

Army accused of denying housing benefits

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army is accused in a new federal court filing of defying an order by its highest review board to repay several soldiers who were wrongfully denied half a million dollars in housing allowance benefits.

The filing also alleges that the service's compensation chief misled a U.S. senator in an attempt to sidestep federal law.

"First and foremost, the harm is ongoing ... and the Army is refusing to comply with the order of their own Secretary," according to court papers filed Monday by Patriots Law Group on behalf of seven Army reservists.

The Department of the Army did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the filing.

The filing came in response to an Army request for dismissal of a lawsuit. The Army argued that the case is no longer needed because the dispute had been resolved by the Army's Board of Corrections in August.

But to date, no repayments have been made, and other corrective measures haven't been taken despite the board's Oct. 26 deadline, said attorney Patrick Hughes of the Patriots Law Group.

"The Army has not demonstrated any intent to fix this," Hughes said.

The review board ruled that the service had violated federal law in denying dual housing allowances to reservists sent to Europe on lengthy tours with no place to live on base. For the Army, the amount owed the soldiers is estimated at \$500,000.

The latest court filing lays much of the blame over the mistaken interpretation of housing allowance regulations and the continued lack of compliance with the board's order on Larry Lock, the Army's chief of compensation and entitlements.

In light of the board's ruling, an Army reservist who was not part of the original lawsuit, Nicholas Capozzi, sought assistance from Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski to determine whether he was entitled to dual housing allowances during his overseas tour in Germany.

On Oct. 4, Lock responded in a letter that because "Capozzi is a member without a dependent, the board's decision does not impact the entitlements he received while on active duty."

But Lock's assertion contradicted the Army board's actual ruling, which stated that Maj. Louis Morelli, a reservist soldier without dependents, was entitled to the dual allowance.

"Mr. Lock's response to Senator Murkowski concerning Mr. Capozzi makes clear

that if Maj. Morelli were to be mobilized again to Europe, as a member without dependents, he would be denied dual entitlements," Hughes wrote in the court filing.

The board issued seven decisions, one for each reservist in the Patriots Law Group case, and it came to the same conclusion every time: The Army erred by denying dual housing allowances and seeking recoupment of past payments.

The service was also ordered, among other things, to delete all negative findings such as letters of reprimand or files stored in Army criminal databases from the soldiers' records.

The battle over housing allowances has ramifications for potentially hundreds of other soldiers who were likely affected by the Army's erroneous interpretation of regulations, said Hughes.

He is representing another group of reservists in a separate potential class-action case that could have millions of dollars more at stake.

It is unclear why the Army has not yet followed the order of the Board of Corrections, which acts on behalf of the secretary of the Army and is the highest level of administrative review in the service. The board's mission is to correct errors and remove injustices from military records.

Report shows China's rise in nukes, military power

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department's new report on China's military power details the nation's continued rapid advancement, highlighted by growth in its nuclear program, hypersonic missiles, increased international influence and expansion into other countries.

"[China's] strategy aims to achieve 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2049 to match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region and revise the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing's authoritarian system and national interests," according to the annual report.

The China Military Power report is designed to update Congress on the country's latest military developments and focuses on 2020 activities. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has called China the "pacing threat" for the U.S. military with its increasingly aggressive actions in the Indo-Pacific region, rapid military development and expanding international ambitions.

China continued its more than 20-year streak of defense spending increases in 2021, upping its military budget by about 6.8%. Its defense budget is second only to the United States, but its "published military budget omits several major categories of expenditures and its actual military-related spending is higher than what it states in its official budget," according to the report, which was re-

leased Wednesday.

The Chinese army has approximately 975,000 active-duty troops in combat units, the largest naval fleet in the world with about 355 Navy ships and the third-largest aviation force with more than 2,800 aircraft, according to the report.

The report characterizes China's intentions "as a determined pursuit of far-ranging efforts to expand [its] national power" at the expense of the U.S., which Beijing views as "increasingly determined to contain" China.

China is on track to have at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, indicating its nuclear programs are accelerating much faster than the U.S. predicted in its 2020 report, a defense official told reporters Tuesday at the Pentagon.

DODEA facing potential staffing shortfalls

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Nearly 25% of Defense Department school system employees have yet to be inoculated against COVID-19 or provide proof of full vaccination, leaving schools facing potential staffing shortfalls as the vaccination deadline for all DOD civilians approaches this month.

Among just over 14,000 employees, about 10,800 are fully vaccinated and about 400 partially vaccinated, said Will Griffin, a spokesman for the Department of Defense Education Activity. The DODEA staff includes about 8,000 teachers.

"We are planning for a range of contingencies to minimize any potential impacts on school operations and maintain continuity of instruction for our military-connected stu-

dents" because of the vaccine mandate, Griffin said.

Griffin did not elaborate on the contingency plans DODEA is considering. But the impact on individual schools is likely to be disproportionate if employees are fired, as the Pentagon has threatened to do, for refusing a shot or failing to complete a waiver.

