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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Virus surging with no signs of slowing

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The U.S. hit a record number of coronavirus hospitalizations Tuesday and surpassed 1 million new confirmed cases in just the first 10 days of November amid a nationwide surge of infections that shows no signs of slowing.

The new wave appears bigger and more widespread than the surges that happened in the spring and summer — and threatens to be worse. But experts say there are also reasons to think the nation is better able to deal with the virus this time around.

“We’re definitely in a better place” when it comes to improved medical tools and knowledge, said William Hanage, a Harvard University infectious-disease researcher.

Newly confirmed infections in the U.S. were running at all-time highs of well over 100,000 per day, pushing the total to more than 10 million and eclipsing 1 million since Halloween.

There are now 61,964 people hospitalized, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

Several states posted records Tuesday, including over 12,600 new cases in Illinois, 10,800 in Texas and 7,000 in Wisconsin.

Deaths — a lagging indicator, since it takes time for people to get sick and die — are climbing again, reaching an average

of more than 930 a day.

Hospitals are getting slammed. And unlike the earlier outbreaks, this one is not confined to a region or two.

“The virus is spreading in a largely uncontrolled fashion across the vast majority of the country,” said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-disease expert at Vanderbilt University.

Governors made increasingly desperate pleas for people to take the fight against the virus more seriously.

In an unusual prime-time speech hours after Wisconsin set new records for infections and deaths, Democratic Gov. Tony Evers announced that he was advising people to stay in their houses and businesses to allow people to work remotely, require masks and limit the number of people in stores and offices.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat, ordered bars and restaurants to close at 10 p.m., and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, said she will require masks at indoor gatherings of 25 or more people, inching toward more stringent measures after months of holding out.

While deaths are still well below the U.S. peak of about 2,200 per day back in April, some researchers estimate the nation’s overall toll will hit about 400,000 by Feb. 1, up from about 240,000 now.

But there is also some good news.

Doctors now better know how to treat severe cases, meaning higher percentages of the COVID-19 patients who go into intensive care units are coming out alive. Patients have the benefit of new treatments, namely remdesivir, the steroid dexamethasone and an antibody drug that won emergency-use approval from the Food and Drug Administration on Monday. Also, testing is more widely available.

In addition, a vaccine appears to be on the horizon, perhaps around the end of the year, with Pfizer this week reporting early results showing that its experimental shots are a surprising 90% effective at preventing the disease.

And there’s a change pending in the White House, with President-elect Joe Biden vowing to rely on a highly respected set of medical advisers and carry out a detailed coronavirus plan that experts say includes the kind of measures that will be necessary to bring the surge under control.

Biden pledged during the campaign to be guided by science, make testing free and widely available, hire thousands of health workers to undertake contact-tracing, and instruct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide clear, expert advice.

Trump emerges from White House for Veterans Day

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery on Wednesday, emerging in public for the first time since his failed reelection bid to take part in the annual presidential rite.

Trump, who honored veterans in a ceremony that was held during a steady rain, has spent the last several days holed up at the White House tweeting angry, baseless claims of voter fraud after his election loss.

He’s made no public comments since President-elect Joe Biden surpassed the 270 electoral votes on Saturday needed to win the presidency.

Although his official schedule has been

devoid of public events, Trump has made several personnel moves — firing Defense Secretary Mark Esper and installing three staunch loyalists in top defense jobs. Trump’s pick to serve as acting defense secretary, Christopher Miller, was among the Pentagon brass that joined the president for the solemn Veterans Day ceremony.

Meanwhile, his legal team has filed a barrage of lawsuits alleging voting fraud in the battleground states that went for Biden.

The president’s resistance to acknowledging the outcome of the race has stalled the transition process as the head of the General Services Administration, a Trump appointee, has held off on certifying Biden as the winner of the election.

The certification — known as ascertain-

ment — frees up money for the transition and clears the way for Biden’s team to begin putting in place the transition process at agencies.

“I just think it’s an embarrassment, quite frankly,” Biden said on Tuesday of Trump’s refusal to acknowledge the election results. The president-elect and his wife, Jill Biden, marked Veterans Day with a visit to the Korean War Memorial in Philadelphia.

From his Twitter account on Tuesday, Trump again raised unsupported claims of “massive ballot counting abuse” and predicted he would ultimately win the race he has already lost.

Trump’s tweets were swiftly flagged by the social media network as disputed claims about election fraud.

3 Trump loyalists get top Pentagon jobs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A day after President Donald Trump fired Defense Secretary Mark Esper, three staunch loyalists to the president were named to top defense jobs. Among them was a former Fox News commentator who failed to get through Senate confirmation because of offensive remarks he made, including about Islam.

The abrupt changes sent reverberations through the Pentagon as nervous civilian and military personnel waited for the next shoe to drop. And they fueled worries of a wider effort to drum out anyone considered not loyal enough to Trump.

The unease was palpable inside the building throughout the day over concerns about what the Trump administration may do in the months before President-elect Joe Biden takes office and whether there will be a greater effort to politicize the historically apolitical military. While radical policy shifts seem unlikely before the Jan. 20 inauguration, the changes could further damage prospects for a smooth transition already hampered by Trump's refusal to concede his election loss.

