

Navy to buy more oilers and seek crew

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A Navy plan to buy at least eight more replenishment oilers for \$6.75 billion has raised doubts whether the service will be able to crew the ships when they're ready.

The oilers are critical to keeping the Navy's warships moving in a hypothetical war against an adversary with a large modern military, such as China, analysts say.

But it remains unclear how the service over the long term will address the shortage of skilled civilian mariners needed to man oiler, hospital and other support ships managed by Military Sealift Command.

The temporary fix is to sideline 17 ships. The Navy hopes that a plan to reassign 700 people from those ships to others will fill gaps and allow mariners

to take adequate vacation time.

The underlying problem with the proposal is "that they are pulling these crews from vessels that are a lot different than the oilers and the underway replenishment ships," said Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy who has served ashore and at sea for Military Sealift Command.

Many of the mariners being reassigned are coming from cargo ships, Mercogliano said.

Unlike active-duty sailors, civilian mariners are at-will employees, meaning they can quit their jobs at any time.

"They don't have the experience, and some of them may not come," said Mercogliano, who likened the discrepancy in skills to that between taxicab operators and long-haul truck drivers.

Military Sealift operates about 125 civilian-crewed ships that replenish Navy ships, preposition combat cargo at sea and conduct specialized missions. The fleet's 15 Kaiser-class oilers also are operated by the command, according to its site.

In all, roughly 5,500 civilians fill about 4,500 jobs across Military Sealift Command. But about 10,000 mariners are needed, experts say.

A grueling schedule, along with a policy that forced many civilian mariners to stay on their ships for months on end during the COVID-19 pandemic, led many of them to leave.

Meanwhile, the Navy is replacing the current class of oilers, which were first commissioned in 1987. Three new John Lewis-class vessels have been delivered to the service but not yet deployed. Three others are

under construction and another three are under contract, according to the Navy.

The number of civilian mariners freed up for that new construction by moving about 12 expeditionary fast transports, or EFPs, and five other ships to inactive status likely would be insufficient, said Steven Wills, a retired Navy officer and research scientist at the Arlington, Va.-based think tank CNA.

"Each EFP has a nominal crew of 22," Wills said. "It takes 99 such people to crew a John Lewis-class (oiler), so not much additional ship crew bought by that change."

Maritime Sealift Command needs to address the crew shortage by stepping up recruitment efforts at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and six state maritime academies, analysts said.

Navy plan has China in sights, eyes fleet improvement

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Tackling delays in ship maintenance, using more drones, and improving recruiting are part of the Navy's plan to prepare the fleet in three years for a potential fight with China, the chief of naval operations announced Wednesday in a new initiative called "Project 33."

"The chairman of the People's Republic of China has told his forces to be ready for war by 2027 — we will be more ready," said Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the sea service's top officer.

Project 33 was wrapped into the 2024 Navigation Plan, a framework of Franchetti's priorities during her tenure as chief of

naval operations.

The plan identified seven areas of focus that fall under Project 33, including eliminating delays in ship maintenance, integrating more drones and autonomous systems into the force, and building upon existing quality-of-service initiatives to recruit and retain the sailors needed to man warfighting ships.

The 30-page plan, which Franchetti described as ambitious but necessary, sets a goal to implement all seven priority areas by 2027.

"Project 33 sets new targets but we do not need new levers to reach them. This is core to my guidance. We will deliver results using the tools and re-

sources we have to gain ground without losing speed," she said.

A key is to have 80% of the force ready enough at any given time to deploy for combat if needed.

The Navy is structured to have one-third of the fleet in maintenance, one-third in training and one-third on or ready for deployment. But maintenance delays could mean ships are not ready for a fight.

"We must accelerate our efforts to deliver the ready force we need now. We must do so to deter potential adversaries and be ready when called," Franchetti said.

Driving Franchetti's Project 33 are the tensions and wars around the globe now. The plan

notes while Russia is "wounded and isolated" following its invasion of Ukraine, the country remains dangerous.

And nefarious networks between Iran and Russia amid relentless attacks on merchant shipping in the Middle East make peace brittle.

Drawing on lessons from fleet experimentation and real-world developments in the Black and Red seas, Franchetti said the Navy must deliver a proven hybrid fleet that incorporates robotic and drone capabilities by 2027.

"As chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. 'CQ' Brown says, 'accelerate change or lose,' and we have no intention of losing," she said.

US SOCEUR reorganizes with NATO role

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A leadership makeover aimed at improving how U.S. special operators work with allies in Europe is in the works, military officials said this week.

The change involves turning the Stuttgart-based U.S. Special Operations Command Europe into a three-star headquarters with its commander serving in a dual role as head of NATO's special operations command.

The change "will better align SOF operations, activities and investments," SOCEUR spokesman Lt. Col. Peter Bogart said in a statement Wednesday.

"Furthermore, it ensures a more efficient allocation of resources and personnel, where SOF assets can be rapidly deployed in support of NATO or U.S. missions as needed," he said.

The move is in line with how other top positions are struc-

tured, such as U.S. European Command, whose leader also serves as NATO's supreme allied commander from an office in Belgium. The heads of the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force in Europe lead corresponding NATO commands.