With just over 77% of employees worldwide vaccinated, DODEA lags behind the military services, which reported last week that between 1% and 7% of the active-duty force remains unvaccinated.

DOD wants all civilian employees to be vaccinated and then allow two weeks for them to build up antibodies against the virus.

The deadline is Nov. 22, meaning workers must get the

second shot in a two-dose series or a single jab of a one-dose inoculation by Monday to fulfill the directive.

The Federal Education Association, the largest union representing DODEA teachers, is recommending that its members get vaccinated to meet the deadline, union spokesman Gary Hritz said Wednesday.

But Hritz said DODEA hasn't been very forthcoming about how to seek a legitimate waiver. Employees have been asking for two months how to apply, and they are stressed and frustrated by the lack of communication, he said.

Exemptions may be granted for health or religious reasons, according to DOD guidance.

Griffin said that DODEA sent out the exemption forms to all employees Tuesday. The

agency had been waiting for the Defense Department to finalize the forms and provide further guidance on the exemption process, he added. Monday is the deadline to file a request.

DODEA did not provide the number of unvaccinated teachers or vaccination rates among locations, citing Defense Department guidance against the release of such data.

DODEA operates 160 schools separated into three regions: the United States, Europe and the Pacific.

The agency has seen an earlier trend toward higher vaccination numbers overseas, Griffin said. One factor could be host nation vaccination requirements or policies that affect employees' off-installation and leisure travel, he said.

Army's V Corps declared 'fully operationally capable'

Stars and Stripes

The Army's new V Corps, responsible for overseeing units operating up and down NATO's eastern flank in Europe, was declared "fully operationally capable" Wednesday during a ceremony at its main headquarters at Fort Knox, Ky.

The unit, which also has a forward-based headquarters in Poznan, Poland, was re-established last year in an effort to

add more command-and-control capabilities to the Army's expanding mission in Europe.

Among the headquarters' tasks will be managing the day-to-day operations of soldiers involved in Atlantic Resolve, a mission focused on deterring potential Russian aggression in places like the Baltics and Poland.

V Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. John

Kolasheski, consists of 200 soldiers in Poland and 400 based in Kentucky.

Thursday's ceremony was officiated by U.S. Forces Command's Gen. Michael X. Garrett.

V Corps' history in Europe dates to World War I. It was a fixture in Germany throughout the Cold War, but was deactivated in 2013 as part of the Army's gradual drawdown in Europe.

US vaccination effort reaches elementary-age children

Associated Press

The United States entered a new phase Wednesday in its COVID-19 vaccination campaign, with shots now available to millions of elementary-age children in what health officials hailed as a major breakthrough after more than 18 months of illness, hospitalizations, deaths and disrupted education.

With the federal government promising enough vaccine doses to protect the nation's 28 million kids ages 5-11, pediatricians' offic-

es, pharmacies, hospitals, schools and health clinics were poised to begin the shots after the final OK late Tuesday.

"This is not going to be 'The Hunger Games,'" said Dr. Allison Arwady, Chicago's public health commissioner, referring to the chaotic early national rollout of adult vaccines nearly a year ago. Chicago expected to have nearly enough vaccine in just the first week for nearly half of its 210,000 school-aged children, and many more doses later on.

"Our goal is to be ready, have a calm rol-

lout," Arwady said.

Kid-sized doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine cleared two final hurdles Tuesday—a recommendation from CDC advisers followed by a green light from Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The actions mean sleepovers, playdates and family get-togethers put off for more than a year will be back on the agenda for many kids, along with a chance for fewer school interruptions.

Tougher sentences sought for Jan. 6 vets

Associated Press

During his 27 years in the U.S. Army, Leonard Gruppó joined the Special Forces, served in four war zones and led a team of combat medics in Iraq before retiring in 2013 as a lieutenant colonel.

During his six minutes inside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, Gruppó, 56, of New Mexico, joined a slew of other military veterans as a mob of pro-Donald Trump rioters carried out an unparalleled assault on the bastion of American democracy. He's among dozens of veterans and active-duty service members charged in connection with the insurrection.

Now, cases like his are presenting a thorny question for federal judges to consider when they sentence veterans who stormed the Capitol: Do they deserve leniency because they served their country or tougher punishment because they swore an oath to de-

fend it?

The Justice Department has adopted the latter position. In at least five cases so far, prosecutors have cited a rioter's military service as a factor weighing in favor of a jail sentence or house arrest. Prosecutors have repeatedly maintained that veterans' service, while commendable, made their actions on Jan. 6 more egregious. The participation of veterans in the riot was particularly shocking because some of them apparently used training they received in the U.S. military against their own government to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power.

Prosecutors' arguments about rioters' military service didn't sway one of the first judges to hear them — at Gruppó's sentencing hearing last Friday.

"I don't view his military service that way. I just can't bring myself to do that," Chief U.S. Dis-

trict Judge Beryl Howell said before sentencing Gruppó to two years of probation, including 90 days of house arrest.