James Anderson, who had been acting undersecretary for policy, resigned Tuesday morning and he was quickly replaced by Anthony Tata, a retired Army one-star general. A short time later, Joseph

Kernan, a retired Navy vice admiral, stepped down as undersecretary for intelligence, hastening what had been an already planned post-election departure. Kernan was replaced by Ezra Cohen-Watnick, who becomes acting undersecretary for intelligence.

The departures came on Christopher Miller's second day on the job as defense chief. Miller also brought in his own chief of staff, Kash Patel, to replace Jen Stewart, who had worked in that job for Esper. Patel and Cohen-Watnick are both considered staunchly loyal to Trump and previously worked at the National Security Council.

Patel was among the small group of aides who traveled with Trump extensively during the final stretch of the campaign. He also is a former prosecutor in the national security division of the Department of Justice and former staff member on the House Intelligence Committee. In that post, he was a top aide to Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., leading the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Patel was linked in media accounts to efforts to discredit the investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. He moved to the National Security Council in February 2019, and earlier this year, he traveled to Syria for rare high-level talks aimed at securing the release of two Americans who

have been missing for years, including journalist Austin Tice.

Cohen-Watnick was a protege of Trump's initial national security adviser, Michael Flynn, but was replaced in the summer of 2017 by Flynn's successor, H.R. McMaster, as part of a string of shakeups at the White House and National Security Council.

While the personnel changes added to the tumult in the wake of Esper's departure, it's not clear how much impact they could have on the massive Pentagon bureaucracy. The department is anchored by the tenet of civilian control of the military, and much of the day-to-day activities are conducted by career policy experts and military leaders in the U.S. and around the globe who adhere to a strict chain of command.

Also, many of Trump's policies and defense priorities have already been put in motion by Esper and his predecessors, guided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including the chairman, Army Gen. Mark Milley. All of those military leaders remain in place.

Earlier this year, Trump appointed Tata to the policy post, but the Senate canceled a hearing on the nomination when it became clear that it would be difficult if not impossible to get him confirmed. Trump then appointed Tata to serve in the job of deputy undersecretary.

There has been continuing tumult in the Pentagon's policy shop. John Rood was

forced to resign as undersecretary for policy in February after he drew White House ire for warning against the U.S. withholding aid to Ukraine, the issue that led to the president's impeachment.

Tata will be "performing the duties of" the undersecretary job, rather than holding the "acting" title. Officials who carry the "acting" title have more authority than those who are "performing the duties of" the job.

According to reports, Tata posted tweets in 2018 calling Islam the "most oppressive violent religion I know of," and he called former President Barack Obama a "terrorist leader" and referred to him as Muslim. The tweets were later taken down.

At the time of the Senate hearing, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said Trump must not prioritize loyalty over competence and install someone in a job if the "appointee cannot gain the support of the Senate, as is clearly the case with Tata."

Defense officials said Miller, who previously was director of the National Counterterrorism Center, continues meeting with staff and becoming familiar with the Pentagon and its wide range of complex and critical national security issues and mission.

Anderson's departure was first reported by Politico.

Senate clears path for Medal of Honor for heroism in Iraq

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Senate passed legislation Tuesday that clears the way for President Donald Trump to award the nation's highest award for valor in combat to Army Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, who repeatedly entered a burning vehicle in Iraq to save six fellow soldiers and an interpreter from harm and died a few weeks later.

The legislation, passed by

unanimous consent, waives the legal requirement that the Medal of Honor be awarded within five years of a service member's acts of valor. Cashe has long been considered one of the war's great American heroes and would be the first African American to receive the award for actions in Iraq or Afghanistan. Then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper supported the move in a letter to Congress

in August after years of deliberations within the Army.

The Senate bill was introduced following the approval of similar legislation in the House last week. Lawmakers said they wanted to move quickly.

Cashe, 35, of Oviedo, Fla., was deployed to Samarra, Iraq, with the 3rd Infantry Division when the armored Bradley Fighting Vehicle he was in rolled over an improvised ex-

plosive device on Oct. 17, 2005. He was slightly injured by the explosion and drenched in fuel, and realized the vehicle's fuel cell had erupted and the vehicle had burst into flames.

Cashe made numerous trips into the vehicle to recover fellow soldiers, suffering burns. He died about three weeks later at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

Pentagon refutes reports of Taiwan training

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The Defense Department on Wednesday shot down recent media reports saying special operations Marines were working with forces on Taiwan this week.

Taiwanese and Japanese news outlets, which cited Taiwan's defense ministry and naval command, said the Marine Raiders were at Tsoying Naval Base in Kaohsiung on Monday, training Taiwan marines in assault boat and speedboat infiltration techniques. If true, it would have been the first public acknowledgement of such training by either side since the 1970s.

However, Pentagon spokesman John Supple, in a statement emailed to Stars

and Stripes via Indo-Pacific Command on Wednesday, called the reports about U.S. Marines on Taiwan "inaccurate."

"The United States remains committed to our One-China Policy," he said, referring to a policy acknowledging that Beijing believes it has sovereignty over Taiwan. The sides split during a civil war in 1949 and China considers the island a breakaway province that should be brought under its control by force if necessary.