Last week, the Pentagon announced that Army Maj. Gen. Richard E. Angle had been nominated for a third star to head up SOCEUR and the Allied Special Operations Forces Command. If confirmed, he

will command from NATO's military headquarters in Belgium.

Since August, he has served as a special assistant to Gen. Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and NATO's Allied Land Command.

Meanwhile, Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Lock, who took over SOCEUR in July, will remain in Stuttgart and serve as Angle's deputy upon confirmation.

Top admirals may move to testify in Navy bribery case

The Washington Post

Eight current or former Navy officials, including five admirals, could be compelled to testify in a bribery case against the Navy's former second-highest ranking official that includes allegations of a spurned lover and an illicit deal sketched on a napkin, according to new court documents.

The documents, filed in recent weeks in the case against retired four-star Adm. Robert P. Burke and two executives of a New York company, outline more details about the origins of the investigation and how those involved might seek to defend themselves.

Burke, 62, of Coconut Creek, Fla., is accused of awarding a sole source contract to the executives, Charlie Kim, 50, and Meghan Messenger, 47, in exchange for a \$500,000-a-year post-retirement job and stock options at their technology services firm, Next Jump. All have pleaded not guilty, questioning the logic of offering a \$500,000-a-year job for what was ultimately a \$355,000 sole-source award.

The recent filings — from Burke, Kim and Messenger — take aim at a key witness in the

case, identified only as "Person 3", a career Pentagon official alleged to have been in a romantic relationship with the married Burke. According to a filing from Burke's lawyer, the investigation stemmed from a complaint Person 3 made to the Pentagon's inspector general.

Person 3, prosecutors allege, attended a key lunch meeting in July 2021 where Burke, Kim and Messenger agreed on the plan to award a contract for leadership training services to their firm, then have Burke join it with salary and stock options. In Person 3's telling to investigators, Kim sketched the illicit proposal on a napkin.

But attorneys for Burke and the executives have alleged that Person 3 had mischaracterized the interaction between Burke and the executives because she was upset that Burke had ended their romantic relationship and reconciled with his wife. Prosecutors, they say, also intentionally omitted from law enforcement probable cause affidavits — typically used to obtain search and arrest warrants — that a Virginia appeals court confirmed in 2013 that Person 3 committed perjury in her recently finalized divorce and

child custody case.

"The only evidence of this alleged agreement is the deeply flawed eyewitness testimony" of Person 3, Burke attorney Tim Parlatore wrote. "By embellishing certain elements of the conversation, Person 3 was able to recast an entirely legal conversation into a criminal transaction. With her prior perjury finding undisclosed to investigators Person 3 misled the IG and the FBI as to her credibility in all matters, instead reinforcing her senior position within the DOD as a false mantle of credibility."

A former divorce attorney for the woman did not immediately comment. She has not been accused of any crimes.

Prosecutors did not respond to claims about the woman's credibility, but they said in court filings that Kim repeated the plan to investors in a July 2021 email. After Burke was hired, Messenger confided to Kim in a text that she had erupted at the ex-admiral in a bout of frustration when the company didn't immediately get the contract, saying "no contract no job," prosecutors alleged.

"Kim put the pieces of

scheme in writing, but it was Messenger who said the quiet part out loud," prosecutors Joshua S. Rothstein and Trevor Wilmot wrote.

The executives said the statements were taken out of context, and that the contract award was also supported by Burke's predecessor as vice Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. William Moran. Moran unexpectedly retired instead of taking over as Chief of Naval Operations in August 2019 because of his ongoing work with a former top Navy spokesman accused of sexual misconduct.

The executives recently won a federal judge's permission to issue trial subpoenas to five former or current Navy admirals and three other current or former Navy officials, including Person 3. Kim and Messenger's public court filings did not identify the subpoena targets by name, but said the requests were calibrated to uncover facts that "will undercut the government's version of events and show that there was no bribery scheme."

A Navy spokesperson declined to comment, referring questions to the Justice Department.

Trump holds 1st event after second assassination scare

Associated Press

FLINT, Mich. — Former President Donald Trump on Tuesday made his first public appearance since Sunday's second apparent assassination attempt against him, speaking to an crowd chanting "God bless Trump!" and "Fight, Fight, Fight" as U.S. Secret Service agents surrounded the stage to protect him.

"It's been a great experience," the Republican presidential nominee said in an evening town hall in Flint, Mich., about holding events with thousands of supporters. But he also went on to call running for president "a dangerous business" akin to car racing or bull riding.

"Only consequential presidents get shot at," he said.

Earlier in the day, Vice President Kamala Harris struck a measured tone, even steering clear of mentioning Trump by

name in an interview with Black journalists that starkly contrasted with the former president's own highly contentious appearance before the same group.

The two candidates briefly put their differences aside in a phone call Trump described as "very, very nice" even as crowds booed when he mentioned Harris by her first name. Harris said earlier in the day that she told Trump "there's no place for political violence in our country."

Both sides are ramping up campaigning with no changes to Trump's calendar despite the apparent assassination attempt at one of his Florida golf courses, which has renewed accusations by Republicans that Democrats' criticism against Trump is inspiring violent attacks. Democrats have accused Trump in the past for his long history of inflammatory cam-

paign rhetoric and advocacy for jailing or prosecuting his political enemies.