A prosecutor argued that Gruppó's military service supported the Justice Department's recommendation for a 30-day jail sentence. Assistant U.S. Attorney Hava Mirell said Gruppó was trained to recognize the obvious danger at the Capitol and "to assist rather than to harm."

"But the fact that he did receive that training and the fact that he intentionally overlooked his oath to commit one of the most destructive acts against our Constitution and our democracy, that does affect the government's view of his conduct," she said.

Defense attorney Daniel Lindsey argued his client's service to the country shouldn't be used against him. He said Gruppó initially wanted to keep quiet about

his military service because he felt he had dishonored it.

"And he did," Howell interjected. "Let's not mince words."

But the judge said she was surprised by the Justice Department's position because she believes most Americans would have "enormous respect" for Gruppó's service.

"And it's not just because I grew up on military bases around the world," Howell added.

In most criminal cases, judges typically view a defendant's military service as a mitigating factor that favors leniency, said James Markham, a professor of public law and government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an Air Force veteran. But he recognizes how the Justice Department could conclude that rioters with military experience should be held to a higher standard than those without it.

Uniform pageant marks USMC's 246th birthday

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — Marines in uniforms of every era — from the high collars that gave the leathernecks their nickname to the digital print of modern combat utilities — marked the Corps' approaching birthday with a standing-room-only marching pageant on Tuesday.

At the hourlong event attended by more than 200 spectators, the evolution of Marine uniforms over the years passed in review, accompanied by a narrator who described key moments of Corps history, from the battles of Derna during the First Barbary War to Iwo Jima in World War II and Fallujah in the Iraq War.

"Today we were commemorating the 246th birthday of our illustrious Corps, and we do this to not forget about our history," Sgt. Maj. Jorge Cedeno-Tulloch

of Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, who coordinated the program, told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday. "The history with the Marine Corps is something we always pride ourselves on, so it's something we make sure, especially with the younger Marines, to understand where we came from and where we are right now."

The Marine Corps celebrates its birthday on Nov. 10, the day in 1775 when the Second Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, authorized the raising of two Marine battalions.

A full display of Marine uniforms in this type of ceremony doesn't happen at all Marine Corps bases, said Cedeno-Tulloch, a native of Panama.

"Sometimes you have Marines that have been in for a good 20-some years and have never seen a uniform pageant before," he said.

In Va., GOP finds playbook that might be hard to reuse

Associated Press

In a stunning victory in Virginia, the Republican Party has fashioned a playbook that could repair the GOP's tarnished image in swing states and suburban districts across the nation.

ANALYSIS But it is a formula

that may be difficult to replicate on a broad scale in next year's midterm elections.

Republican businessman Glenn Youngkin, virtually unknown a year ago, won the Virginia governor's race early Wednesday by running away from the national Republican Party and its most prominent leaders — especially Donald Trump. The Virginia Republican spent the closing months of his campaign avoiding the divisive issues that most animate Trump's base, including the baseless prospect of election

fraud. And Youngkin benefited from running against former Gov. Terry McAuliffe, a political insider with a muddled message.

With a clear enthusiasm advantage on the right, Democrats should worry that the Republican victory in Virginia could signal an anti-Democrat wave in 2022. President Joe Biden's sagging numbers and Democratic dysfunction on Capitol Hill have added to the traditional prevailing winds that plague the party in the White House.

But to take advantage of such a climate in Tuesday's elections, Republicans in Virginia followed a strategy that relied on placating Trump's base while avoiding Trump and his brand of politics. And Trump cooperated by keeping a low profile, participating only in call-in appearances and sending emails late in the race to his supporters.

Biden considers new rationale for nukes

The Washington Post

The White House is planning meetings this month to discuss whether to declare the “sole purpose” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter or retaliate against a nuclear attack — a change in policy supported by President Joe Biden and arms control advocates but opposed by key U.S. allies and GOP lawmakers.

The meetings at the National Security Council are part of the administration’s broader effort to hammer out a new nuclear weapons policy by early next year. Any decision would be announced then, according to officials familiar with the discussions who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal deliberations.

The process is freighted with

multiple issues, including whether to roll back a vast, multi-decade modernization of U.S. nuclear systems, scrap new nuclear capabilities that the Trump administration approved and change the policy on when the United States would use a nuclear weapon.

Biden has publicly supported modifying the rationale for the U.S. arsenal.

In a January 2017 speech, delivered days before he left office as vice president, Biden said it would be “hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. would be necessary. Or make sense.”

The Obama administration at its outset had rolled out a nuclear weapons policy that stopped short of naming deterrence as

the “sole purpose” of U.S. nuclear weapons, conceding that the arsenal could play a role in deterring a conventional or chemical weapons attack in a “narrow range of contingencies.”

While it wasn’t prepared to make a “sole purpose” declaration at the time, the Obama administration pledged to “work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.”

By 2017, Biden said he felt confident that sufficient progress had been made to adopt the policy and declare “that deterring — and if necessary, retaliating against — a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.”

