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Marines relieve leader of unit that lost 9

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps has fired the battalion commander whose unit lost nine service members when an assault amphibious vehicle sank during a July training accident off the Southern California coast.

Lt. Col. Michael J. Regner was relieved Tuesday from command of the Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, “due to a loss in trust and confidence in his ability to command,” said a Marine Corps statement issued late Tuesday.

The training accident was the deadliest involving an assault amphibious vehicle in Marine

Corps history, the service said.

Fifteen Marines and a sailor were aboard the 26-ton vehicle on July 30 when it sank more than a half-mile from San Clemente Island. They had just finished routine waterborne training with the Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group.

The assault amphibious vehicle began taking on water on its way back to the amphibious transport dock Somerset around 5:45 p.m., according to the Marine Corps.

The sailor and eight Marines died; seven Marines were rescued. Two investigations into the incident are underway by I MEF and the Naval Safety Center.

Lt. Gen. Karsten S. Heckl,

commander I Marine Expeditionary Force, based at Camp Pendleton, Calif., relieved Regner of command, according to the statement.

“Although the command investigation has compiled a substantial amount of information and data which formed the basis for Heckl’s decision, it is still ongoing as the Marine Corps continues to investigate, assess all relevant information, and take appropriate actions,” the statement said.

While details about the specific vehicle involved in the accident are not yet known, such vehicles have been in service since the early 1970s, though they have been updated and rehabilitated in the years since.

Replacing the vehicles with expeditionary fighting vehicles was a top priority for the Marines, but a budget crunch in 2011 led to scrapping those plans.

A planned replacement for the assault amphibious vehicle is still in development.

A Marine Expeditionary Unit is composed of about 2,200 Marines and sailors broken into four elements.

Its battalion landing team consists of light armored reconnaissance vehicles, artillery and assault amphibious vehicles, and is part of the 1,200-person ground combat element, according to the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit website.

Taliban attacks spur fears about a hasty US withdrawal

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
AND ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A deadly Taliban offensive in Afghanistan’s Helmand province has drawn a crescendo of accusations that the militant group is openly flouting a deal under which all American troops could leave the country by next spring, and jeopardizing month-old peace talks with the government.

The Taliban spent six months planning the attacks targeting Helmand’s capital and other districts, in which hundreds of militants, troops and civilians have been killed or injured, and thousands have been forced from their homes, provincial governor Mohammad Yasin Khan said in a statement Wednesday.

Peace talks between the Afghan government and the militants, which were called for in an agreement the Taliban signed with the U.S. in February, were delayed for an equal amount of time, during which violence has erupted in the country.

Afghan troops were deployed to quell the attacks in Helmand, which began Sunday, and the U.S. launched days of airstrikes against the militant group, something it

has done sparingly since signing the agreement, which calls for the militants not to attack U.S. and other coalition forces but does not explicitly bar them from attacking Afghan troops and cities. U.S. officials have said, however, that they have a verbal commitment from the Taliban to do neither.

The airstrikes on the militants’ positions over the weekend were in defense of Afghan troops and consistent with the February deal, USFOR-A spokesman Col. Sonny Leggett said Monday on Twitter.

“USFOR-A has & will continue to provide support in defense of the ANDSF under attack by the Taliban,” he tweeted, using the acronym for Afghan security forces.

Khan said more strikes have targeted the Taliban since Monday, but USFOR-A has not confirmed that the coalition was involved in those. The Afghan air force has also been flying sorties against the Taliban, Khan said.

The offensive in Helmand began several days after President Donald Trump said in a tweet on Oct. 7 that all U.S. troops “should” be home from Afghanistan by Christmas.

That tweet, which is said to have blindsided American military leaders, delighted the Taliban, the group said in a statement.

But it raised fears in many Afghans that, “if Trump follows through, abruptly dropping the U.S.-Taliban agreement for a conditions-based and gradual pullout of the about 4,500 remaining U.S. troops by May, the country might plunge again into full-scale war and political mayhem,” The Washington Post wrote.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, insisted in an interview with NPR that further troop reductions would be “conditions-based.”

“The key here is that we’re trying to end a war responsibly, deliberately,” he said in the interview Sunday.

While one of the conditions of the February deal has been met — the belated start of intra-Afghan talks — Milley hedged when asked about others, both in the peace deal and in verbal agreements with the Americans, that would influence the withdrawal of American troops.

“In terms of violence, for example, if you start measuring the violence from, call it four or five months ago, has there been a significant reduction in violence? Answer: not significant,” he said. “If you measure it from two to three years ago or five years ago, there has been a significant reduction in violence.”

Navy reviews no-shave waiver policy

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is reviewing a policy that did away with permanent shaving waivers for sailors diagnosed with razor bumps after receiving feedback through recent diversity and inclusion initiatives, the chief of naval operations said Tuesday in an interview with Defense One.

The Navy, under Adm. Mike Gilday's leadership, halted the waivers, often referred to as "no-shave chits," on Oct. 4, 2019, following a series of reviews by the Naval Safety Center that said beard hair posed a safety risk for face seals on breathing devices such as respirators.