But Harris was treading more carefully in the aftermath of the latest incident.

Her session with the National Association of Black Journalists was one of the few extensive sit-down interviews Harris has done since replacing President Joe Biden atop the Democratic ticket in July. She repeatedly criticized Trump on issues including his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and opposition to abortion access, but was careful to refer to him as the former president and in other ways that avoided naming him directly.

Trump re-upped his past retaliation threats against election workers, donors and others as he tries to stoke fears about the integrity of the upcoming 2024 election.

'Firehose' storm hits N. Carolina

Associated Press

The Carolinas braced for a storm that forecasters warned could bring heavy rain — as much as 6 to 8 inches in some spots. But one narrow band got a "firehose" that dumped as much as 20 inches in a so-called 1,000-year flood that shocked many with its intensity.

The storm that left homes flooded, cars submerged and schools closed Tuesday in parts of North Carolina wasn't really a surprise to scientists who have long said that such rainfalls are one marker of climate change.

"Data shows one of the strongest relationships between climate change and precipitation is that as the atmosphere warms, the capacity to hold water increases. Therefore we see more intense rainfall in a shorter period of time," said Andrew Kruczkiwicz, senior researcher at the Columbia Climate School at Columbia University.

Monday's deluge centered on Carolina Beach south of Wilmington, where more than 18 inches of rain fell in 12 hours and almost 21 overall. That much rain qualifies as a 1,000-year flood expected only once in that length of time, meteorologists at the National Weather Service office in Wilmington said.

Some areas were hit particularly hard as the storm took a narrow path over the region, "causing a bit of a firehose effect," NWS meteorologist Lauren Warner said. The agency's forecasts allowed for "locally higher" amounts, but those weren't close to what eventually fell.

"If that had moved just a little to the left or continued to the left, that would have mitigated some of the totals that we saw or perhaps spread them out over a wider area," said Warner.

Johnson takes yet another shot with his spending bill linked to citizenship proof

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House is scheduled to vote Wednesday evening on Speaker Mike Johnson's proposal that links the funding of the federal government for the new budget year with a mandate that states require proof of citizenship when people register to vote.

Johnson pulled the bill from consideration last week and said he would work over the weekend to build consensus for it within the Republican ranks. It's unclear whether he was able to do so as some GOP members have concerns about continuing current spending levels, but Johnson said he is

determined to hold the vote regardless. Meanwhile, Democrats overwhelmingly oppose the measure.

Requiring new voters to provide proof of citizenship has become a leading election-year priority for Republicans raising the specter of noncitizens voting in the U.S., even though it's already illegal to do so and research has shown that such voting is rare. Opponents also say that such a requirement would disenfranchise millions of Americans who do not have a birth certificate or passport readily available when they get a chance to register at their school, church or other venues when voter registration drives

occur.

But Johnson said it is a serious problem because even if a tiny percentage of noncitizens do vote, it could determine the outcome of an extremely close race. He noted that Republican Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks of Iowa won her seat back in 2020 by six votes.

"It's very, very serious stuff and that's why we're going to do the right thing," Johnson said. "We're going to responsibly fund the government and we're going to stop non-citizens voting in elections."

Johnson told reporters he was not ready to discuss an alternative plan to keep the government funded.

2nd wave of device blasts hits Lebanon

Associated Press

BEIRUT—Walkie-talkies and solar equipment exploded in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon on Wednesday in a second wave of attacks targeting electronic devices a day after hundreds of pagers used by Hezbollah blew up, state media and Hezbollah officials said. At least nine people were killed and more than 300 people wounded in the second wave, the Health Ministry said.

The attacks, which were widely believed to be carried out by Israel targeting Hezbollah, have hiked fears that the two sides' simmering conflict could escalate into all-out war.

Speaking to Israeli troops on Wednesday, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, "We are at the start of a new phase in the war — it requires courage, determination and perseverance." He made no mention of the explosions of electronic devices but

praised the work of Israel's army and security agencies, saying "the results are very impressive."

In Wednesday's attacks, several blasts were heard at a funeral in Beirut for three Hezbollah members and a child killed by exploding pagers the day before, according to Associated Press journalists at the scene. An AP photographer in the southern coastal city of Sidon saw a car and a mobile phone shop damaged after devices exploded inside of them. A girl was hurt in the south when a solar energy system blew up, the state news agency reported.

The new blasts hit a country still roiling with confusion and anger after Tuesday's pager bombings, which appeared to be a complex Israeli attack targeting Hezbollah members that caused civilian casualties, too. Tuesday's bombings killed at least 12 people, including two children, and wounded some 2,800 others.

The second wave also deepens concern over the potentially indiscriminate casualties caused in the attacks, in which hundreds of blasts went off wherever the holder of the pager happened to be — in homes, cars, at grocery stores and in cafes, often with family or bystanders nearby.

While the pagers were used by Hezbollah members, there was no guarantee who was holding the device at the time of the blast. Also, many of the casualties were not Hezbollah fighters, but members of the group's extensive civilian operations mainly serving Lebanon's Shiite community.