Still, the Obama administration considered and ultimately declined to make such a decla-

ration in its waning days.

On his campaign website in 2020, Biden reiterated his belief in a “sole purpose” declaration and said as president he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with our allies and military.”

Liberal lawmakers have been pushing for the U.S. to go even further and declare a “no first use” policy, under which the U.S. would pledge not to use a nuclear weapon unless attacked with one first.

But people tracking the issue believe such a “no first use” pledge is unlikely, primarily because it would upset U.S. allies and rankle the military by constraining planning and strike options. Biden also hasn’t voiced support for a “no first use” pledge.

Facebook announces end of face-recognition system

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Facebook said it will shut down its face-recognition system and delete the faceprints of more than 1 billion people amid growing concerns about the technology and its misuse by governments, police and others.

“This change will represent one of the largest shifts in facial recognition usage in the technology’s history,” Jerome Pesenti, vice president of artificial intelligence for Facebook’s new parent company, Meta, wrote in a blog post on Tuesday.

He said the company was trying to weigh the positive use cases for the technology “against growing societal concerns, especially as regulators have yet to provide clear rules.” The company in the coming weeks will delete “more than a billion people’s individual facial recognition templates,” he said.

Facebook’s about-face fol-

lows a busy few weeks. On Thursday it announced its new name Meta for Facebook the company, but not the social network. The change, it said, will help it focus on building technology for what it envisions as the next iteration of the internet — the “metaverse.”

The company is also facing perhaps its biggest public relations crisis to date after leaked documents from whistleblower Frances Haugen showed that it has known about the harms its products cause and often did little or nothing to mitigate them.

More than a third of Facebook’s daily active users have opted in to have their faces recognized by the social network’s system. That’s about 640 million people. Facebook introduced facial recognition more than a decade ago, but gradually made it easier to opt out of the feature as it faced scrutiny from courts and regulators.

Biden confronts China on trip

Associated Press

GLASGOW, Scotland — Over five days abroad at two global summits, President Joe Biden showed a new willingness to openly confront China over climate change and its lack of leadership on the global stage.

Biden ended his time at the U.N. climate summit in Scotland on Tuesday by chastising Chinese President Xi Jinping for physically skipping the event and failing to make the level of commitments that roughly 100 other nations did to curb greenhouse gases. Xi also avoided the earlier Group of 20 summit in Rome, allowing Biden to dominate the conversation as he met with his French, Italian, British and German counterparts.

“We showed up, and by showing up we’ve had a profound impact on the way I think the rest of the world is looking at the United States in its leadership role,” Biden said at a Tuesday news conference wrapping up his trip abroad. Biden added that China had made a “big mistake” in by-

passing the events because “they’ve lost an ability to influence people around the world.”

The president stressed that he wants to compete against China, rather than have conflict. But he also showed a new strategy of using climate as a cudgel against Beijing.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters during the trip that China has an obligation to “step up” on climate and the U.S. will keep pressing Beijing. One tool might be economic penalties: Biden brokered a deal with the European Union to block “dirty steel” made possible by Chinese coal plants.

The president outlined his thinking by quoting his father at Tuesday’s news conference.

“My dad had an expression. He said the only conflict worse than one that’s intended is the one that’s unintended,” the president said, adding that he wants to make sure in an upcoming virtual meeting with Xi that there are no misunderstandings.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Drugs held as evidence stolen; cases dismissed

NE LINCOLN — At least 66 criminal cases have been dismissed a month after authorities announced that more than \$1.2 million worth of drugs had been stolen from a Nebraska State Patrol evidence room, and more dismissals are likely.

Deputy Lancaster County Attorney Bruce Prenda said his office has closed 66 cases, and it is still reviewing 43 more. Similar reviews are happening in 13 other counties served by the State Patrol evidence locker where the thefts were discovered.

A former State Patrol evidence technician, Anna Idigima, and her boyfriend, George Weaver Jr., have been indicted on federal charges of conspiracy to distribute the drugs. Both of them have pleaded not guilty.

Authorities said more than 150 pounds of marijuana, 10 pounds of fentanyl and 3 pounds of meth disappeared from the State Patrol evidence facility in Lincoln over the summer.

Man jailed for cheating chicken products supply

MA BOSTON — A Massachusetts man who pleaded guilty to defrauding Texas chicken products companies out of \$630,000 through a fake invoice scheme was sentenced to more than four years in federal prison, prosecutors said.

Yannick Minang, 27, of Hingham, was sentenced last week, The Patriot Ledger reported.

Minang fooled two Texas companies by submitting false invoices purportedly from

chicken parts suppliers in Brazil, prosecutors said. He took some money as cash and transferred much of it overseas, authorities said.

Minang used a type of fraud referred to as business email compromise, in which the fraud is carried out by spoofing legitimate business email accounts, according to court documents.

In addition to prison time, Minang was ordered to pay more than \$522,000 in restitution.