Beards are typically not allowed in the service except for religious and medical exemptions.

Razor bumps, also known as pseudofolliculitis barbae, occur predominantly in African

Americans, according to the Navy. They occur when curly beard hair curves back into the skin after shaving.

"It's something that we're taking a look at with the inclusion and diversity task force," Gilday said when asked if beards were "coming back in the Navy." The interview with Defense One was posted to YouTube.

"We made a decision pretty early in my tenure as CNO to do away essentially with no-shave chits," he said. "Some would argue that I moved too fast with that decision and that some were disadvantaged by it."

Gilday said his thinking at the time was protecting sailors during fires. He said, however, that he is open to revisiting the decision after receiving the feedback.

Of the more than 337,000 sailors in the Navy, about 6,000 each year are treated for razor

bumps, Cmdr. Thomas Barlow, a dermatologist at Naval Medical Center San Diego, told Stars and Stripes last year. The Navy tracks people treated for the condition but not how many permanent waivers are issued.

The Navy maintains the condition is treatable. Treatment options have included face creams and allowing sailors with no-shave chits to grow beard hair up to one-quarter inch in length.

Following Gilday's decision, sailors with permanent waivers were given six months to undergo a medical re-evaluation and to establish a new treatment plan, the Navy told Stars and Stripes last year. Temporary waivers are still authorized for up to 60 days to help manage the skin condition.

If creams and growing hair out do not work, the Navy also offers laser treatments that can kill some of the hairs over time

and thin out the beard, Barlow said.

Beards have come and gone throughout the service's history, according to a 2014 article by the U.S. Naval Institute. Units stationed in cold weather duty stations, on submarines or those out at sea, at times, were allowed facial hair, usually within limits.

The Navy's diversity and inclusion task force, called Task Force One Navy, was launched in June in the wake of nationwide protests after the May 25 police killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, in Minneapolis.

The goal of the task force is to listen to sailors at every command, at every level, and make recommendations for reform. Rear Adm. Alvin Holsey, an African American, heads the task force, which is composed of officers, enlisted personnel and civilians.

Military rape convictions go before Supreme Court

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department, in a rare challenge to the military's legal processes, argued to the Supreme Court on Tuesday that three rape convictions secured years after the offenses were committed should be reinstated despite recent rulings that the statute of limitations apply in the cases.

Each conviction was overturned last year by the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, which found that because the crimes were not death-penalty eligible, they should have been subject to a five-year time bar. Prosecutors brought the cases between nine and 18 years from the date of the offense.

Lawyers for the Justice Department said the military's

highest court was wrong in its interpretation.

"The question here is whether three convicted rapists will go scot-free," acting solicitor general Jeffrey Wall told the court's eight justices during an hourlong teleconference hearing.

The Justice Department wants the Supreme Court to find that the offenses can be prosecuted at any time because they were death-penalty cases under military law and would have no time restriction under federal law.

The justices must consider whether the death penalty was applicable to the convictions and whether legislation passed by Congress in 2006 eliminated the five-year statute of limitations for rape retroactively.

DODEA to open sign-ups for 2nd semester of online school

Stars and Stripes

The Department of Defense Education Activity is opening a three-week enrollment period Thursday for second-semester virtual school, officials said.

Parents have until Nov. 6 to sign their child or children up for the program's new semester, which begins Jan. 19.

First-quarter report cards and parent-teacher conferences are scheduled to be done before the enrollment deadline, to aid parents in their decision, DODEA-Europe said in a statement.

DODEA is asking parents to commit to virtual school for the entire semester when they sign their children up, it said.

DODEA for the first time this school year made a full-time digital learning option avail-

able for all grade levels due to the coronavirus pandemic. Although it's geared primarily toward students and families with health vulnerabilities or with concerns about returning to school, anyone may enroll.

About one in four students opted for virtual learning in the first semester, DODEA officials said in August. Updated figures were not immediately available, but a spokesman said Wednesday that the number has stayed relatively stable throughout the semester.

Parents may register using the DODEA Aspen Family Portal and contact their child's teacher or the local school administration for assistance if needed.

More information is available at dodea.edu/returntoschool.cfm.

High court nominee vows 'open mind' on cases

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett presented herself Wednesday in her final round of confirmation questioning as a judge with deeply held personal and religious beliefs but vowing to keep an “open mind” on cases. Senate Republicans are championing her conservative approach to the law as doubtful Democrats run out of time to stop her quick confirmation.

Democratic senators are trying to dig deeper into the judge’s approach as a legal originalist, one who adheres to a more strict reading of the Constitution, but the appellate court justice has declined to directly respond to many questions on abortion, health care and a potentially disputed presidential election, saying it’s against judicial code

to weigh in at this point.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., opened the final day of her testimony praising President Donald Trump’s nominee as an “unashamedly pro-life” conservative who is making history as a role model for other women.

“She’s going to the court,” Graham said. “This is the first time in American history that we’ve nominated a woman who’s unashamedly pro-life and embraces her faith without apology.”

Her nomination to replace the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has ground other legislative business to a halt as Republicans excited by the prospect of locking in a 6-3 conservative court majority race to confirm her over Democratic objections before Election Day.

Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois agreed Bar-

rett is making history — but as the first nominee considered so close to a presidential election, tapped to fulfill the president’s public quest to install a ninth justice in time to undo the Affordable Care Act in a case heading to the court Nov. 10.

Durbin called Trump’s intent to dismantle the health care law a cloud — “an orange cloud” — over her nomination, a political slam at the president’s tan.

Barrett’s nomination has been the focus at a Capitol mostly shut down by COVID-19 protocols. The health care debate has been central to the week’s hearings, as Americans struggle during the pandemic, but Barrett’s views on racial equity and presidential power are also being questioned as senators try to unpack how she would rule on cases if confirmed.

Durbin probed if her strict

adherence to originalism means a president could not “unilaterally deny the right to vote” based on race, noting restrictions on mail-in ballots being erected in several states before Nov. 3.

She agreed there are “many laws” that protect the right to vote, including the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, but stopped short of a blanket statement: “I really can’t say anything more.”

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., asked what she thinks of Trump’s view that he can pardon himself.

Barrett said a president’s ability to pardon himself has never been tested in court and the question calls out for “legal analysis.”

She said, “It’s not one that I can offer a view.”

Dems, GOP stretch for hard-to-get districts in House

Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — In a rustic Virginia district that bounced its Republican congressman after he officiated a same-sex wedding, the battle to replace him pits a self-described “biblical conservative” backed by President Donald Trump against a Black doctor who worked in Barack Obama’s White House.

The district, which stretches from Washington’s far suburbs to the North Carolina line, has elected just one Democrat for a single two-year term this century. Trump carried it by 11 percentage points in 2016. Yet Democrats are spending money to go after it.

The contest between Republican Bob

Good and Democrat Cameron Webb will answer whether a Black candidate with an expertise in health care can prevail in a traditionally conservative area during a pandemic and a time of racial reckoning. It’s also an example of how both parties are pursuing a handful of districts that might seem a reach.

Democrats are contesting over a dozen seats from New York’s Long Island to Alaska where Trump won by at least 10 percentage points, usually a daunting margin. Republicans have fewer viable targets but are spending serious money in places like South Florida and central California where Trump lost badly four years ago.

Marking the efforts’ seriousness, at least one side’s outside groups are spending \$1

million or more in most of these races. The expenditures come during an election when the question isn’t whether Democrats will keep their House majority but how large it will be.

Democrats have more opportunities because of the suburbs’ continuing flight from Trump, GOP retirements and primaries that produced some weaker candidates, and a fundraising edge that lets them spend amply.

“The political environment is tough, so it’s forcing us to shore up key defensive seats,” said Dan Conston, president of the Congressional Leadership Fund, a big-spending political committee aligned with House GOP leaders.

Supreme Court rules census count can be cut short

Associated Press

The Supreme Court on Tuesday ruled that the Trump administration can end census field operations early, in a blow to efforts to make sure minorities and hard-to-enumerate communities are properly counted in the crucial once-a-decade tally.

The decision was not a total loss for plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging the administration’s decision to end the count early. They managed to get nearly two extra weeks of counting people as the case made its way through the courts.

The ruling did, however, increase the chances of the Trump administration retain-

ing control of the process that decides how many congressional seats each state gets — and by extension how much voting power each state has.

The Supreme Court justices’ ruling came as the nation’s largest association of statisticians, and even the U.S. Census Bureau’s own census takers and partners, have been raising

questions about the quality of the data being gathered — numbers that are used to determine how much federal funding and how many congressional seats are allotted to states.

After the Supreme Court’s decision, the Census Bureau said field operations would end on Thursday.

10 Calif. counties ease virus restrictions

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Ten California counties were cleared to ease coronavirus restrictions Tuesday, including some in the Central Valley that saw major case spikes over the summer, but the state's top health official warned that upcoming Halloween celebrations pose a risk for renewed spread.

Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state health secretary, said no counties moved backward in California's color-coded, four-tiered system for reopening, but Riverside was on the verge of reverting to the most restrictive purple tier. The county of about 2.5 million residents has asked for a review of its data and will stay in the red tier until the state makes a decision on its status later this week.

Two San Francisco Bay Area counties, Alameda and Santa Clara, will advance to the less-restrictive orange tier, which allows for increased capacity at restaurants, movie theaters and houses of worship — all with modifications to require face coverings.

Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson on Tuesday ruled out rolling back the state's reopening despite a recent surge in coronavirus hospitalizations and 25 more deaths from the illness caused by the virus.

The Republican governor extended for another 60 days the emergency declaration he issued because of COVID-19, which has now killed 1,611 people in the state. The Health Department reported 680 new confirmed and probable cases.

Hutchinson said the focus needs to be on following the state's mask mandate and other safety guidelines.

Arkansas was among a handful of states that never issued a stay-at-home order because of the virus, but had closed bars, restaurants and other businesses. They have since reopened, but with capacity limits and other safety restrictions.

Connecticut

NORWICH — More than 400 nurses at a Connecticut hospital began a two-day strike Tuesday over what union leaders called low wages and struggles to get enough personal protective equipment.