At least two health workers were among those killed Tuesday. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, charity workers, teachers and office administrators work for Hezbollah-linked organizations; an unknown number had pagers.

The U.N. human rights chief, Volker Türk, called for an inde-

pendent investigation into the mass explosions. "The fear and terror unleashed is profound," he said in a statement, urging world leaders to step up "in defense of the rights of all people to live in peace and security."

Iran-backed Hezbollah — Lebanon's strongest armed force — and Israel's military have exchanged fire almost daily since Oct. 8, the day after a deadly Hamas-led assault in Israel triggered the war in Gaza. Since then, hundreds have been killed in strikes in Lebanon and dozens in Israel, while tens of thousands on each side of the border have been displaced. Hezbollah said its strikes are in support of Hamas.

Israeli leaders have issued warnings in recent weeks that they might increase operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying they must put a stop to the exchanges to allow people to return to homes near the border.

US admits Houthis shot down 2 Reaper drones

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen's Houthi rebels shot down two American MQ-9 Reaper drones in under a week, the United States military acknowledged Wednesday, further highlighting the regional spread of the Israel-Hamas war.

As the one-year anniversary of the war approaches, Houthis continue a campaign to target ships traveling through the Red Sea as U.S.-led airstrikes pound their positions in Yemen.

That's imperiled a waterway that typically sees \$1 trillion of trade pass through it, as well as crucial shipments of aid to war-torn Sudan and Yemen.

The U.S. military said Houthis shot down the first Reaper on Sept. 10, and the second on Monday. Online video showed the downing and the flaming wreckage on the ground afterward in

Yemen's Dhamar province.

General Atomics Reapers, which cost around \$30 million apiece, can fly at altitudes up to 50,000 feet and have an endurance of up to 24 hours before needing to land.

The aircraft have been flown by both the U.S. military and the CIA over Yemen for years.

U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's press secretary, said authorities continue to investigate Monday's downing, but declined to elaborate.

He added that a claim by the Houthis that they shot down 10 Reapers since the start of their campaign in November over the Israel-Hamas war was "not accurate."

Since Houthis seized the country's north and its capital of Sanaa in 2014, the U.S. military has seen Reapers shot down in Yemen in 2017, 2019, 2023 and 2024.

Ukrainian drones strike military depot in Russia

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian drones struck a large military depot in a town deep inside Russia overnight, causing a huge blaze and prompting the evacuation of some local residents, a Ukrainian official and Russian news reports said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, a senior U.S. diplomat said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy recently said he has a plan for winning the war that "can work" and help end the conflict, which is now in its third year. But the Ukrainian leader hasn't publicly spelled out the plan.

Ukraine claimed the strike destroyed Russian military warehouses in Toropets, a town about 240 miles northwest of Moscow and about 300 miles from the border with Ukraine.

The attack was carried out by Ukraine's Security Service, along

with Ukraine's Intelligence and Special Operations Forces, a Kyiv security official told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the operation.

According to the official, the depot housed Iskander and Tochka-U missiles, as well as glide bombs and artillery shells.

Among the destroyed ammunition were North Korean KN-23 short-range ballistic missiles, another official, in Ukraine's Intelligence Office, told The AP. He was not authorized to comment publicly and didn't provide evidence to support his claim.

Russian state news agency RIA Novosti quoted regional authorities as saying air defense systems were working to repel a "massive drone attack" on Toropets. The agency also reported a fire and the evacuation of some residents.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Sheriff tired of hoaxes posts boy's mugshot

FL TALLAHASSEE — A Florida sheriff fed up with a spate of false school shooting threats is taking a new tactic to try get through to students and their parents: he's posting the mugshot of any offender on social media.

Law enforcement officials in Florida and across the country have seen a wave of school shooting hoaxes recently, including in the wake of the deadly attack at Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga., that killed two students and two teachers.

Volusia County Sheriff Mike Chitwood on Florida's Atlantic Coast said he's tired of the hoaxes targeting students, disrupting schools and sapping law enforcement resources. In social media posts Monday, Chitwood warned parents that if their kids are arrested for making these threats, he'll make sure the public knows.

Chitwood made the announcement in a video highlighting the arrest of an 11-year-boy who was taken into custody for allegedly threatening to carry out a school shooting at Creekside or Silver Sands Middle School in Volusia County. Chitwood posted the boy's full name and mugshot to his Facebook page.

Lawmaker injured in lawn mower accident

KY HARLAN — A Kentucky lawmaker was critically injured when the lawn mower he was driving plunged into an empty swimming pool at his home, authorities said Monday.

State Sen. Johnnie Turner, a Republican from Harlan, was in critical but stable condition at the University of Tennessee Medical Center in Knoxville, said Kentucky Senate President Robert Stivers.

Turner was injured when he drove his mower into the deep end of the pool, Kentucky State Police said. Authorities received the 911 call shortly before 8 p.m. Sunday. State police had no details about what caused the accident. Turner was taken to a local hospital and then transferred to UT Medical Center.

Turner's injuries were not immediately disclosed. His family requested prayers for his "speedy recovery," Stivers said in a statement.

