee.

Cornerback Desmond King picked up a fumble and ran 63 yards for a TD only days after Tennessee picked up the 2018 All-Pro from the Chargers for a sixth-round pick. King didn't join the team until Saturday after clearing COVID-19 testing protocols.

Vikings 34, Lions 20: Dalvin Cook kept his brilliant season rolling by rushing for

a career-high 206 yards and two scores on 22 carries, leading host Minnesota past Detroit.

Kirk Cousins threw for three touchdowns — two to tight end Irv Smith Jr. — in his second straight turnover-free performance for the Vikings (3-5), who averaged 8.9 yards per play on the way to their first home win this season.

Falcons 34, Broncos 27: Matt Ryan took advantage of Denver's thin secondary to throw three touchdown passes and host Atlanta turned back the Broncos' bid for a second consecutive comeback.

Ryan completed 25 of 35 passes for 284 yards with one interception. The Falcons (3-6) improved to 3-1 under interim coach Raheem Morris.

Atlanta led 20-3 at halftime. Drew Lock threw two touchdown passes and ran for a 10-yard score in the final quarter that made it 34-27. With the Falcons leading by seven points, Denver (3-5) took the ball at its 20 with 44 seconds remaining and no timeouts. Following three incompletions by Lock, a fumbled snap ended the possession.

Giants 23, Washington 20: Daniel Jones completed his longest pass of the season, didn't turn the ball over and New York held on to win at Washington.

Jones was 23-for-34 for 212 yards, including a 50-yard connection with Austin Mack and a touchdown pass to Evan Engram to build a 17-point halftime lead. The Giants (2-7) attempted to run things out in the second half and survived a couple of touchdown drives led by Alex Smith, who replaced injured Washington quarterback Kyle Allen.

Smith connected with Terry McLaurin on a 68-yard score, his first TD pass in 728 days, to cut New York's lead to 23-20 in the fourth quarter. But Smith threw two interceptions in the final 2:18 for Washington (2-6).

Texans 27, Jaguars 25: Deshaun Watson had touchdowns passes of 57 and 77 yards, the second one appearing to come after the play clock expired, and Houston won at Jacksonville for its sixth straight win in the series.

The Jaguars (1-7) lost their seventh straight and barely avoided making NFL history. They would have become the first to allow at least 30 points in seven consecutive games in a single season. Instead, they will share the record with the 1968 Denver Broncos and the 1984 Minnesota Vikings.