Though Washington has no formal relations with Taiwan's government, which is elected democratically, U.S. law requires the government to ensure Taiwan can defend itself.

U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan have increased in recent years, as China builds up its military and remains dedicated to a

goal of annexing the island.

Beijing spoke out last month against a U.S. plan to sell \$1.8 billion in weapons systems to Taiwan and warned the move could cause "serious consequences" to already frayed Sino-American relations.

The Pentagon spokesman, in his statement Tuesday, said China has engaged in a string of destabilizing activities aimed at both Taiwan and the broader region that increase the risk of miscalculation.

"We urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure targeted at Taiwan and to engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan," Supple wrote. "Any resolution of cross-Strait differences must be peaceful and based on the will of the people on both sides."

France: Several wounded in explosion at Saudi cemetery

Associated Press

PARIS — Three people were wounded Wednesday when an improvised explosive device targeted a ceremony of French, American, British, Italian and Greek officials commemorating the end of World War I at a cemetery in the Saudi city of Jiddah, according to official statements.

The ceremony was held at a cemetery for non-Muslim dead, French Foreign Ministry officials said.

"Such attacks on innocent people are shameful and entirely without justification," said a joint statement issued by the embassies of the five countries in attendance. The group also acknowledged the work of Saudi first responders at the scene.

Hours after the attack, Saudi state-media quoted a local official acknowledging the attack and saying a Greek Consulate employee and Saudi security man were lightly wounded in the incident. The British government said one U.K. national suffered minor injuries.

The Saudi official said an in-

vestigation was underway.

Wednesday's attack follows on the heels of a stabbing Oct. 29 that lightly wounded a guard at the French Consulate in the same city. The stabbing was carried out by a Saudi man, who was arrested. His motives remain unclear.

France has suffered two deadly attacks by foreign-born Muslims in the past month. A teacher was beheaded outside Paris for showing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad to his class for a debate on free expression, and three people were later killed in a church in the southern city of Nice.

The depictions of the prophet sparked protests and calls for boycotts of French products among some Muslims in the Middle East and South Asia. France has urged its citizens in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim-majority countries to be "on maximum alert" amid the heightened tensions.

Wednesday marked the 102nd anniversary of the armistice ending World War I and is commemorated in several European countries.

Marines seek gag order in case involving corporal

The (Norfolk, Va.) Virginian-Pilot

The Marine Corps is seeking a gag order in the criminal case of a Virginia Beach corporal whose supporters say her actions stem from trauma related to a sexual assault at the hands of a fellow Marine.

The Corps is aiming to bar Cpl. Thae Ohu's attorneys or any other witnesses from speaking with the press.

Ohu, 27, an administrative specialist with the Marine Corps Intelligence Schools aboard Dam Neck Naval Base, is being charged with attempted murder, aggravated assault on an intimate partner and a host of other charges after prosecutors say she attacked her then-boyfriend in April. She's been held at the Navy Consolidated Brig in Chesapeake since June.

Meanwhile, Ohu's family has publicly pleaded for her to be released into mental health treatment. They say the April incident was the result of a psychological break and that she's suffered from severe PTSD and other issues following a sexual assault by another Marine in Japan in 2015.

The proposed gag order, which was filed Monday and will likely be argued before a

judge on Thursday at Quantico, centers on The Virginian-Pilot's reporting on the case, which has also been published in other news outlets such as Stars and Stripes.

The stories have been shared online and in advocacy circles as emblematic of broader issues with how the military treats sexual assault victims.

The government's attorneys argue in their motion that statements made to The Pilot about Ohu's mental health and previous sexual assault allegation are outside the scope of her current legal woes.

A Marine Corps spokesman said in an email Tuesday that "due to regulations governing what information can be released regarding matters pending at court-martial, we are not allowed to discuss the substance of any upcoming motions."

The victim in the case, Ohu's ex-boyfriend Michael Hinesley, who's also a Marine, previously asked officials not to pursue the charges, telling them he believed everything that happened could be tied to her service-related trauma.

Ohu's general court-martial is scheduled to begin in March.

Florida prepares for another hit from Eta

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE — Eta regained hurricane strength Wednesday morning as Florida braced for a second hit from the storm.

The storm's maximum sustained winds increased to around 75 mph off Florida's southwest coast.

Forecasters at the National Hurricane Center in Miami issued a hurricane watch for a 120-mile stretch that includes Tampa and St. Petersburg. The storm has been in the Gulf of Mexico since crossing over South Florida on Sunday.

The latest hurricane watch extends from Anna Maria Island, which is south of St. Petersburg, to Yankeetown.

Eta was about 130 miles west-southwest of Fort Myers early Wednesday and moving at 15 mph.

The hurricane center said "life-threatening storm surge" is possible early Thursday, and forecasters advised residents to heed warnings from local officials. Tropical storm-force winds are expected in the area by late Wednesday.

Forecasts have called for more rain from the storm system over parts of already drenched South Florida.

"Never seen this, never, not this deep," said Anthony Lys, who has lived in his now-waterlogged Fort Lauderdale neighborhood since 1996. He described hearing water and debris slamming against his shuttered home overnight as the storm crossed Florida.