Tribes fight to stop lithium drilling on lands

AZ PHOENIX — Members of an Arizona tribe urged a federal judge Tuesday to extend a temporary ban on exploratory drilling for a lithium project near lands they have used for religious and cultural ceremonies for centuries.

An executive for the Australian mining company that is trying to determine whether there is enough lithium to justify a commercial operation to help expedite production of renewable energy resources testified that every day of delay is costing it money.

The judge indicated she wouldn't decide for more than a week whether to grant the tribe's request or lift a temporary restraining order she issued last month.

The tribe wants the judge to issue a preliminary injunction extending the prohibition on ac-

tivity pending a trial on allegations that the federal Bureau of Land Management failed to adequately analyze potential impacts to sacred springs that the Hualapai people call Ha'Kamwe', which means warm spring. The springs have served as a place of healing and prayer for generations, the tribe has said in court filings.

Medical waste washes ashore, swimming banned

MD OCEAN CITY — Officials warned people to stay out of the ocean at several beaches in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia after they said medical waste, including hypodermic needles, washed ashore. The source of the waste was under investigation.

Officials banned swimming, wading and surfing at Assateague State Park on Sunday and Monday after Maryland Park Service rangers found several needles and needle caps, feminine hygiene products and cigar tips along the beach, Maryland Department of Natural Resources spokesperson Gregg Bortz said in an email.

There have been no reports of injuries or people encountering these items while swimming, Bortz said.

Court reinstates ban of electronic signatures

AR LITTLE ROCK — A federal appeals court has reinstated an Arkansas rule prohibiting election officials from accepting voter registration forms signed with an electronic signature.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday afternoon issued an administrative stay of a

preliminary injunction that a federal judge issued against the rule adopted earlier this year by the State Board of Election Commissioners. An appeal of the preliminary injunction is still pending before the court.

The board in April said Arkansas' constitution only allows certain state agencies, and not elections officials, to accept electronic signatures. Under the rule, voters will have to register by signing their name with a pen.

Lawsuit says voter purge targets naturalized citizens

AL MONTGOMERY — Voting rights groups have filed a lawsuit against Alabama's secretary of state over a policy they said is illegally targeting naturalized citizens for removal from voting rolls ahead of the November election.

Alabama Secretary of State Wes Allen announced last month that 3,251 people who had been previously issued non-citizen identification numbers will have their voter registration status made inactive and flagged for possible removal from the voter rolls.

The lawsuit filed Friday by the Campaign Legal Center, Fair Elections Center and Southern Poverty Law Center on behalf of naturalized citizens and advocacy groups says the method wrongly targets naturalized citizens who once had noncitizen identification numbers before gaining citizenship. "Alabama is targeting its growing immigrant population through a voter purge intended to intimidate and disenfranchise naturalized citizen," the lawsuit says.

— From wire reports

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Rodgers set for first home game since injury

Associated Press

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — Aaron Rodgers is trying to not make too much of his MetLife Stadium homecoming.

But the New York Jets quarterback knows all eyes will be on him Thursday night when he faces the New England Patriots.

Rodgers has waited more than a year to play in another game in front of the home fans — and further push aside the overwhelming disappointment that marked his debut in the Big Apple spotlight last year.

“I mean, I feel good about it. It’s been a long time since I took the field at JetLife,” Rodgers said, using his nickname for the stadium the Jets share with the Giants. “So it’ll be a lot of emotions, for sure. But we’re thankfully already into the third game of the season.

“Played two full games, body feels good, about as good as it can on a short week.”

Rodgers, 40, has helped lead the Jets to a 1-1 start, but will be playing in his third game in 11 days when New York kicks off Thursday night.

“Yeah, testing the body for sure, but we love to play, so

shorter time between games is great,” Rodgers said. “It’s definitely tough on the body, tough on the week, but easier for a guy who’s 20 than a guy who’s 40, but I’ll be ready to go Thursday night and look forward to three days off.”

It will mark Rodgers’ first home game in which he’ll play since Sept. 11, 2023, when he jogged onto the field carrying an American flag during the player introductions before the Jets faced the Buffalo Bills.

The crowd was electric, still buzzing about what seemed a magical moment when Rodgers went down four snaps into the game with a torn left Achilles tendon.

Rodgers briefly questioned whether he’d ever play again. Months of difficult rehabilitation followed. And now he’ll be able to play at home again instead of watching from the sideline.

“If you love the game, there’s always emotion,” Rodgers said. “So there’ll be emotion this week, as there always is during the anthem and seeing our crowd and night games and the excitement driving up to the sta-

dium and seeing the tailgates happening.

“It’s always fun.”

In his first game since the injury, Rodgers appeared a bit rusty in New York’s 32-19 loss at San Francisco, going 13-for-21 for 167 yards and a touchdown with an interception. The Jets couldn’t get much going consistently, particularly because the defense had trouble getting off the field. With the game out of reach, Rodgers sat for the final drive.

Still, New York managed three touchdowns on offense.

Last Sunday, Rodgers and the offense were a tick better while beating the Titans 24-17 in Tennessee. He was 18-for-30 for 176 yards and two TDs with no interceptions. And the offense combined to score three touchdowns, marking the first time the Jets had three or more offensive TDs in their first two games since 2004.

