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WHAT RECESSION? UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN COUNTY DROPS TO 2.9%

Jobless percentage in region remains low despite fears of economic downturn ahead

BY PHILLIP MOLNAR

San Diego County ended 2022 with one of its lowest jobless rates of the year — 2.9 percent — as retail and construction work picked up.

The county's unemployment rate in December was the second lowest of the year and reversed a trend of slightly increasing jobless claims, the state Employment Development Department reported Friday. San Diego's lowest rate of the year was 2.7 percent in May.

San Diego's unemployment rate of 2.9 percent was lower than the state average of 3.7 percent and 3.3 percent for the nation. Many California counties saw their jobless claims shrink in December, in part, because of holiday retail hiring. Another factor is that California's job growth is outpacing the U.S. as a whole.

"California's employers added jobs more quickly than was the case in the national economy," said Taner Osman, research manager at Beacon Economics, "but labor shortages in the state dampened job growth towards the end of the year and will continue to be a drag on job growth in 2023."

San Diego County's unemployment rate stayed low throughout 2022 as the job market remained tight. The

region has still not recovered its pre-pandemic labor force. San Diego County's labor force — adults who either have a job or are actively looking for one — is still down compared with when COVID lockdowns started. San Diego County's labor force was 1.59 million in December down by 11,600 people compared with February 2020.

From November to December, the county added 5,400 non-farm jobs. Construction, retail and professional and business services (legal, scientific, waste management, architectural) all added about 1,700 jobs each. Other sectors to add work were educational and health services (nursing, social assistance) with 1,100, government (mainly education) with 500 jobs and manufacturing with 200 jobs.

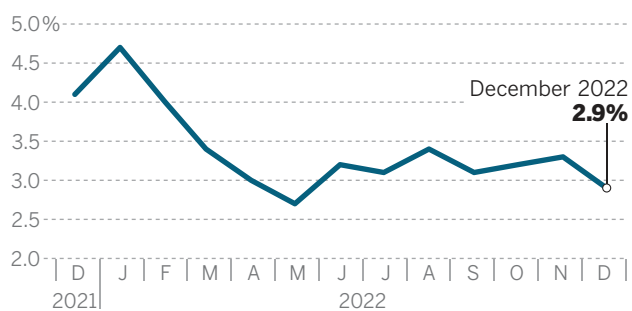
When adjusted for seasonal swings, the unemployment rate was 2.87 percent, said Daniel Enemark, chief economist at the San Diego Workforce Partnership. That compares to the adjusted rate of 3.5 percent in the nation and 4.1 percent in California.

The low jobless rate stands out in the recent business and political climate because many people think we are in a recession, or soon to be in one. Most

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County's unemployment rate drops

The jobless rate in December was the second lowest of the year.



Source: California Employment Development Department

U-T



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T PHOTOS

Royce Williams, 97, of Escondido salutes during the national anthem on Friday at the San Diego Air & Space Museum, where he was awarded the Navy Cross.

AFTER DECADES, PILOT RECEIVES NAVY CROSS

Secretary of Navy awards 'upgrade' to Escondido man

BY GARY ROBBINS

In one of the most masterful pieces of flying in Navy history, Royce Williams of Escondido took on seven Soviet MiGs in Korea in 1952 and shot down four of them in a solo dogfight that was kept secret for decades because it was fraught with political sensitivities.

He was quietly awarded the Silver Star the following year. But that wasn't the end of the story.

At the urging of military and political leaders, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro visited San Diego Friday and gave the 97-year-old Williams an "upgrade," awarding him the Navy Cross in front of about 400 people, includ-



"This is the kind of thing I've seen in the movies. ... I'm thrilled," Williams said.

ing U.S. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan.

The Navy Cross is the second highest military honor conferred by the Navy.

"The thought of one pilot who wasn't planning to be the mission lead that day to go into a combat like that and to become the mission leader and actually have to fight off seven MiGs is

extraordinary," Del Toro said after the ceremony, which was held at the San Diego Air & Space Museum.

"And to get shot up the way his plane got shot up is extraordinary," he said. "Even after the combat action was over, to actually go back on that aircraft carrier with a disabled plane essentially just took tremen-

dous, tremendous courage and skill."

Williams, a humble, soft-spoken man, smiled and said, "This is the kind of thing I've seen in the movies. Never thought I'd be part of it. I'm thrilled."