The storm first hit Nicaragua as a Category 4 hurricane and killed nearly 70 people from Mexico to Panama before moving into the Gulf of Mexico

early Monday, near where the Everglades meet the sea, with maximum sustained winds of 50 mph.

"It was far worse than we could've ever imagined, and we were prepared," said Arbie Walker, a 27-year-old student whose Fort Lauderdale apartment was filled with 5 or 6 inches of water.

There was nowhere for the water to go across much of South Florida, which had already experienced nearly 14 inches of rain in October.

As much as 16 inches of rain damaged one of the state's largest COVID-19 testing sites, at Miami-Dade County's Hard Rock Stadium, officials said. Throughout the pandemic, it has been among the busiest places to get a coronavirus diagnosis. The site was expected to be closed until Wednesday or

Thursday.

Eta hit land late Sunday as it blew over Lower Matecumbe, in the middle of the chain of small islands that form the Keys, but the heavily populated areas of Miami-Dade and Broward Counties bore the brunt of the fury.

It was the 28th named storm of an especially busy Atlantic hurricane season, tying the 2005 record for named storms. And late Monday, it was followed by the 29th storm — Theta.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami said Theta broke the record of 28 named storms in 2005. Theta was centered Wednesday morning about 740 miles southwest of the Azores, bearing top sustained winds of 65 mph as that system moved east-northeast at 8 mph.

Biden to 'get right to work' despite transition resistance

Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. — Vowing "to get right to work," President-elect Joe Biden shrugged off President Donald Trump's fierce refusal to accept the election outcome as "inconsequential," even as Democrats elsewhere warned that the Republican president's actions were dangerous.

Raising unsupported claims of voter fraud, Trump has blocked the incoming president from receiving intelligence briefings and withheld federal funding intended to help facilitate the transfer of power. Trump's resistance, backed by senior Republicans in Washington and across the country, could also prevent background investigations and security clearances for prospective staff and access to federal agencies to discuss transition planning.

As some Democrats and former Republican officials warned of serious consequences, Biden sought to lower the national temperature Tues-

day as he addressed reporters from a makeshift transition headquarters near his home in downtown Wilmington.

Biden described Trump's position as little more than an "embarrassing" mark on the outgoing president's legacy, while predicting that Republicans on Capitol Hill would eventually accept the reality of Biden's victory. The Republican resistance, Biden said, "does not change the dynamic at all in what we're able to do."

Additional intelligence briefings "would be useful," Biden added, but "we don't see anything slowing us down."

Biden's team is also calling on the General Services Administration, led by a Trump-appointed administrator, Emily Murphy, to formally recognize Biden's victory. Until that happens, Biden will not receive comprehensive security briefings, transition funding or the ability to communicate with agencies to begin coordinating the transfer of power.

Dems clinch House control, majority is likely to decrease

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats clinched two more years of controlling the House but with a potentially razor-thin majority, a bittersweet finale to last week's elections that has left them divided and with scant margin for error for advancing their agenda.

The party on Tuesday nailed down at least 218 seats, according to The Associated Press, and could win a few others when more votes are counted. While that assures command of the 435-member chamber, blindsided Democrats were all but certain to see their current 232-seat majority shrink after an unforeseen surge of Republican voters transformed expected gains of perhaps 15 seats into losses potentially approaching that amount.

"We have the gavel, we have the gavel," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who seems all but certain to continue in that role. While she

bemoaned Democrats' losses in districts where GOP votes proved "almost insurmountable," she told reporters last week, "We've lost some battles but we've won the war."

By retaining the House, Democrats will control the chamber for four consecutive years for only the second time since 1995, when Republicans ended 40 years of Democratic dominance.

Democrats went into Election Day with a 232-197 House advantage, plus an independent and five open seats. With some races remaining undecided, it was possible that in the new Congress that convenes in January, they'll have the smallest majority since Republicans had just 221 seats two decades ago.

Democrats secured the majority after The Associated Press declared three winners late Tuesday: incumbents Kim Schrier in Washington, Tom O'Halleran in Arizona and Jimmy Gomez in California.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Group aims to reduce feral rabbit population

HI HILO — A Hawaii island group has launched an effort to reduce the number of feral rabbits, which the campaigners say are wreaking havoc on yards and burrowing under homes.

The Big Island Invasive Species Committee has asked for reports from residents who have seen the wild bunnies, The Hawaii Tribune-Herald reported.

The organization does not know exactly where the rabbits came from but said they are probably escaped pets or escaped from breeding hutches.

Hawaii has strict laws regarding rabbit containment because they can be a menace to farmers and gardeners.

The committee received a \$6,600 grant from the Hawaii Invasive Species Council to work with landowners to control the rabbit population.

Cops: Woman posing as agent sought free food

GA ROCKMART — Police jailed a woman in Georgia accused of pretending to be an FBI agent to score a free fast-food meal, saying she allegedly threatened to arrest restaurant workers if they didn't serve her a complimentary bite.

Kimberly Ragsdale, 47, of Dallas, was charged with impersonating a public officer following repeated attempts to get free meals at a Chick-Fil-A, according to a Rockmart Police arrest report obtained by news outlets.