“We’re looking at an offense that’s still trying to learn itself, find itself and it’s still able to generate scoring drives, more so than most teams in this organization’s past,” coach Robert Saleh said Monday. “So it’s go-

ing in the right direction.”

Rodgers isn’t nearly as mobile as he once was, but he has also been well protected by the Jets’ revamped offensive line, which has allowed the quarterback to be sacked three times in two games.

“I mean, the pocket’s been pretty bucolic, I would say the first couple weeks,” Rodgers said. “It’s been real nice back there. Not many hits, not many sacks, a lot of time. Last week, I felt better than I did Week 1. It’s just confidence, just doing a couple things, escaping the pocket.

“The next thing will be making a big play outside the pocket, but it’s all stuff I’ve done in practice, I’ve done in training camp. I think it’s just doing more of it.”

And he’ll get his next chance to do so in front of the home fans. Finally.

“Yeah, it’ll be fun to be out there with the crowd and, night games, I love night games,” Rodgers said. “So excited about it. No one’s real crazy about Thursday games, but everybody loves the weekend after the Thursday games.”

Dolphins’ Tagovailoa on IR following latest concussion

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The Miami Dolphins placed Tua Tagovailoa on injured reserve Tuesday after the quarterback was diagnosed with his third concussion in two years.

Tagovailoa will be sidelined for at least four games. He will be eligible to return in Week 8 when the Dolphins host Arizona, but has to complete a series of tests and assessments required by the NFL’s concussion protocol before he can return to the field.

Tagovailoa was hurt last Thursday night when he collided with Buffalo defensive back Damar Hamlin. He ran for a first down and then initiated the contact by lowering his shoulder into Hamlin instead of sliding.

Players from both teams immediately motioned that Tagovailoa was hurt, and as

he lay on the turf the quarterback exhibited signs typically associated with a traumatic brain injury. He remained down on the field for a couple of minutes, got to his feet and walked to the sideline. The Dolphins diagnosed him with a concussion a few minutes later.

Coach Mike McDaniel has since cautioned against speculation on the quarterback’s future, stressing that he’s more focused on Tagovailoa getting healthy than what this latest concussion means for the team or for his career. Tagovailoa this week began the process of consulting neurologists about his health amid reports that he has no plans to retire.

Others around the NFL have offered their opinions on Tagovailoa’s future, including Raiders coach Antonio Pierce, who suggested he should retire.

“As far as Tua’s career is concerned, I think it’s an utmost priority of mine for Tua to speak on Tua’s career,” McDaniel said Monday. “Reports are reports. As far as I’m concerned, I’m just worried about the human being and where that’s at day to day. I’ll let Tua be the champion of his own career.”

McDaniel said Tagovailoa was at the team’s practice facility on Monday, greeting teammates and working with trainers.

“He’s doing good, man. Talked to him, he’s in good spirits,” receiver Jaylen Waddle said Monday. “(He’s) got the team in good spirits and everybody praying for him and hoping (for his) health.”

With Tagovailoa sidelined, the Dolphins will go with backup Skylar Thompson when they play at Seattle on Sunday. Miami also signed Tyler Huntley off the Ravens’ practice squad.

Mets get big night from younger Acuña

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Luisangel Acuña has subbed so nicely for the New York Mets already that his brother's team is in growing danger of missing the postseason.

Replacing an ailing Francisco Lindor at shortstop, Acuña capped a huge night at the plate with his first career home run to help the Mets beat the Washington Nationals 10-1 on Tuesday.

The 22-year-old Acuña, a younger sibling of Atlanta Braves star Ronald Acuña Jr., finished a triple short of the cycle and scored three times in his fourth major league game.

"He had a hell of a night and I hope he has many, many nights like that in his career," Mets teammate Pete Alonso said. "Super exciting start for him, and he's been playing super lights-out for us."

New York's victory coupled with Atlanta's 6-5 loss in Cincinnati left the Braves two games out of a playoff spot with 11 to play. The Mets and Arizona Diamondbacks are tied for the second of three National League wild cards at 83-68.

"I'm just here to help in whatever way I possibly can," Luisangel Acuña said through an interpreter.

Winners of six consecutive NL East titles, the banged-up Braves have been without Ronald Acuña Jr. since late May, when the 26-year-old reigning NL MVP went down with a season-ending knee injury.

Lindor wrenched his back during Friday night's victory at Philadelphia, and the Mets called up Luisangel Acuña from Triple-A Syracuse the following day. He singled twice in his major league debut, then came off the bench Sunday when Lindor exited early with recurring pain.

Acuña entered on defense in the ninth inning of a tie game Monday night against Washington and handled four grounders flawlessly — one with the infield in.

None were particularly difficult chances, but all of them came with a runner in scoring position and the game on the line. New York won 2-1 in 10 innings.

"He's come in and shown out — doing it on both sides, offense and defense," Mets pitcher Tylor Megill said. "Since he came up here, nothing's changed. He's still playing incredible."

With left-hander Mitchell Parker on the mound Tuesday for Washington, the Mets gave

Acuña his second start, and he certainly made the most of it.