Dozens of nurses hit the picket line outside the William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich in rainy weather and held signs saying "Nurses on strike for unfair labor practice" and "PPE over profits."

The strike comes amid a breakdown in contract talks between the nurses' union and hospital management, as well as rising coronavirus cases in Norwich and other eastern Connecticut communities. The hospital is operated by Hartford HealthCare.

Donna Handley, president of Backus and Windham hospitals, said in a statement that Backus will remain open throughout the strike, calling it "heartbreaking." She said that nurses have been offered "significant" wage increases — 12.5% over three years — along with additional paid time off and a 2% decrease in health care premiums.

Indiana

INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana's COVID-19 hospitalizations and rates of new infections continued to increase sharply as shown in statistics released Tuesday, as the governor faces a deadline on whether to extend the statewide face mask order.

The jumps have come since Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb decided three weeks ago to lift nearly all of Indiana's restrictions on businesses and crowd sizes, which his Democratic election challenger has called on Holcomb to reverse in the hopes of slowing the coronavirus spread.

The 1,288 COVID-19 hospitalizations as of Monday marked the ninth straight day topping 1,000 after not reaching that high since the end of May, the Indiana State Department

of Health reported. Such hospitalizations have grown 70% since Sept. 21. Indiana hospitals had 382 coronavirus patients in their intensive care units — a 50% increase during that time.

Kentucky

BARDSTOWN — This year's Kentucky Bourbon Festival that was postponed then moved online gets underway Thursday.

Registration is free and open for online programs on topics ranging from food and whiskey pairing to the art of whiskey making and putting together cocktails with ordinary supermarket ingredients. There's also a VIP package available for \$150.

Last year's festival drew some 50,000 visitors from 40 states and more than 20 countries. The festival runs through Sunday.

New Mexico

ALBUQUERQUE — New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham announced Tuesday she will renew public health restrictions and warned that more stringent rules could be imposed because of a rise in COVID-19 cases.

The updated regulations will take effect later this week. They will include limiting gatherings to five people or less, a mandatory 14-day quarantine for visitors from states deemed high-risk, reduced hotel capacities and a 10 p.m. closing time for food or drink establishments serving alcohol.

Lujan Grisham said the virus is spiking in New Mexico and that the state has experienced some of the worst increases in the U.S. so far this fall. Without a vaccine, she said officials have only a few tools to fight the virus — such as making people wear masks, staying home as much as possible and avoiding groups of people.

State health officials have reported more than 33,710 cases since the pandemic began, and 918 residents have died.

Utah

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah is implementing a new strategy to fight the coronavirus pandemic as the number of confirmed cases and hospitalizations continued to surge, state officials announced Tuesday.

The state will move away from its color-coded health system and instead place counties under restrictions based on their COVID-19 transmission rates, said Gov. Gary Herbert. Each county will be listed as high, moderate or low level transmission areas.

Six counties — Salt Lake, Utah, Cache, Garfield, Juab and Wasatch — have been designated as high transmission areas. Masks will be required in all indoor settings in these counties, and social gatherings must be limited to 10 people or fewer, said Rich Saunders, acting director of the Utah Department of Health.

Utah ranks fifth in the country for newly confirmed infections per capita, according to data from Johns Hopkins. There have been over 87,000 reported virus cases in Utah and 522 people have died, according to state data.

Washington

OLYMPIA — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said five counties in central and eastern Washington still under the tightest COVID-19 restrictions will be able to resume more activity and open more services.

At a news conference Tuesday the governor said Yakima, Benton, Franklin, Douglas and Chelan counties will be moved from modified Phase 1 into Phase 2.

Inslee has instituted a virus reopening plan under which counties go through four phases — with 1 the most restrictive and 4 being a full reopening.

Authorities say there has been a "leveling out" of coronavirus risk between the five counties and the rest of the state since a pause in the reopening plan took effect in July.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pizza dough recalled after tampering incident

ME SACO — Another supermarket chain is recalling a brand of fresh pizza dough amid concerns about tampering.

Shaw's and Star Market announced the company is removing Portland Pie Co. pizza dough from the shelves of its supermarkets in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island. Hannaford Supermarkets already removed the product.

A New Hampshire man is accused of putting razor blades in the pizza dough at a Hannaford store in Saco.

Nicholas R. Mitchell, 38, was arrested Sunday night and charged as a fugitive from justice in Dover, N.H.

Mitchell is a former employee of It'll Be Pizza, the Scarborough company that makes several brands of dough, including the Portland Pie Co. dough that was allegedly tampered with in Saco.

2,900 ski passes sell out in under 10 hours

NM ALBUQUERQUE — It's not even winter yet, but Ski Santa Fe has sold out of its nearly 3,000 passes.

Albuquerque TV station KOB reported that the ski passes were gone in less than 10 hours.

Ski Santa Fe general manager Ben Abruzzo said they put 2,900 different reservation-based passes on sale at midnight.

In a typical season, Ski Santa Fe sells close to 6,000 season passes over a few months.