Volunteers rescue baby seal from busy street

CA SAN RAFAEL — A northern fur seal pup was recovering at a marine life rehabilitation center where he was being fed fish smoothies after a harrowing weekend in San Rafael where he was almost hit by a car.

The baby seal was spotted by police officers near the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge moments after he flapped across the roadway narrowly avoiding being hit by several cars, the San Rafael Police Department said on Facebook.

The seal pup, nicknamed "Ivy," was rescued by volunteers with the Marine Mammal Center and taken to their facility in Sausalito. It was not known how the pup made its way onto San Rafael streets.

Northern fur seals are typically found 600 miles off the coast and are a threatened species, police said.

Bad behavior prompts liquor store changes

ID BOISE — Instances of hoarding, illegal reselling and bad behavior by customers have caused the state

agency that sells alcohol to change how it rolls out rare spirits at stores, officials said.

The Idaho State Liquor Division last month announced new rules involving rare but highly sought after bourbons, whiskeys and other small-batch liquor offerings.

That combination has resulted in what the agency calls unsavory behavior by some customers that includes harassment of store workers.

The new rules mean the agency will now sporadically allocate rare products across its 67 retail outlets to create what it calls a "treasure hunt" approach. The agency has also stopped listing rare-product inventory on its website, and will only sell alcohol visible on store shelves.

Gummed-up historic fountain getting repairs

IN SOUTH BEND — A northern Indiana fountain that was restored a few years ago for more than \$600,000 needs a plumber.

South Bend and a fundraising committee recently reached a deal to pay for a water softener at the Studebaker Electric fountain, which is located in the city's Leeper Park and is more than 100 years old.

Hard water has gummed up the fountain's intricate fittings. The water softener is expected to be installed next spring. The fountain's sculpted turtles and cherubs riding dolphins are plagued by plugged-up water spouts, the South Bend Tribune reported.

The 28-foot-tall fountain was unveiled in 1906, and was a gift from Studebaker Corp. co-foun-

der John M. Studebaker.

Boy stabbed to death in struggle over toy

PA GILLETT — An 11-year-old boy was stabbed to death during a scuffle with a 9-year-old boy over a toy in northern Pennsylvania, authorities said.

State police in Bradford County said the boys were playing with foam-based toys shortly at a Ridgebury Township residence when a "tug of war" ensued over a foam-based gun.

Police said the younger boy was holding a knife and cut the victim in his left upper chest during the struggle.

The older boy was pronounced dead at Robert Packer Hospital after life-saving efforts.

Police: Tow truck driver wasn't stealing vehicle

VA RICHMOND — Detectives in Richmond now believe that a tow truck driver thought to have stolen a vehicle had towed it lawfully, police said.

Richmond Police released a video of a vehicle being towed and warned that an unmarked tow truck was being used to quickly steal vehicles. But police later said that the truck had been identified and they determined that the vehicle was lawfully towed.

Information from the tow company wasn't immediately forwarded to police, police said in a news release. So when detectives investigated the missing vehicle, police said they didn't know that it had been towed legally.

— From wire reports

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Braves win first World Series since 1995

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Most of the season, it just seemed this wasn't their year.

They dropped their first four games, and soon injuries piled up. They lost their most dynamic player before the All-Star break. They were stuck below .500 in August.

Yet out of nowhere, suddenly, these Atlanta Braves transformed themselves and took off.

Jorge Soler, Freddie Freeman and the Braves breezed to their first World Series championship since 1995, hammering the Houston Astros 7-0 on Tuesday night in Game 6. Max Fried threw six dominant innings in a signature pitching performance to close it out.

"We hit every pothole, every bump you could possibly hit this year," Freeman said. "Injuries, every single kind of thing that could happen, that could go wrong went wrong, and we overcame every single one of those things."

How proud Hank Aaron

would've been.

Even so, Atlanta's troubles never fully went away.

General manager Alex Anthopoulos, the architect of the Braves' midseason turnaround, missed this crowning achievement after testing positive for COVID-19. He was back home for the clincher.

Soler, a July acquisition who tested positive for the coronavirus in the playoffs, backed Fried early with a monster three-run shot for his third homer against the Astros.

Freeman hit an RBI double and then punctuated the romp with a solo home run in the seventh that made it 7-0.

By then, it was a total team effort. Ailing star Ronald Acuña Jr., the dynamo of Atlanta's future, bounded from the dugout to join the celebration for Freeman, the longtime face of the franchise.

When Yuli Gurriel grounded out to end it, Freeman caught the throw at first base, put the ball in his pocket, and the party

was on for manager Brian Snitker's club.

A full hour after the game, hundreds of Braves fans packed behind the team's third-base dugout kept doing the chop and chant, causing loud echoes to bounce around the ballpark.

About 700 miles away at suburban Truist Park, thousands of fans poured into the Braves' home to holler.

A mere afterthought in the summer heat among the land of the Giants, White Sox and Dodgers, but magnificent in the Fall Classic.

"This is the toughest team I've ever been a part of," said shortstop Dansby Swanson, who also homered.