Employees at the restaurant told investigators that Ragsdale showed up at the location multiple times during the week and posed as a federal agent and also threatened to take employees into custody if they didn't

comply, the police report said.

It added that the woman continued the farce as police arrived to arrest her in the restaurant parking lot, reportedly claiming to officers that she was an FBI agent and that her credentials were electronic.

Feds: Officer served as lookout for cocaine ring

NY NEW YORK — Federal authorities arrested a New York City police officer on charges he served as a lookout for drug traffickers who smuggled hundreds of kilograms of cocaine into the United States.

Officer Amaury Abreu, 34, of Hauppauge, is accused of explaining law enforcement methods to the drug ring and performing warrant checks on its members.

Federal prosecutors said he also distributed cocaine and traveled to the Dominican Republic in January and February to meet with leaders of the trafficking group.

Abreu, who has been with the NYPD for nine years, was charged with conspiring to import and distribute cocaine and released on \$1 million bond.

Deer hunter gets bang for buck with gator haul

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A Minnesota man who was tracking a large buck on the opening weekend of deer hunting season wound up finding another prize for his collection when he came across a 3-foot alligator.

Cory Klocek was hunting on farmland in East Bethel, about 40 miles north of Minneapolis, when he took down with a shotgun what he described on Facebook as a "beautiful 10-point buck," the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported. Right about that time he came around a

pond and spotted the alligator.

Klocek, 35, contacted a local conservation officer with the state Department of Natural Resources and got the go-ahead to shoot the alligator as well.

Police: Explosive found in car following crash

NE LINCOLN — A man was arrested in Lincoln after officials first found a gun, then a homemade explosive in his car following a crash, police said.

The crash happened when the 35-year-old man suffered a medical episode, according to police, and crashed his vehicle into a light pole near the Nebraska Wesleyan University campus, television station KOLN reported.

Rescue crews who arrived on the scene found a gun on the man, who police say is a convicted felon and barred from having a gun. Police said a subsequent search of the vehicle then turned up an improvised explosive device.

Police said the man was arrested on suspicion of being a felon in possession of a firearm, possession of a destructive device, possession of a controlled substance and driving with a suspended license.

Observatory mascot dies after 12 years on duty

NH NORTH CONWAY — A cat who patrolled the Northeast's highest peak for a dozen years as its weather observatory's mascot died.

Marty, a black Maine coon cat, succumbed to "an unforeseen illness," Mount Washington Summit Operations Manager Rebecca Scholand said in a news release. "As a past observer who lived on the summit for four years, I can tell you Marty was a special companion, entertainer and so

incredibly loved by observers and state park staff and will be sadly missed."

The Mount Washington Observatory staff have had a cat at the 6,288-foot summit, called the "home of the world's worst weather," since 1932.

Search prompted by empty life raft ended

NC BUXTON — The U.S. Coast Guard suspended its search for people after an empty raft was spotted off the shore of North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Officer Tara Molle said the raft appeared to be brand new and that there were not indications that it had been occupied. The Coast Guard also found no corresponding reports of missing people.

The life raft was spotted one mile offshore of Buxton. A Coast Guard aircrew had deployed a swimmer to observe the raft more closely. It was a six-man orange life raft with a sea anchor inside and no visible marine growth or markings.

Guard breaks ground on mountain warfare facility

VT JERICHO — The Vermont National Guard broke ground on a new \$27 million facility for its U.S. Army Mountain Warfare School.

The school in Jericho has trained military and other personnel around the world in techniques of high-altitude and mountain operations and combat.

The new 82,668-square-foot facility will have a drill hall with a four-story climbing wall, classrooms and other spaces, a dining facility and more. The facility is expected to be completed in the spring of 2022.

From wire reports

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This Masters really is like no other

Associated Press

Nothing about this Masters will look familiar until the champion slips his arms through a green jacket.

The purple, pink and white blooms of azaleas and dogwoods, which provide such a magnificent accent to Augusta National in spring, give way to the orange and gold hues of autumn. The course might look familiar with its emerald green fairways, blazing white sand in the bunkers, towering Georgia pines and the still water of Rae's Creek.

It just won't sound the same, not without thousands upon thousands of spectators framing each hole and sending those piercing roars from all corners of the course.

It won't be the same.

What makes this Masters unlike any other is the calendar. Golf's annual rite of spring is now two weeks before Thanksgiving. And without its patrons, the cathedral of golf will never be quieter.

"It's going to be eerie. It's going to be different," Rory McIlroy said. "But at least we're playing for a green jacket."

Not even that much was certain when the COVID-19 pandemic began shutting down sports around the world a week before the first day of spring. The Masters was postponed — a relief to those who initially feared cancellation — and then rescheduled for Nov. 12-15, the final major of an unforgettable year.

When the pandemic did not loosen its grip, the club had no choice but to close the door to its patrons. No need for those green "Golf Traffic" signs posted about the city, or people lining the streets of Washington Road looking for tickets.

There won't be a Par 3 Contest, with players dressing their children in white coveralls. The first-time players might not know any better. For the veterans, it might not be much different from their scouting trips to Augusta National. They will know what they're missing, the sights and sounds.