Abruzzo said state officials finalized ski areas' coronavirus-safe plans Monday. Some of those plans include limiting ski lift capacity to 25%.

Mailman rescues man in chainsaw accident

CA NORWALK — A mailman on his route in Southern California came to the rescue of a man who accidentally cut his own arm with a chainsaw, authorities said.

United States Postal Service mailman Fernando Garcia was wrapping up his shift in Norwalk when he heard a loud scream from a nearby house and rushed toward the home to help, KNBC-TV reported.

Garcia said he found a man with a cut to the arm and used his belt as a tourniquet.

The Los Angeles County sheriff's department posted on Twitter that the man is expected to recover because of Garcia's quick action.

Trooper dives to safety as car hits cruiser

CT BERLIN — A Connecticut state trooper dived to safety as an alleged under-the-influence driver struck a cruiser in the shoulder of a highway where police had pulled over a wrong-way driver who was also suspected of being impaired, authorities said.

Troopers had closed the right lane and shoulder and the emergency lights on their cruisers were on when a second car rear-ended an unoccupied cruiser.

One of the troopers jumped over a guardrail to avoid being hit and was not injured, state police said.

The wrong-way driver, Andrew Duffy, 55, of Cromwell, was charged with driving under the influence and traveling the wrong way on a highway, state police said.

The other driver, Jamar Jones, 28, of New Haven, was charged with driving under

the influence, reckless endangerment and motor vehicle violations.

Mural depicting slavery at post office covered

MD CATONSVILLE — A nearly 80-year-old mural inside a Maryland post office that portrays Black slaves pulling barrels of tobacco alongside white men on horses was covered in plastic.

The mural in the Catonsville post office was covered after state and federal representatives called for its replacement, The Baltimore Sun reported Monday.

Rep. Kweisi Mfume, a Maryland Democrat, said he initiated the conversation with U.S. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy after hearing from some constituents who found the mural derogatory or complained of its deteriorating condition.

Officers: 37 pounds of meth found in spare tire

MS FOREST — Officers who pulled a driver over for a traffic violation in Mississippi allegedly discovered about 37 pounds of methamphetamine hidden inside a spare tire stashed in the vehicle.

The Scott County Sheriff's Office and the Flowood Police Department stopped a pickup truck along an interstate near Flowood early this month after spotting it being driven in a "careless manner," according to the agencies.

An officer conducting the stop discovered a tire in the bed of the truck, and inside it, an assisting deputy found 37.5 pounds of methamphetamine worth an estimated street value of \$350,000, WLBT-TV reported.

The driver was charged with

aggravated trafficking methamphetamine, Scott County Sheriff Mike Lee said.

2,350-pound pumpkin wins annual contest

CA HALF MOON BAY — Being cooped up at home due to the pandemic paid handsomely for a Minnesota horticulture teacher who used the extra time to water and feed a pumpkin that won this year's Half Moon Bay pumpkin contest.

Travis Gienger, 40, of Anoka, Minn., drove his gargantuan gourd for 35 hours to see his hard work pay off at the 47th World Championship Pumpkin Weigh-Off in Half Moon Bay where his winner came in at 2,350 pounds.

The first-time pumpkin champ won \$16,450, or \$7 per pound, for the pumpkin.

Driverless boat spins of control, smashes docks

FL PORT ST. LUCIE — Three men conducting a photo shoot on a boat in a busy Florida river somehow went overboard, leaving the 24-foot vessel unmanned and out of control.

The three men told deputies that they accidentally fell into the St. Lucie River along Florida's Atlantic coast, leaving the boat unmanned.

It circled around the men numerous times, forcing them to dive underwater so it wouldn't run them over.

The boat then straightened out, hit a concrete dock, went airborne and hit a second dock before coming to a stop, the Martin County Sheriff's Office said in a Facebook post.

The men were able to swim to a nearby sailboat.

From wire reports

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Rays move within win of World Series

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Kevin Kiermaier and the Tampa Bay Rays — with big assists from two former Padres who know Petco Park's outfield well — are one win from the second World Series berth in franchise history.

Joey Wendle hit a go-ahead, two-run single two batters after another critical error by Jose Altuve, and the Rays beat the Houston Astros 5-2 on Tuesday night for a 3-0 lead in the AL Championship Series.

Kiermaier, a three-time Gold Glove winner in center field, saved multiple runs for the Rays with two outstanding catches before leaving with a hand injury. Hunter Renfroe, acquired from the San Diego Padres last December, made a pair of terrific grabs in right.

"We've played just tremendous defense all season long," Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said. "It's a credit to the

guys how hard they work at it."

Kiermaier, the longest-tenured Tampa Bay player, said it was "an amazing feeling" to be so close to going to the Fall Classic.

"I knew that this group would be capable of getting to this point. I had no doubt in my mind," the 30-year-old Kiermaier said, praising everyone from the front office to the coaches to the players. "This is what it's all about. I'm so proud to be a part of this and have so much fun with these guys."

Tampa Bay reached the World Series in 2008 but lost to the Philadelphia Phillies.