Batting ninth, he knocked in New York's first run with a line-drive double in the third inning for his first extra-base hit and RBI. Acuña singled and scored again in the sixth on Alonso's three-run homer, then connected for a solo shot of his own in the eighth.

That left him 5-for-11 in the majors, making it easy to forget the low throw Acuña failed to corral for his first career error early in the game.

"He's jelled super quick. I mean, he's just been a complete pro so far and he's been outstanding," Alonso said. "I know it's only been a few games, but I'm really, really impressed with how he's going about his business. I mean, the playing on the field speaks for itself, but just how he carries himself and goes about his business every day. He's a true pro so far and it's awesome to see."

Plenty of touted prospects like Acuña are making their debuts around the big leagues this month to begin gaining experience as the season winds down.

Nobody else is doing it at shortstop in New York City, filling in for a top MVP contender during the heat of a pressure-

packed playoff race.

"That confidence comes from my brother," the younger Acuña said.

He received a congratulatory text message from his big brother Tuesday night and plans to put the souvenir ball from his first home run in a trophy case in the new house he's building.

"Excited. Proud of myself," Acuña said. "I think this is something that I earned."

Acuña was acquired in a July 2023 trade when the Mets sent three-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer and cash to the Texas Rangers.

Immediately tabbed one of New York's top prospects, Acuña batted .258 with seven homers and 40 stolen bases in 131 games at Syracuse this season while splitting time at shortstop, second base and center field.

Now, he's got his eye on helping the Mets reach the playoffs. They have a pivotal three-game series coming up in Atlanta beginning next Tuesday — and even though Ronald Acuña Jr. won't be able to play, it's definitely on his mind, too.

"He just told me that he was going to be there," Luisangel Acuña said, "and just to make sure that I'm there so we can switch jerseys."

Liberty beat Mystics, clinch top seed in playoffs

Associated Press

More than half of the WNBA playoff seeds are set with the New York Liberty clinching the No. 1 seed on Tuesday night.

The rest of the postseason matchups will be determined when the regular season concludes Thursday night.

The Liberty defeated the Washington Mystics 87-71 to earn home court throughout the playoffs for only the second time in franchise history.

"It was important for us, one of our goals we set out," Liberty coach Sandy Brondello said.

"We still have to take care of business in the playoffs, but getting home court, we have a great arena and great fans. We want to play in front of our fans as much as we can."

The Minnesota Lynx clinched the No. 2 seed with their 78-76 victory over the Connecticut Sun. Minnesota is the hottest team right now, winning 13 of 14 since the Olympic break.

The Lynx will face Phoenix in the opening round of the playoffs, which begin Sunday.

The Sun are currently in

third with a one-game lead over Las Vegas, which assured itself no worse than the four seed with an 85-72 victory over Seattle on Tuesday night. The Aces hold the tiebreaker with Connecticut.

With the loss, the Storm are assured of the fifth seed. Caitlin Clark and the Indiana Fever are locked into sixth and will be on the road either in Connecticut or Las Vegas for the opening round.

The final playoff team is undecided. The Atlanta Dream hold the eighth spot after beat-

ing the Chicago Sky 86-70 on Tuesday.

Washington and the Sky are both a game behind the Dream. Atlanta closes the season at New York on Thursday, Chicago visits Connecticut and Washington hosts Indiana that night. The Dream need to either win or have both Chicago and Washington lose to advance.

The Mystics need a win and a loss by Atlanta. Chicago needs a victory and losses by both Washington and Atlanta to reach the postseason.

Astros top Padres after Altuve's wild ejection

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Moments after Jose Altuve was ejected for taking off his left cleat and sock while trying to prove a point, his replacement, Grae Kessinger scored the go-ahead run in the 10th inning and then made a sensational play at second base to seal the Houston Astros' wild 4-3 victory against the San Diego Padres on Tuesday night.

Altuve grounded out to third for the final out of the ninth but insisted he had fouled the ball off his foot. In a crazy scene, he took off his cleat and sock, trying to show the umpires where the ball hit, which got him ejected by plate umpire Brennan Miller. Manager Joe Espada was tossed after continuing to argue.

"Sometimes you get hit somewhere in the hand and you take your batting glove to show you got hit. I was expecting to do the same thing," Altuve said.

Kessinger started the 10th as the automatic runner in place of Altuve, advanced on Yordan Alvarez's groundout and scored on Kyle Tucker's single to left off Adrian Morejon (2-2).

Astros reliever Héctor Neris loaded the bases with two outs in the bottom of the 10th before getting Manny Machado to ground into a force play on a terrific backhanded stop by Kessinger, who flipped the ball to shortstop Jeremy Peña to end it.

It was Kessinger's first game with the Astros since July 13.

"Right before he hit it, I was thinking he's going to hit a ball up the middle and it's going to hit off the mound, and that's exactly what happened. But go catch it. That's the job," Kessinger said.

The Padres twice rallied to tie the game, first at 2-2 on Machado's 27th homer with one out in the sixth and at 3-3 in the eighth when Fernando Tatis Jr. scored on Josh Hader's two-out wild pitch.