"You walk through the gates at Augusta, there's that energy, that anticipation," said McIlroy, making his 10th appearance at the only major keeping him from the career Grand Slam. "There's still a golf course

there. There's still a golf tournament to be won, and you've got to make the most of it.

"But they're playing," he said. "And that's the most important part."

Bryson DeChambeau has been the talk of golf since golf returned. He added some 40 pounds of muscle and mass, all designed to enable him to swing faster and harder and hit drives farther than anyone imagined. It carried him to a six-shot victory in the U.S. Open with a game that defied convention. And that was just the start.

DeChambeau took a month off ahead of the Masters to work on a 48-inch driver — the size used by World Long Drive contestants, his inspiration — with hopes of dismantling Augusta National the way Woods did when he hit pitching wedge into a par 5 on his way to a 12-shot victory in 1997.

"If he can get a 48-inch driver in play, he'll shoot 20 under or better. It's going to be a slaughter," said World Long Drive champion Kyle Berkshire, who provides feedback to DeChambeau. "He might as well be the only one on the course."

DeChambeau won't be the

only one on the course. It will just feel that way.

Players are allowed to bring one significant other and a coach. Augusta National members can attend. That's it.

By now, the players should be used to the silence. Spectators were not allowed at the PGA Championship or U.S. Open, and only recently have a very limited number of fans been allowed in Bermuda and Houston.

But nowhere else than Augusta National will the quiet be so difficult to ignore.

"It echoes there. It travels. You can figure out who's doing what, and the roars for certain people are louder than others," defending champion Tiger Woods said. "It's unlike any other place in the world."

Still, they're playing. It's the Masters. Woods is chasing another green jacket. Five players already have taken their turn at No. 1 this year. It should be quite a show, just like always, right up until the point CBS signs off from Augusta National on Sunday afternoon so it can broadcast an NFL game.

Rahm attempting to give Spain another green jacket

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Seve Ballesteros. Jose Maria Olazabal. Sergio Garcia.

Jon Rahm would love to add his name to the list.

"There's such Spanish history of champions here, with three great champions and three idols of mine," Rahm said Tuesday before a practice round at the Masters. "Five green jackets go out to Spain. Hopefully, I can be the sixth."

A two-time winner this year who rose to No. 1 in the world for the first time in his career, Rahm's lack of a major victory remains the biggest hole in his résumé.

He has come close at Augusta

National, posting top 10s in his last two trips here, including a fourth-place finish in 2018.

And so far, he's having quite a week.

In practice Monday, Rahm made a hole-in-one on the fourth hole with a 5-iron. And then on Tuesday, during the traditional attempt to skip a ball over the pond in front of the 16th green, Rahm hit 4-iron that bounced four times on the water, clipped the embankment and rolled around the back of the green and into the hole.

"The craziest thing. The second hole-in-one of the week," he said. "It could go two ways, right? Something special going on, or I'm just running out of luck already. So I don't know.

"I knew it would be a special week given it's my birthday today, so I'm hoping it's the beginning of a lot of good things to come."

Rahm, who turned 26 on Tuesday, said he hasn't lost the thrill of playing at Augusta National.

"I always get the same feel as I did the first time when I go down Magnolia Lane," he said. "Each day: Yesterday, today, tomorrow, and every day this week, I'm still going to have those butterflies in my stomach because it's such an iconic place for golfers."

Rahm arrives at Augusta after a breakthrough year in which he won the Memorial and the BMW Championship

— his first season with multiple PGA Tour victories — to finish fourth in the FedEx Cup standings. He has 11 wins worldwide since he turned pro in 2016 and joins Justin Thomas, Bryson DeChambeau and Dustin Johnson as the only players with at least one PGA Tour win in each of the past four seasons.

Rahm finished second in his last event, the Zozo Championship at Sherwood.

"I can't lie, I'm feeling pretty confident," he said. "I think the best way I can explain it (is) I'm simply happy, outside the golf course, I'm happy, within the limits of now this pandemic, and I'm also happy on the golf course. ... Hopefully something special happens this weekend."

COVID concerns postpone 4 SEC games

Associated Press

No. 12 Georgia at Missouri became the fourth Southeastern Conference game scheduled for Saturday to be postponed because of COVID-19.

The conference announced Wednesday the game cannot be played because of positive COVID-19 tests and individuals in quarantine after contact tracing within the Missouri program.

Earlier this week, No. 24 Auburn at Mississippi State; No. 1 Alabama at LSU; and No. 5 Texas A&M at Tennessee were all forced to reschedule. Georgia and Missouri share no open dates the rest of the way, but the game could be made up on Dec. 19, which is the day of the SEC title game.

The conference has said it is considering using Dec. 19 as a make-up date for teams that are not involved in the league championship game, but that has not been finalized.

That brings the total to six games across major college football that have been postponed so far this week. Memphis at Navy out of the American Athletic Conference and Louisiana-Monroe at Arkansas State in the Sun Belt were also postponed Tuesday.

Overall, 54 games involving FBS teams have been canceled or postponed since Aug. 26.