The innovative Rays had one of baseball's lowest payrolls during the pandemic-shortened season and still finished with the AL's best record at 40-20. It seems a different player comes up big every night, whether it's an unsung hitter or reliever — sometimes both. They've also

played spectacular defense.

The Astros got into the postseason with a 29-31 record before going 5-1 to reach the ALCS. But they've looked nothing like the team that won the AL pennant two of the last three years and they remain villains to many for illegal sign stealing en route to the 2017 World Series title.

Houston fell apart in the sixth, when the Rays sent 11 batters to the plate and scored five runs on four hits, two hit batters and Altuve's error at second base. One of the runs was unearned.

Losing pitcher Jose Urquidy held Tampa Bay to two singles through five scoreless innings before Randy Arozarena singled leading off the sixth. Brandon Lowe hit a grounder to Altuve, who tried for a routine forceout but short-hopped the throw and it skipped past shortstop Carlos Correa into

left field.

Enoli Paredes replaced Urquidy, and Yandy Diaz singled to load the bases. Wendle lined a single off third baseman Alex Bregman's glove to give Tampa Bay a 2-1 lead.

Manuel Margot, whose three-run homer in Game 2 followed the first of Altuve's two errors, laid down Tampa Bay's first sacrifice bunt of the season. Paredes hit Kiermaier on the hand to load the bases and then grazed Willy Adames on the pinkie with a pitch to bring in another run.

"A nightmare inning," Astros manager Dusty Baker said.

Renfroe, who like Margot began his career with the Padres, flared a pinch-hit double into right to bring in two more runs.

"That big hit has been eluding us the whole series," Baker said. "It seems like they get whatever they want."

Braves hold off Dodgers, take 2-0 lead in NLCS

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas—Ozzie Albies homered into the Braves bullpen in the ninth inning for the second straight night, and Mark Melancon once again grabbed the ball on the fly.

Atlanta had a five-run lead at the time. By the time the reliever went to the mound, the lead was down to one. Melancon held on once again.

Freddie Freeman also homered for the second night in a row, and the streaking Braves beat the Los Angeles Dodgers 8-7 Tuesday night to take a 2-0 lead in the National League Championship Series.

Atlanta became just the fourth team in major league history to begin a postseason 7-0 on a night made more remarkable by Melancon's bullpen grab.

"That's more home runs than I've caught my entire life, let alone one season," Melancon said. "Hopefully tomorrow

night is three in a row."

The Braves led 7-0 in the seventh but the lead had dwindled to 8-6 when Melancon replaced Josh Tomlin with two outs in the bottom of the ninth after Corey Seager's RBI double and Max Muncy's two-run homer.

Albies extended the game with a fielding error on Will Smith's grounder to second before reigning NL MVP Cody Bellinger hit an RBI triple. Melancon induced AJ Pollock to ground out to third, ending the 4-hour, 12-minute game.

"I didn't feel good with a big lead because these guys are too powerful, and that's a good ballgame to win. They all are now," Atlanta manager Brian Snitker said. "We kind of shot ourselves in the foot there at the end. Melancon did a great job coming in."

Rookie Ian Anderson extended his postseason scoreless streak in an abbreviated start as the Braves moved within two wins of their first World

Series appearance since 1999. All previous 14 teams to win the first two games of a best-of-seven NLCS went on to claim the pennant.

"They're not going to give up. We have to treat tomorrow like the first game of the series and come out strong," Melancon said. "There's no reason for either club to take their foot off the gas. ... Nobody has won anything yet."

Freeman put NL East champion Atlanta ahead to stay with a two-run homer in the fourth off rookie Tony Gonsolin, who filled in after three-time NL Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw was scratched because of back spasms. Freeman added an RBI single as part of a four-run outburst an inning later.

"This team's got a lot of fight. We've done it all year," Seager said. "We were one swing, one anything away from tying that ballgame and going into extras. This is a long series. We're

looking up to the challenge."

Freeman was hit on his right elbow by Alex Wood in the eighth and was shaken up but stayed in the game.

"Stung him pretty good and he lost feeling," Snitker said. "But I think after he got through that inning and came back in, he got all of his strength back. He should be OK."

Anderson allowed one hit and struck out five, but walked five while throwing 85 pitches in four innings. The 22-year-old right-hander didn't come out for the fifth after Braves batted around in the top of the frame and built a 6-0 lead while tying a LCS record with four walks in the inning.

"We had a good game plan, and in the playoffs you just have to keep guys from scoring and we were able to do that," Anderson said. "As long as we keep winning ballgames here. ... It's good to be up 2-0, and we get back to work tomorrow."

Titans hammer Bills, remain unbeaten

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Titans just put together their most gratifying victory of coach Mike Vrabel's short tenure.

They spent the past two weeks dealing with the NFL's first COVID-19 outbreak with each morning bringing news of yet another positive test. A game postponed and rescheduled with a second pushed back. Only one practice with two walk-throughs and unrelenting criticism.

The Titans remain depleted. They're also still undefeated.

Ryan Tannehill threw for three touchdowns and ran for one as Tennessee routed the Buffalo Bills 42-16 on a rare Tuesday night in a showdown between two of the NFL's five remaining undefeated teams pushed back two days after a couple more positive tests for the Titans last week.