The dogfight Del Toro described occurred on Nov. 18, 1952, while Williams and three other Navy pilots were flying their F9F-5 aircraft along the Yalu River, a demarcation line between North Korean and Soviet territories.

The Soviets were not directly involved in the Korean War, and the U.S. wanted to avoid an expansion of hostilities to avert triggering World War III.

But things turned hairy when Williams and his fellow pilots unexpectedly encountered the Soviet MiGs — planes that were faster and more maneuverable

SEE **CROSS** • A6

DISTRICT: VISTA HIGH FOOTBALL PLAYERS DISCIPLINED

Coaching staff to be restructured after viral video incident

BY LYND SAY WINKLEY

A group of Vista High School football players have been disciplined and a new coaching staff is being installed after an investigation into the school's football program found a pattern of "inappropriate and unacceptable behavior" among some players, district officials said Friday.

The announcement comes months after protests erupted over a viral video depicting an incident involving a 14-year-old boy in the school's varsity football team locker room.

In the video, the boy, who is shirtless and wearing shorts and socks, is picked up and carried into a room, where he is pushed to the floor. He is surrounded by other teens, one of whom is holding what looks like a wooden broom handle. It is unclear what, if anything, is done with it. The video ends with someone helping the

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FLOODS, FLORA AND A DROUGHT FAR FROM OVER

Storms create rare winter bloom in the Anza-Borrego area

BY JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH

Flowers are blooming in the desert. Flooding and sewage spills have largely receded. Dams continue to collect runoff. But the drought is still far from over.

San Diego recently weathered a monthlong series of storms that also blanketed much of the West with badly needed snow. Still, the possibility of state-mandated water restrictions looms over the region this year, especially if dry conditions return to the Sierra Nevada.

Residents and local officials in San Diego are now taking stock of the situation as the deluges appear to be giving way to sunnier skies. While urban areas are still riddled with potholes and beach closures, rains have revived parched natural landscapes.

Nowhere in San Diego County are these effects more pronounced than east of the mountains in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, where storms have produced a rare winter bloom.

"It's a much larger scale than I've ever seen in 60 years," said Mark Jor-



K.C. ALFRED U-T

City of San Diego worker Anthony Ortega clears water out of a pothole on Thursday to prepare it for repair after recent rains.

gensen, longtime resident and former park superintendent. "Pretty cool. It means a lot to the wildlife after such a hard-hitting drought."

Downpours in the desert — totaling about 4.5 inches since September — have spurred the flowering of several plant species, from purple-colored sand verbena to the iconic, red-tipped ocotillo.

"The gamut of annual wildflowers is spectacular," said Jim Dice, reserve manager for UC Irvine's Anza-Borrego Desert Research Center.

"I mean, SEE **STORMS** • A7



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T

A bee feeds off a newly bloomed desert sunflower in the Anza-Borrego Desert on Thursday.

NAVY SEAL WHO WENT AWOL IN '19 KILLED IN UKRAINE

Records indicate ex-service member trained in Coronado

U-T STAFF & NEWS SERVICES

A former Navy SEAL was killed in Ukraine this week, the Navy said Friday, the latest American combat fatality in a war that has drawn legions of international fighters.

Daniel Swift died Wednesday, the Navy said in a brief statement accompanying the release of his official military records. He enlisted in 2005, earning awards that suggested combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, though officials declined to describe those operations. Navy SEALs and other elite Special Operations troops conduct some of the U.S. military's most secretive and sensitive missions, and the government seldom discloses what those tasks entail.

Swift briefly left the military in 2014 and returned the next year. His career took an unusual turn in 2019, his

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UKRAINE

FROM A1
service records show, when the Navy classified him as an “active deserter.” Officials did not provide any additional details.

Swift's service records indicate he spent several stints training as a SEAL in Coronado beginning in 2005. He was also assigned to West Coast special warfare units between 2007 and 2014, and again from 2016 until the time he deserted.

After he deserted, Naval Special Warfare Command stripped him of his SEAL qualification — essentially revoking the trident that SEALs wear.

Court records show Swift's wife filed for divorce in Chula Vista Superior Court on Halloween 2018. A

criminal complaint filed three days later in North County Superior Court charged him with 10 felony and misdemeanor counts related to domestic violence — one for alleged battery on Oct. 30, and nine for assault, false imprisonment and child cruelty that allegedly occurred Oct. 31, the same day as the divorce filing.

According to the Navy, he deserted a few months later, in March 2019. The next month, a North County judge issued a \$250,000 bench warrant for his arrest in connection with the domestic violence case.