"While it is unfortunate to have multiple postponements in the same week, we began the season with the understanding interruptions to the schedule were possible and we have remained focused throughout the season on the health of everyone around our programs," SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said in a statement. "We must re-

main vigilant, within our programs and in our communities, to prevent the spread of the virus and to manage activities that contribute to these interruptions."

Texas A&M said it has three active COVID-19 cases, including two people who traveled with the team to South Carolina last week.

"The nature of away game travel (flights, meals, lodging, locker room, etc.) naturally leads to an increase in the number of student-athletes, coaches and staff who meet the criteria for mandatory quarantine based on contact tracing guidelines," Texas A&M athletic director Ross Bjork said.

Auburn paused team activities on Tuesday after nine players and three staff members tested positive for COVID-19.

Auburn also has "a handful of close contact" cases having to quarantine, in addition to the positive tests, coach Gus Malzahn said. He didn't give a specific number or say which positions had been hardest hit.

Auburn, which is coming off an open date, is next scheduled to host Tennessee on Nov. 21.

It was also confirmed Tuesday that Arkansas coach Sam Pittman will miss the Razorbacks' game at No. 6 Florida on Saturday after having two positive COVID-19 tests. Pittman first tested positive Sunday and has reported no symptoms. SEC protocols require him to isolate for at least 10 days. Defensive coordinator Barry Odom will serve as head coach against Florida.

In the American Athletic Conference, Navy's game at Memphis on Saturday was postponed because of positive COVID-19 tests at the Naval Academy.

Alabama-LSU is typically one of the most anticipated games of the college football season. Last year, the Tigers broke an eight-game long losing streak in the series and won a thriller in Tuscaloosa, Ala., that propelled them to an SEC championship and national title.

The matchup has lost its luster this season, with LSU stumbling to a 2-3 record and Alabama favored by more than three touchdowns.

This year's game was scheduled to kick off at 6 p.m. EST and be broadcast by CBS, following the network's coverage of the Masters. The pandemic forced the golf major to be postponed from April. Now CBS will not carry an SEC game this weekend.

Alabama's next game is Nov. 21 at home against Kentucky.

It's the second week in a row that Navy had a game postponed because of positive coronavirus tests at the Academy and the subsequent quarantine of student-athletes. The Midshipmen were scheduled to host Tulsa last weekend before that game was called off.

Navy has not been on the field since Nov. 2 and has not had a regular practice since Oct. 29.

The American has not announced potential makeup dates for Saturday's game or the Tulsa-Navy game. Memphis and Navy do not share a common open date through the rest of the season.

The AAC did announce that a previously rescheduled game between No. 7 Cincinnati and Tulsa will be played Friday, Dec. 4, instead of Saturday, Dec. 5.

Browns clear Mayfield to practice, play this week

Associated Press

The Browns activated quarterback Baker Mayfield from the COVID-19 list, clearing him to practice and play this week against Houston.

Mayfield had to isolate for several days after he had close contact with a staff member who tested positive for the coronavirus. The staffer has not been identified.

Cleveland placed Mayfield on the reserve/COVID-19 list on Sunday when the team was on its bye week. He was not allowed to be at the facility Monday and participated in team

meetings virtually.

Mayfield is expected to practice Wednesday with the Browns (5-3), who reached the midway point of the season with a winning record for just the third time since 1999. They are trying to end an 18-year playoff drought, the league's longest.

Mayfield has thrown 15 touchdown passes and seven interceptions this season.

There has been a rise in coronavirus cases around the league recently. On Tuesday, the unbeaten Pittsburgh Steelers placed quarterback Ben Roethlisberger on the reserve/

COVID-19 list.

In other NFL news:

■ Panthers running back Christian McCaffrey will not play Sunday against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and will be getting a second medical opinion on his injured right shoulder.

The team has not released the details surrounding the injury McCaffrey sustained in the fourth quarter of a 33-31 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday.

■ Miami Dolphins receiver Preston Williams will be placed on injured reserve with a foot injury, meaning he'll be

sidelined for three games and perhaps longer.

Coach Brian Flores announced the roster move Wednesday, and he declined to say whether Williams is expected to return this season. Flores said the injury is more serious than first thought, and additional tests were planned.

■ NFL owners approved a proposal that will reward organizations with draft picks for developing minority coaches and front office executives who become head coaches, general managers or team presidents for other clubs.

Mattingly, Cash win manager of the year

Associated Press

By the time Kevin Cash pulled Tampa Bay ace Blake Snell from the last game of the World Series, he had already been voted Manager of the Year in the American League.

Even if he ended up losing the biggest prize.

It was a Sunshine State sweep for skippers Tuesday night, with Miami's Don Mattingly winning NL Manager of the Year and Cash receiving the AL award.

Long regarded as one of baseball's brightest young minds, Cash guided the thrifty Rays to an AL-best 40-20 record during the pandemic-shortened season. But he was roundly criticized for pulling a dominant Snell in the sixth inning of the decisive Game 6 of the Fall Classic against the champion Los Angeles Dodgers.

"Have I reflected on it? There's not a day that goes by that I don't reflect on it," Cash said. "Being in this position we owe it to ourselves and more importantly our players to continue to reflect on those decisions."