"What this organization has been through over the past couple weeks to really fight through all of that, shake it all

off, really limited practice, limited reps and go out and put this kind of win together, I think makes a statement and I'm happy we were able to do that today," Tannehill said.

Tennessee (4-0) continued its best start since winning its first 10 games in 2008 despite not playing since Sept. 27 in Minnesota. Coach Mike Vrabel said everyone in the organization would get a game ball after this performance.

"I learned a long time ago is the definition of a pro is they make the hard look easy, so whatever situation we're presented with we got to all come together and make the best decisions for the team each and every time," Vrabel said.

Malcolm Butler intercepted two passes, the second he returned 68 yards, and both set up short touchdowns for the Titans. Kareem Orr's recovery of a fumbled kickoff set up Tannehill's fourth TD for 21 points off Buffalo's three turnovers. Kalif Raymond's 40-yard punt return also set up a 1-yard TD run by Derrick Henry.

"We expected to win," Butler said.

The Bills (4-1) had not won five straight games since 2004, and they came in looking for the franchise's best start since 1991 when Buffalo reached the Super Bowl. The Bills also played without starting cornerbacks, with Tre'Davious White inactive because of a back injury and Levi Wallace on injured reserve.

Starting wide receiver John Brown also was out for Buffalo, which had scored at least 30 points in the past three games.

"They were ready to go and at the same time we beat ourselves," Bills coach Sean McDermott said.

Buffalo center Mitch Morse called this a gut punch.

"It's tough. They came out and beat us like a drum," Morse said.

Josh Allen came in second in the NFL in yards passing. He threw for 263 yards and two TDs. Stephon Diggs had 10 catches for 106 yards.

Tennessee needed the turnovers with seven key players

on the reserve/COVID-19 list led by wide receivers Corey Davis and Adam Humphries and defensive lineman Jeffery Simmons. The Titans also were missing a couple of assistant coaches and two players activated off that reserve list earlier Tuesday were scratched.

The Titans got a big boost on the Bills' opening drive.

Allen's pass went off Andre Roberts' hands right to Butler, and he returned the interception 29 yards to the Buffalo 16. Two plays later, Tannehill hit A.J. Brown, who missed the last two games with an injured knee, for a 16-yard TD for the quick lead.

The Bills tied it up with a methodical 15-play drive converting four third downs, taking advantage of a Tennessee defense playing a pair of rookies in end Larrell Murchison and cornerback Chris Jackson. Allen tossed the ball to Isaiah McKenzie for a 3-yard TD tying it up, the ninth different Bill to catch a TD pass from Allen.

The Titans scored 21 of the next 24 points.

Unable to work out a trade, Jets part ways with Bell

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Later, Le'Veon.

The New York Jets surprisingly released disgruntled running back Le'Veon Bell on Tuesday night, ending a disappointing tenure after less than two full seasons.

The team issued a statement from general manager Joe Douglas in which he said the Jets made the move after having several conversations with Bell and his agent during the last few days and exploring trade options.

In a post on Twitter shortly after the Jets' statement, Bell posted only a hands in prayer emoji — implying that the feeling is mutual and his wish was granted.

He later followed that up with another tweet: "Got a lot

to prove," he said. "I'm ready to go."

As a vested veteran, Bell does not have to clear waivers. He was available to sign with another team after 4 p.m. Wednesday.

Bell and coach Adam Gase appeared to not mesh since the running back signed a four-year, \$52.5 million contract with \$35 million guaranteed last year as a free agent. There were reports that Gase was opposed to the Jets — mainly then-general manager Mike Maccagnan — giving such a large contract to a running back.

Bell spent his first six NFL years in Pittsburgh, but sat out the entire 2018 season in a contract dispute with the Steelers. He became a free agent and joined the Jets in March 2019.

He rushed for 789 yards and

three touchdowns last season, and had a career-low 3.2 yards per carry. Bell also wasn't as prominently featured in the passing game as expected, catching 66 passes for 461 yards and a score.

He spoke at times of wanting to be able to see more touches to try to help the team win. Gase spoke this offseason about needing to find ways to use him more effectively in the offense.

None of that materialized.

Bell, who missed three games this season with a hamstring injury, finished with 74 yards on 19 carries and three catches for 39 yards. And there were increasing rumblings that Bell wasn't happy.

During training camp, Gase pulled Bell out of the team's scrimmage practice as a precaution because the coach said the running back's hamstrings

felt a little tight. Bell went on social media and said his hamstrings were fine. The two said they spoke and there were no hard feelings or ill will.

But Bell's latest frustrations were evident Sunday night when he liked a few Twitter posts in which some suggested he should be used more in the passing game. He saw only one target in the Jets' loss to Arizona. Bell also liked a post in which someone suggested the Jets should trade him.

New York tried to find a trade partner, but his salary was a tough sell. He has \$6 million remaining on his base salary this year, and it's fully guaranteed. Bell was likely to be cut in the offseason as a salary cap casualty, so it made sense that New York would look to try to deal him before the NFL's trade deadline in three weeks.