Houston padded its lead in the AL West to five games with the Mariners' loss to the Yankees. San Diego failed to add to its

wild-card lead over Arizona and remained 3½ games behind Los Angeles in the NL West.

Giants 10, Orioles 0: Blake Snell struck out 12 in six innings and allowed just one hit as visiting San Francisco beat faltering Baltimore.

The Orioles have lost seven of nine to fall four games behind the first-place Yankees in the AL East. Baltimore held a half-game lead on Sept. 5 before its current tailspin, during which it has been outscored 46-18.

Rays 8, Red Sox 3: Shane Baz (3-3) allowed two runs and two hits in seven innings, Jose Siri homered and drove in four runs, and host Tampa Bay beat Boston.

Triston Casas and Romy Gonzalez homered for the Red Sox, who are five games back of the Twins for the last AL wild-card spot with 11 games remaining.

Marlins 11, Dodgers 9: Jesús Sánchez doubled twice and drove in three runs as host Miami beat Shohei Ohtani and the NL West-leading Los Angeles Dodgers.

Ohtani struck out three times but hit his 48th home run as he tries to become the first player in MLB history to hit 50 home runs and steal 50 bases in a season. He did not steal a base for the fifth straight game and remains at 48.

Twins 4, Guardians 1: Willi Castro hit a two-run homer, Matt Wallner had two RBIs and visiting Minnesota bounced back from a crushing loss in the series opener to beat AL Central-leading Cleveland and stay locked into the final AL wild card.

Castro connected in the eighth inning, and both of Wallner's RBI singles came off Gavin Williams (3-10), who has just one win in his last seven starts. The Twins maintained a 1½-game lead over Detroit for the last AL playoff berth.

Reds 6, Braves 5: Michael Harris II and Matt Olson homered for Atlanta, but the

Braves blew a four-run lead in a costly loss to host Cincinnati.

Pierce Johnson and Jesse Chavez struggled as Atlanta dropped its third consecutive game. The Braves (81-70) are battling the New York Mets for the third NL wild card, with the loss dropping them to two games out of the spot.

Mets 10, Nationals 1: Pete Alonso homered and drove in five runs, Luisangel Acuña added his first major league long ball to cap a huge night at the plate and host New York routed Washington to boost its chances in a close NL playoff race.

The Mets moved two games ahead of the rival Braves for the last NL wild card with 11 to play. A loud cheer went up in the crowd of 24,932 at Citi Field when the out-of-town scoreboard showed that Cincinnati had polished off a 6-5 comeback win over the Braves.

Phillies 5, Brewers 1: Bryce Harper hit a tiebreaking two-run homer in the sixth inning to back up the strong pitching of Zack Wheeler and visiting Philadelphia beat Milwaukee in a matchup of division leaders.

Nick Castellanos added a solo shot and Trea Turner went 3 for 5 to help the Phillies move closer to wrapping up the NL East while delaying the Brewers' NL Central championship celebration.

Athletics 4, Cubs 3: Shea Langeliers homered twice, including a towering solo drive that cleared the Wrigley Field bleachers in left, as visiting Oakland beat Chicago.

Ian Happ hit two solo homers for the Cubs (77-74), who fell six games behind the New York Mets for the final NL wild card with 11 games left.

Tigers 3, Royals 1 (10): Parker Meadows hit a broken-bat single in the 10th inning to give visiting Detroit the lead, moments after Trey Sweeney was given third base because of a balk, and the Tigers went on to beat Kansas City.

Riley Greene added an RBI single off Lucas Erceg (2-6) later in the 10th for the Tigers, helping them to remain 1½ games back of the Twins for the final AL wild-card spot. The Royals stayed 2½ games behind Baltimore for the first wild-card spot. They are 1½ games ahead of Minnesota.

Rockies 8, Diamondbacks 2: Hunter Goodman and Ezequiel Tovar hit home runs, Ryan Feltner pitched into the seventh inning for his first victory at Coors Field in two years, and host Colorado beat Arizona.

Christian Walker homered and Pavin Smith had two doubles and scored a run for the Diamondbacks, who dropped into a tie with the New York Mets for the last two NL wild-card spots. San Diego holds the top spot.

Yankees 11, Mariners 2: Aaron Judge drove in four runs in his first two at-bats, Juan Soto hit his 40th homer of the season and 200th of his career, and visiting New York moved to the cusp of clinching a playoff berth with a win over Seattle.

The Yankees could clinch at worst a wild-card spot in the AL with a victory over Seattle on Wednesday. The win in the opener of a six-game road trip pushed the Yankees' lead in the AL East to four games over Baltimore.

Rangers 13, Blue Jays 8: Wyatt Langford homered and doubled twice, struggling Jonah Heim delivered a two-run single to break a sixth-inning tie and host Texas beat Toronto.

Angels 5, White Sox 0: Rookie Eric Wagman homered for the second straight game, Griffin Canning threw six innings of three-hit ball, and host Los Angeles dealt Chicago its 116th loss.

Cardinals 3, Pirates 1: Lance Lynn threw six strong innings in his 100th appearance at Busch Stadium, Jordan Walker homered and host St. Louis beat Pittsburgh.