After Snell exited, the Dodgers rallied against Nick Anderson and went on to a 3-1 victory. Cash said he has had multiple conversations with many people within the game since the loss and has received a lot of positive support.

"Yes, I would do it the same way all over again. I would plead for a different outcome, that's for sure," Cash said with a chuckle.

"That decision was not reflective of my confidence in Blake. It was very reflective of my confidence in Nick, and that's (what) I felt was, at the moment, the best chance for us to win the game."

Voting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America concluded before the beginning of the playoffs. Rick Renner, let go by the Chicago White Sox after the team made

the postseason for the first time since 2008, finished second in the AL, followed by Toronto's Charlie Montoyo.

Mattingly led the Marlins to their first playoff appearance since 2003 despite dealing with a COVID-19 outbreak that paused their season and ravaged the roster.

The Marlins' 31-29 record was Mattingly's first winning season in his fifth year with the club. The former New York Yankees first baseman and captain had a winning record in each of his five seasons as manager of the Dodgers.

Mattingly, the first Manager of the Year for the Marlins since Joe Girardi in 2006, was the AL MVP in 1985. He became the fifth person to win both MVP and Manager of the Year.

"They're just different. The first one feels personal and this one feels more like a team thing," Mattingly said, "and that's why I'm proud of it because we've struggled for a couple years and for us to move forward is important, and I think this is a sign that we're heading in that direction." San Diego's Jayce Tingler finished second behind Mattingly in balloting by the BBWAA, followed by David Ross of the Chicago Cubs.

The Cy Young Awards will be announced by the BBWAA on Wednesday night, followed by the MVPs on Thursday.

After losing 105 games a year ago, Miami had its 2020 season nearly derailed by a coronavirus outbreak during the first weekend of play. The team had to make 174 roster moves but still managed the franchise's first winning record since 2009.

The steady hand of the 59-year-old Mattingly played a big role in the turnaround, which continued in the playoffs. Miami eliminated the NL Central champion Cubs in the first round before getting swept by the Atlanta Braves in the Division Series.

Being physical paying off for Titans' receiver Brown

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — A.J. Brown makes it clear. He sees himself as a very physical wide receiver for the Tennessee Titans.

"I don't worry about getting hit," Brown said. "I try to do the hitting."

Midway through his second NFL season, it's fair to say Brown is making a mark. After leading all rookies with 1,051 yards receiving, he's joined Hall of Fame receiver Randy Moss as the only receivers since 1970 to pile up at least 75 catches with 12 TDs while averaging at least 18 yards per reception.

Moss had 82 catches for 1,556 yards with a 19-yard receiving average and 20 TDs in his first 20 games, while Brown had 75 catches, 1,383 yards and 12 TDs averaging 18.4 yards per catch.

"My confidence is still growing," Brown said. "I like to tell myself I haven't done anything yet, never too high, never too low. I'm still working every day, always trying to improve something to my game. I am nowhere I want to be, but I feel like I am getting there."

A second-round pick out of Mississippi in 2019, the Starkville native currently has a TD catch in five straight games. That's the second-longest streak in the NFL right now after he had four catches last week for 101 yards and a touchdown.

Brown showed off his hands in a win over Chicago by grabbing a high pass and running for 38 yards, even stopping to let a pair of defenders go past him to pick up a few more yards at the end. He later fought off a defender for a perfectly thrown ball, ran and dove for the goal line, stretching out to get the ball over the goal line for a 40-yard TD.

"I know A.J. has high expectations for himself, and so do we," Titans coach Mike Vrabel said. "He's got good play strength, really good hands."

Brown finished third in the voting last year for the AP Of-

fensive Rookie of the Year. Despite missing two games with an injured knee, he's leading the Titans with 31 catches for 347 yards and six TDs.

Only Odell Beckham Jr. (eight) and Victor Cruz (six) have had more 100-yard receiving games with at least one TD catch within their first 20 games since 1970. Brown is tied with T.Y. Hilton of the Colts, Martavis Bryant, Julio Jones, Anquan Boldin, Marcus Robinson and Moss with five each in that span.

Titans offensive coordinator Arthur Smith said Tuesday that Brown has a great mindset and works at improving.

"We're constantly trying to expand his role," Smith said. "And as his route tree grows, I don't like to put a cap on something ... We're just trying to focus every week just to get better offensively, and he does a great job individually working on his craft."

If Brown catches a TD pass Thursday night against Indianapolis (5-3), he would be the franchise's first player with such a streak since Bill Groman set the record with an eight-game streak in 1961 when this team was in the AFL as the Houston Oilers.

With two more TD catches, Brown would be the fourth player in team history with at least eight TD catches in back-to-back seasons joining Groman (1960-61), Charlie Hennigan (1961-64) and Drew Hill (1988-89).

Ryan Tannehill says he sees Brown growing into a more complete receiver.

"He's taken that on his shoulders and done well with it," Tannehill said. "We're happy with the growth that he's shown and just want to continue pushing him to make more and more plays for us because obviously he's very talented and made big plays already."

Notes: OLB Jadeveon Clowney practiced fully Tuesday after sitting out the Bears' game with an injured knee. LG Rodger Saffold (shoulder) also practiced fully after leaving that game in the first half.