Football won't save Pac-12 revenue woes

Associated Press

The return of football isn't likely to make a dramatic dent in the losses athletic departments across the Pac-12 will ultimately incur because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Faced with large budget shortfalls, most schools in the league have already resorted to layoffs, furloughs, and cutting some sports entirely.

At Utah, football coach Kyle Whittingham and basketball coach Larry Krystkowiak took salary cuts to help offset up to \$60 million in projected losses. Athletic director Mark Harlan said the Utes are still dealing with "significant financial challenges."

One reason: as of now, none of the Pac-12 football games will have fans in attendance. That said, any help — like television revenue — is welcomed.

"Obviously, we have a chance to have more revenue than maybe we would have thought of a few weeks ago. So we're going to continue to adhere to our budget and into all the policies that we put in place to manage our way through this, knowing that there could be a light here at the end of the tunnel that we'll have more revenue that we weren't necessarily counting on," Harlan said.

The pandemic shut down sports in March, including the NCAA basketball tournaments. With no March Madness, the NCAA was short \$375 million in the money scheduled to be distributed to its member schools, which were already facing questions about enrollment levels and tuition shortfalls.

Following the cancellation of all spring sports, the league decided on Aug. 11 to postpone

all fall and winter sports until after the first of next year.

But a deal with Quidel, a California-based diagnostic healthcare manufacturer, for a daily rapid-results coronavirus testing program helped put the football season — by far the biggest revenue generator in college sports — back on track.

The league will open a seven-game, conference-only football season on Nov. 7.

Arizona athletic director David Heeke insisted that discussions to restart athletics centered around athletes, and not budgets.

Arizona has estimated \$60 million to \$65 million in revenue losses.

The Wildcats are looking at a 10% budget cut for their sports programs and a 15% cut for all administrative programs. The university also has implement-

ed salary cuts and furloughs.

Oregon President Michael Schill, chairman of the Pac-12 CEO group, echoed that the return of football is by no means going to make up the shortfall.

"The losses that our schools are encountering — particularly in our athletic department — are huge. The amount of money that will be paid as a result of going back to play is tiny in comparison to the losses," Schill said.

The most dramatic action was taken by Stanford, which is discontinuing 11 varsity sports programs at the end of the 2020-21 academic year, including men's and women's fencing, field hockey, lightweight rowing, men's rowing, co-ed and women's sailing, squash, synchronized swimming, men's volleyball and wrestling.

Briefly

Bruins may be missing 2 stars to start season

Associated Press

The Boston Bruins could be without two-thirds of their top line when the next NHL season starts after the team said Tuesday that David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand each underwent surgery last month.

Pastrnak isn't expected to be fully recovered and able to play until mid-February after an operation to repair a torn labrum in his right hip Sept. 16 in New York. Pastrnak shared the Rocket Richard Trophy by tying for the league lead with 48 goals last season and missed some time in the playoffs because of injury.

Marchand won't be good to go until roughly mid-January after having a sports hernia repaired Sept. 14 at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester, Mass. He was the NHL's first-team All-Star left wing in the postseason voting after having 87 points on 28 goals and 59 assists in 70 games when play was halted.

Boston defenseman Charlie McAvoy had arthroscopic surgery on his right knee Sept. 8 and is expected to be ready for the start of training camp.

The Bruins said each surgery was suc-

cessful, but the reigning Presidents' Trophy winners for finishing with the most points in the regular season will have an uphill climb to start early in 2021 if play begins Jan. 1 or soon thereafter, which the NHL is targeting.

Boston lost to eventual Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay in the second round of the playoffs in the Eastern Conference bubble in Toronto. The Bruins got to Game 7 of the Cup Final in 2019 before losing to St. Louis.

In other NHL news:

■ Patrick Marleau rejoined San Jose on Tuesday, signing a one-year deal worth the league minimum of \$700,000. The 41-year-old can now break Gordie Howe's all-time NHL games played record in the Sharks uniform he has worn for the vast majority of his career.

Cardinals All-Pro LB Jones out for remainder of season

TEMPE, Ariz. — Arizona Cardinals All-Pro linebacker Chandler Jones is out for the season because of a biceps injury that requires surgery.

An MRI earlier this week confirmed the extent of the injury, which happened during the first half of Arizona's 30-10 win over the New York Jets on Sunday, and coach Kliff Kingsbury said Wednesday that Jones has elected to have the season-ending surgery. The recovery time is expected to be 3-to-4 months.

It's a huge blow for the Cardinals' defense, which has improved after giving up the most total yards in the NFL last season. Jones had a career-high 19 sacks in 2019. He only had one sack this season while frequently drawing double-teams from opposing blockers.

In other NFL news:

■ Denver Broncos running back Melvin Gordon III was cited for driving under the influence and speeding by Denver police on Tuesday night.

Gordon was cited for traveling between 25 and 39 mph faster than the posted speed limit when he was pulled over in downtown Denver, according to police records.

Gordon is coming off his first 100-yard game for the Broncos after signing a two-year, \$16 million free agent contract last offseason.