It was not immediately clear what drew Swift to the war or for how long he had been engaged in the fighting. The Navy's statement said only, “We cannot speculate as to why the former Sailor was in Ukraine.”

U.S. officials said he was not fighting in an official capacity. Attempts to reach Swift's family were not immediately successful.

In a self-published e-book, “Fall of a Man,” Swift described a troubled childhood in which his parents divorced and he at one point ran away from home. He married young and had his first child at 20. Three more children would follow, the book says.

After Navy SEAL training, he wrote, Swift was assigned to a team based in Hawaii. He was frustrated that his unit deployed for the first few years of his career, and was present when a colleague, Eric Shellenberger, was killed in a diving accident while training in Washington state in May 2009, he recalled.

Swift vented in the book

about his experiences during a deployment to Iraq, writing that he and his fellow SEALs often knew where enemies were but were not allowed to kill them. They did not trust the Iraqi troops they took along on operations, he wrote.

Swift also recounted a Humvee rollover in Iraq in which he was tossed around inside “like being a bean in a maraca.” At least two service members broke bones, he said, but he survived relatively unscathed.

“Afghanistan,” he wrote, “was, and still is, my best deployment and that's all I'll say about it. ... I have nothing bad to say about my time in Afghanistan.”

Time magazine, which was first to report his death, reported earlier Friday that Swift was killed fighting alongside Ukrainian troops

in the east, which is the scene of the most intense combat in the country — what Pentagon officials have characterized as a close-in knife fight.

The fight over the town of Bakhmut and nearby Soledar has been particularly bloody. The Russian mercenary group Wagner has sent waves of personnel to push back the Ukrainians, with both sides suffering substantial losses.

“When we kill five out of 10 of their soldiers at once, they are replenished again to 10 over the course of several hours,” said Andriy Kryshchenko, a deputy battalion commander of a national guard unit posted in the region.

The United States has ramped up security assistance to Ukraine in recent weeks in anticipation of a

spring offensive, the success of which probably would depend on how well the Ukrainians can dislodge Russian forces in the eastern Donbas region.

There is no official count of U.S. volunteer fighters in Ukraine. At least five other Americans have died there since the war began in late February, according to an unofficial tally of such reports.

The State Department declined to address Swift's death specifically but said in a statement that it could confirm the recent death of a U.S. citizen in Ukraine.

“We are in touch with his family and providing all possible consular assistance,” the department said.

Staff writer Alex Riggins, The Washington Post and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

CROSS Dogfight kept secret for decades

FROM A1
than Panther jets. They immediately opened fire.

The attack and engine problems led three of the American pilots to quickly bolt from the area. Williams got trapped and had to take on all seven MiGs.

So began one of the longest dogfights in naval history, a 35-minute brawl that Williams survived with his peerless flying skills and ability to bring the MiGs into his gun sights. Four of the MiGs went down.

“A lot of it was awareness of where they were and how I had to maneuver to avoid them,” Williams, who retired with the rank of captain, told the Union-Tribune last year.

“They were taking turns. I decided if I concentrated on shooting them down, then I'd become an easy target. So my initial goal was to look for defensive opportunities when they made mistakes.”

The strategy worked. He then hightailed it back to his carrier, the Oriskany, in a plane riddled with 263 holes.

Williams had left the



Royce Williams is congratulated by Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro after receiving the Navy Cross. U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa (second from left) backed the campaign and pressed the Navy to give Williams the honor.

carrier in a snowstorm. Now, he found himself trying to land with a broken hydraulic system. The Oriskany performed a maneuver that gave him the best possible chance to land safely, which he managed to do.

A short time later, he was told that he could never tell anyone — not even his wife — about the dogfight to avoid antagonizing the Soviets.

The story remained secret until the early 2000s

when the U.S. declassified certain records from the Korean War.

Military officials, veterans and political figures later began to lobby the Navy to present Williams with a higher medal.

Some felt that he should be awarded the Medal of Honor. The effort led to a formal campaign known as Operation Just Reward and included support from U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Bonsall, who pushed the

Navy particularly hard.

The campaign got the attention of Secretary Del Toro, who investigated the matter and then, last year, visited Williams at his home in Escondido.

“To see him in person, to listen to actions that he took on that day — in defense of himself and defense of his shipmates, defense of those other pilots that were in the air with him — was truly extraordinary, like nothing I have experienced in my time as Secretary of the Navy,” Del Toro said.