Soler tapped his heart twice before beginning his home run trot after connecting off rookie Luis Garcia in the third inning, sending the ball flying completely out of Minute Maid Park and clinching the Series MVP award.

By the end, nothing could stop them. Not a broken leg sus-

tained by starter Charlie Morton in the World Series opener. Not a big blown lead in Game 5.

Steadied by the 66-year-old Snitker, an organization man for four decades, the underdog Braves won the franchise's fourth title.

"They never gave up on themselves," he said on a postgame victory platform. "We lost a lot of pieces over the course of the summer and it was just the next man up."

Consider it a tribute to the greatest Braves player of them all. Aaron died Jan. 22 at 86, still pulling for his old team, and The Hammer's legacy was stamped all over this Series.

"Nobody ever wanted to let Hank down," Snitker said. "That's just the way it was, we didn't want to let him down. He charged us with a responsibility to make these guys better and we weren't going to let him down."

And note the Braves out-homered the top-scoring team in the majors by 11-2.

Soler transforms from summer castoff into Series MVP

Associated Press

HOUSTON—A spare piece no more, Jorge Soler drove a pitch over the train tracks, out of Minute Maid Park and deep into the heart of Texas. He dropped his bat, tapped his chest twice and jabbed a hand toward the Atlanta Braves dugout, yelling "I'm here!"

Three months earlier, he was a .192 hitter on a fourth-place team.

Two weeks ago, he was sidelined by COVID-19.

Now, he was a World Series star, finishing off the Houston Astros for the Braves' first World Series title since 1995.

A bit player during the Chicago Cubs' drought-smashing victory over Cleveland five years ago, Soler was voted MVP of Atlanta's six-game Series win over the Astros.

"We've known what he can do for so long," Freddie Freeman said in the interview room as Soler waited to walk up to the podium. "Two years ago, he's hitting 50 homers. It's actually pretty incredible what he did in the World Series, getting COVID in the NLCS and missing 10 days and then coming back and not missing a beat."

Soler hit .300 with three home runs and six RBIs. Numbers tell only part of the story.

Soler's three Series home runs matched the most for the Braves, equalling Hank Aaron in 1957, Lonnie Smith in 1991 and Ryan Klesko in 1995.

Soler had a Cuban flag draped around him during the celebration, the second World Series MVP from the island nation after the Marlins' Liván Hernández in

1997.

After defecting from Cuba in 2011, Soler agreed to a \$30 million, nine-year contract with the Cubs. He was just 2-for-5 with a walk in the 2016 Series and was dealt to Kansas City that September for reliever Wade Davis.

Soler led American League batters with 48 home runs in 2019 — and also with 178 strikeouts. With Atlanta seeking replacements for its depleted outfield, the out-of-contention Royals dealt the 29-year-old on July 30 for minor league right-hander Kaley Kalich.

"It was challenging at first. I felt a little out of my comfort zone. I didn't really know people," Soler said. "It was kind of tough to go to a new place and start making those acquaintances and everything. Within a week, I felt right at

home. Everyone in that clubhouse welcomed me in, and it felt instantly, after a little while, just like a family."

Soler revived with the Braves, hitting .269 with 14 homers and 33 RBIs. He didn't drive in any runs in the NL playoffs, missing five games because of a positive COVID-19 test.

He was among the fabulous four players acquired by general manager Alex Anthopoulos ahead of the July 30 trade deadline. Eddie Rosario, Joc Pederson and Adam Duvall also played key roles.

"You can go and get players, and you can throw him in a clubhouse, and sometimes that piece just don't fit into that puzzle," Freeman said. "They came into our clubhouse, and they fit perfectly."

Balanced Heat hold off late Mavs rally

Associated Press

DALLAS — Four Miami Heat players had 22 or more points for the first time in franchise history to hold off a late Dallas rally and beat the Mavericks 125-110 on Tuesday night for their fifth straight win.

Tyler Herro scored 25 points off the bench, 15 alone in the second quarter when the Heat outscored the Mavericks 46-32 to take a 70-62 halftime lead. Jimmy Butler added 23 points, Kyle Lowry had 22 and Bam Adebayo scored 22 and grabbed 13 rebounds.

Miami's top scorers did so from all over the court. Butler sank 15 of 17 free throws while Lowry hit six of nine three-pointers. The Heat shot 52% behind the arc.

"You want to be able to maximize your offense in all the different ways in your menu without feeling like you're taking turns," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

Luka Doncic scored a sea-

son-high 33 points for the Mavericks, who lost for the first time in four home games.

Miami is 6-1 for the first time since the 2012-13 season, when it won the second of its three NBA championships.

"The Heat, I would consider them the best team in the league right now," Dallas coach Jason Kidd said.

Bucks 117, Pistons 89: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 28 points, nine assists and eight rebounds in visiting Milwaukee's rout of Detroit.

The Bucks, who ended a three-game losing streak, also got 16 points from Pat Connaughton and reserve Jordan Nwora.

Jerami Grant led the Pistons (1-6) with 21 points.

Cade Cunningham, the No. 1 pick in this summer's draft, went 2-for-14 in his second NBA game, including 0-for-9 from behind the three-point line. He is shooting 13.6% (3-for-22) thus far and has missed all 14 three-point attempts.

Lakers 119, Rockets 117: LeBron James scored 14 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter, Russell Westbrook added 27 points and host Los Angeles swept back-to-back games against Houston.

Anthony Davis had 27 points and nine rebounds for the Lakers, who have won three straight and five of six after an 0-2 start to their reboot season. Carmelo Anthony also provided yet another impressive performance off the bench, hitting three three-pointers while scoring 15 points.

Rookie Jalen Green scored 24 points for Houston, but the second overall pick was scoreless in the fourth until he hit back-to-back three-pointers in the final minute.

Jazz 119, Kings 113: Donovan Mitchell scored a season-high 36 points and Mike Conley added a season-best 30 points, lifting host Utah over Sacramento.

Conley scored 13, including three threes, in the fourth quar-

ter, and Rudy Gobert made six clutch free throws down the stretch to move Utah to 7-1 on the season. Gobert had 12 points, 20 rebounds and four blocked shots.

The Kings kept hanging around and cut the lead to 115-113 on Harrison Barnes's three-pointer with 23 seconds remaining.

Gobert forced Barnes into a tough shot on a drive and then blocked Davion Mitchell's shot on the next possession to seal the win.

Barnes led seven Kings in double figures with 23 points.

Suns 112, Pelicans 100: Mikal Bridges scored 22 points, Chris Paul added 14 points and 18 assists and host Phoenix rallied to beat New Orleans.

Paul is now third in NBA history with 10,346 career assists, passing both Mark Jackson and Steve Nash. The 36-year-old shook off a slow start with a vintage performance in the second half, when he scored all of his points and dished 10 assists.

SEC powers atop first College Football Playoff rankings

Associated Press

Georgia, Alabama, Michigan State and Oregon will start the College Football Playoff race in prime position at the top of the selection committee's rankings.

Unbeaten Cincinnati is going to need some help to make history as the first team from outside the Power Five conferences to reach college football's final four.

At sixth, the unbeaten Bearcats of the American Athletic Conference have the best ranking ever in the selection committee's Top 25 for a non-Power Five team, but still sit behind three teams (second-ranked Alabama, fourth-ranked Oregon and fifth-ranked Ohio State) that have already been beaten.

Committee chairman Gary Barta, who is also Iowa's athletic director, said the committee was

impressed with Cincinnati's victory at 10th-ranked Notre Dame (7-1), but not so much by the rest of the Bearcats' schedule.

He cited closer-than-expected wins against Navy (2-6) and Tulane (1-7) over the past two weeks.

"Cincinnati has tremendous respect from the committee," Barta said in a conference call with reporters. "But after that win (against Notre Dame), look at who else they have beaten. Look at who else they have played."

Cincinnati is ranked No. 2 in the AP Top 25.

American Athletic Conference Commissioner Mike Aresco told AP the committee continues to undervalue the members of his league.

"I guess you could say same

old, same old," he said. "I just want our teams to have a fair chance."

Michigan (7-1), Oklahoma (9-0), Wake Forest (8-0) and Notre Dame rounded out the top 10.

Only once in the seven-year history of the CFP have the four teams in the committee's initial ranking made the final four. That was last season.

This season, Georgia (8-0) was an obvious No. 1. Barta said Alabama (7-1) was a comfortable No. 2 for the 13-member panel, despite the Crimson Tide's close loss at Texas A&M in early October.

"It was a strong consensus," Barta said.

He said Nos. 3-9 were hard to discern.

Oregon got the nod over Ohio

State in the four spot by virtue of beating the Buckeyes on the road in the second week of the season.

Cincinnati set the previous high ranking from a team from the so-called Group of Five conferences last season at No. 7, but the Bearcats never moved up. In fact, they were passed while completing an unbeaten regular season and were eighth in the final rankings that set the playoff field.

Aresco pointed out that this season Cincinnati has a more convincing victory against Indiana than third-ranked Michigan State and that Oregon, in addition to losing to Stanford (3-5), needed a late goal-line stand to beat California (3-5) and the Ducks' margin of victory against winless Arizona (22) was similar to Cincinnati's against Tulane (19).

Reports: QB Rodgers tests positive for virus

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers has tested positive for COVID-19 and will miss Sunday's game at Kansas City, according to published reports.

NFL Network was first to report the positive test, which neither the team nor Rodgers' agent immediately confirmed.

Rodgers, the reigning NFL MVP, is the latest Packers player to test positive. Wide receivers Davante Adams, a 2020 All-Pro, and Allen Lazard missed last week's victory at Arizona due to COVID-19 protocols. Lazard has since been activated.

Green Bay's backup quarterback is 2020 first-round draft pick Jordan Love, who has thrown seven passes in his short career. Their third-stringer, Kurt Benkert, is on the practice squad but was placed on the COVID-19 reserve list on Tuesday.