Issa is among those who believes the Navy should go further and give Williams the Medal of Honor.

“We're not going to give up,” Issa said. “We believe the Medal of Honor, which is a presidential determination, is warranted. But today goes a long way toward straightening out the ambiguity, if you will.”

He added, “What happened 70 years ago with Capt. Williams was a battle between us and the Soviet Union while engaged in a proxy war over North Korea and South Korea.

“We're now in a proxy war with the Russians in Ukraine. And in so many ways it is fitting that ... we're recognizing Capt. Williams' work, but we are still in a battle against an evil empire. Perhaps a smaller one, but still an evil empire.”

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VISTA Video of boy in locker room drew protests

FROM A1
boy up and shoving him out of the room.

The incident was one of two reported to the county Sheriff's Department involving possible student misconduct at the school on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1. Officials said the incident in the video was being investigated as a possible battery, and that the boy was not sexually assaulted.

The department was not immediately able to provide an update on those investigations late Friday.

Following the allegations, the district said it asked independent investigators to look into the Vista High School football program.

“The outcome of the investigation indicated a pat-

tern of inappropriate and unacceptable behavior occurring among a small number of football players,” Vista Unified School District Superintendent Matt Doyle said in a letter sent Friday to the campus community.

He added that although the district couldn't elaborate on the discipline imposed, “I assure our community that consequences have been and are currently being imposed on a number of student athletes.”

The superintendent also announced that the high school would be restructuring its football coaching staff and that the district would begin recruitment soon. Pat Moramarco, the high school's athletic director, said the head coach job would likely be posted in the coming week and may come with a teaching position.

Dave Bottom was the high school's head coach when the two incidents were reported. The football team went 28-44 in seven seasons under his leadership, and 3-17 in the last two seasons.

Bottom was placed on leave and a part-time coach was released as school officials investigated the matter, a school official con-

firmed in September.

“I would like to take this opportunity to reassure all parents, students, staff, and members of our community that we expect that the values of our school district are practiced on every campus and during every event, both academic and extracurricular,” the letter from Doyle read. “How we behave and treat each other matters.”

Officials said although the investigation took months, the district implemented several initiatives immediately after learning of the incidents. These actions included hosting an athletics and sportsmanship workshop, holding implicit bias training for athletes and coaches, and engaging all football players in a restorative justice process with assistance from the National Conflict Resolution Center.

All high schools re-examined their coaching protocols as well as their codes of conduct and expectations for behavior for student athletes and coaches, district officials said.

Staff writer John Maffei contributed to this story. lyndsay.winkley@suniontribune.com

JOBLESS

FROM A1
definitions of a recession include a drop in economic output (GDP) coupled with high unemployment. At an economic forum at the University of San Diego this week, most speakers said a nationwide recession was likely to hit this year.

Despite recent high-profile layoffs at tech companies — Google, Amazon, Microsoft — the nationwide jobless rate, especially in California, has stayed low.

Ray Major, chief economist at the San Diego Association of Governments, said at the economic forum that the region would probably be better off than many areas in a coming recession because of a diverse economy. He said it has several “recession-proof” industries, such as health care and the military.

On an annual basis, San

Diego County's tourism industry showed the biggest recovery. The leisure and hospitality sector (including work at hotels, casinos and restaurants) added 18,100 jobs. It was followed by the professional and business services sector — which includes high-paying jobs in scientific research — with 9,000 new jobs.

Other sectors adding jobs were educational and health services, with 8,900; government, with 8,800; construction with 5,800; and the catch-all “other services” sector (laundry, maintenance, religious) adding 2,400.

Retail lost 1,100 positions and financial activities (real estate, insurance, investments) lost 900 jobs.

Despite concerns over inflation and rising energy costs, the unemployment rate has been a source of relief for the Biden administration. In a statement about the latest job num-

bers, President Biden said the unemployment rate was its lowest in 50 years and the last two years have had record job growth.

“We still have work to do to bring down inflation, and help American families feeling the cost-of-living squeeze,” he wrote. “But we are moving in the right direction.”

Compared with other parts of California, San Diego County was near the lower end of jobless claims with its rate of 2.9 percent. State labor officials do not seasonally adjust jobless rates for individual counties.

The rate was 4.4 percent in Los Angeles County, 2.5 percent in Orange County, 2 percent in San Francisco County, 6.9 percent in Monterey County, 2 percent in Santa Clara County, 4.5 percent in Santa Cruz County and 3.7 percent in Riverside County.

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