Raiders release Ruggs after fatal crash

LAS VEGAS — The Las Vegas Raiders released Henry Ruggs III just hours before the promising young receiver faced an initial court appearance on multiple felony charges after a fiery predawn vehicle crash that left a woman dead and Ruggs and his female passenger injured.

The 22-year-old Ruggs and his passenger were hospitalized with unspecified injuries that police said did not appear life-threatening after the Chevrolet Corvette he was driving slammed at high speed into the rear of a Toyota Rav4 west of the Las Vegas Strip about 3:40 a.m. Tuesday.

Giants retesting after positive test

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — New York Giants running

backs coach Burton Burns has tested positive for COVID-19 and the organization is requiring all players, coaches, team personnel and management to retest for the virus on Wednesday.

Coach Joe Judge said 13 members of the organization tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday. Burns was the only one in that group who tested positive when retested.

Burns, who turned 69 last week, and his wife are staying in their condo, Judge said. He would not say whether the coach was experiencing any symptoms.

Surgery sidelines Saints WR Thomas

METairie, La. — New Orleans Saints receiver Michael Thomas said he won't be able to play this season because of complications related to his offseason ankle surgery.

Saints coach Sean Payton said Thomas will need an additional procedure, but he also said the setback had nothing to do with the receiver's approach to his recovery and credited his work ethic during his rehabilitation.

"He's having complications with the current surgery that was done," Payton said. "I know he's working his tail off to get back out there." Thomas posted comments about his setback on social media Wednesday as well.

OBJ excused from Browns practice

BEREA, Ohio — Browns star wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. was excused from practice Wednesday, a day after his father caused a stir by sharing a video of quarterback Baker Mayfield not throwing passes to Beckham Jr.

Hart stops 29 shots, Flyers shut out winless Coyotes

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Sean Couturier broke a scoreless tie early in the third period and Carter Hart made 29 saves to lead the Philadelphia Flyers to a 3-0 victory over the winless Arizona Coyotes on Tuesday night.

Claude Giroux had a goal and an assist and Scott Laughton also scored for the Flyers, who have won three of four.

"This was a hard-fought hockey game," Philadelphia coach Alain Vigneault said. "It came down to being able to finish in the third."

The Coyotes (0-9-1) lost their 10th game to start the season and remain the only winless team in the NHL. Arizona, which dropped a club-record 11 in a row to begin the 2017-18 season, will look for its first victory when it wraps up a six-game trip on Friday at Anaheim. It did pick up a point with a shootout loss to Buffalo on Oct. 16.

The 1943-44 Rangers set the NHL record, going 15 games without a win to start the season.

Karel Vejmelka made 31 saves in a strong performance for the Coyotes.

Canadiens 3, Red Wings 0: Nick Suzuki had a goal and two assists, Jake Allen stopped

22 shots for his second shutout of the season and host Montreal beat Detroit.

Josh Anderson scored his third of the season and Brendan Gallagher added an empty-netter for the Canadiens, who had lost three of their last four games — all on the road. Allen got his 23rd career shutout.

Maple Leafs 4, Golden Knights 0: Auston Matthews scored twice and Jack Campbell made 26 saves, leading host Toronto to its third straight win.

Mitch Marner had a goal and assists on both of Matthews' goals, and William Nylander added a goal and an assist for the Maple Leafs.

Wild 5, Senators 4 (OT): Kirill Kaprizov scored his first goal of the season 2:02 into overtime to lift host Minnesota.

Marcus Foligno scored twice for the Wild, who got points from 11 players and won for the sixth time — all by one goal. Caleb Addison and Nico Sturm also scored. Cam Talbot had 24 saves.

Jets 4, Stars 3 (SO): Mark Scheifele scored the deciding goal in the shootout in his return from COVID-19 protocol to lead host Winnipeg.

Paul Stastny, Josh Morrissey and Pierre-

Luc Dubois scored in regulation for the Jets. Eric Comrie stopped 24 shots. Kyle Connor also scored in the shootout.

Ducks 4, Devils 0: Troy Terry had two goals and an assist to extend his point streak to nine games, John Gibson made 28 saves and host Anaheim beat New Jersey.

Terry's three-point night gives him the NHL's longest active and overall point streak with seven goals and five assists during the nine-game span. It is the longest point streak by a Ducks player since Ryan Getzlaf had an 11-game run during the 2015-16 season.

Canucks 3, Rangers 2 (OT): J.T. Miller scored his second goal of the game 2:22 into overtime and host Vancouver rallied to beat New York.

Trailing 2-0 heading into the third period, the Canucks rallied with a pair of goals, and goaltender Thatcher Demko forced extra time with solid saves in the final minutes.

Sharks 5, Sabres 3: Tomás Hertl had two goals and an assist, and host San Jose beat Buffalo.

The Sharks overcame the loss of seven players and head coach Bob Boughner to NHL COVID-19 protocols for the second straight game.