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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Defense chief again sails South China Sea

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE USS JOHN C. STENNIS — U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter on Friday made a second sail of the South China Sea, underscoring the U.S. commitment to its Asia-Pacific allies amid increasing tensions with China.

Carter said his presence on the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis, which was sailing about 60 to 70 miles west of the Philippines' main island, Luzon, was to send "a message to the region."

"The United States intends to continue to play a role in keeping peace and stability in this region," said Carter, who was accompanied by Philippine Defense Minister Voltaire Gazmin.

During the two-hour sail, the defense chiefs observed take-offs and landings of U.S. F/A-18 Super Hornets and addressed a gathering of troops in the Stennis' hangar bay.

The Stennis' location during the patrol put it between the Philippines and the Paracel Islands, which China has built

up over the last year on natural reefs and where it has placed landing strips, air defense systems and advanced fighters.

The Stennis, the flagship of Carrier Strike Group 3, has been deployed to the region for the last three months, said Rear Adm. Ron Boxall, the strike group commander.

The carrier has spent the last three weeks in the South China Sea performing routine patrols but not the freedom-of-navigation operations that involve a U.S. vessel sailing within the 12-mile waters that border any of the Chinese-claimed man-made islands.

Even so, Boxall said, the strike group has experienced "significant interaction with the Chinese navy" during its patrols.

"The Chinese navy has gotten a lot bigger," Boxall said. "We see quite a presence out here."

China has sharply criticized the deployment, accusing the U.S. of returning to a "Cold War" mentality and threatening to resolutely defend the reclaimed and militarized islands, according to The Associated Press.

Carter said the idea that the

U.S. was the one escalating tensions in the region was "not only incorrect, it's backwards."

"The only reason the question even comes up is because of what has gone on over the last year, and that is a question of Chinese behavior," Carter said, noting that U.S. aircraft carriers have patrolled the South China Sea for decades. "What's new is not an American carrier in this region. What's new is the context of tension which exists, which we want to reduce."

Carter was in the Philippines this week to meet with his defense counterparts and observe the closing ceremonies of Balikatan, an annual joint exercise involving more than 5,000 U.S. personnel. During his visit, Carter announced the U.S. would begin regular rotations to at least five Philippine bases here and leave a contingent of Marines, airmen and aircraft behind following the exercise.

Initially, U.S. forces will operate out of two additional locations — Clark Air Base and Camp Aguinaldo, Carter said Thursday. The rotations are meant to reassure the Philippines in light of China's buildup

on the islands, several of which were little more than rocks and submerged reefs before China began reclaiming the land.

"With each Balikatan and each cruise by the Stennis, with each new multilateral exercise and each new defense agreement, we add a stitch to the fabric of the region's security network. This is the network — peaceful, principled, and inclusive — America continues to stand for and stand with," Carter said.

Ownership of the South China Sea territories is disputed among several nations in the region. China claims about 90 percent of the sea based on historical claims, while others — including the U.S. — advocate settling ownership claims based on international law.

It is Carter's second South China Sea sail. Last fall, he boarded the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt shortly after the destroyer USS Lassen conducted a freedom-of-navigation transit within 12 nautical miles of a China-occupied island.

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Remains of most Marines lost in Hawaii helo crash ID'd

By AARON KIDD
Stars and Stripes

The remains of nine of 12 Marines killed when a pair of CH-53E helicopters crashed during routine training earlier this year in Hawaii have been recovered and identified, the Marine Corps said Thursday.

Efforts recently wrapped up to find remains and salvage wreckage after the Jan. 14 crash about 2 miles offshore of Waimea Bay in Oahu, a Marine Corps statement said.

Initial around-the-clock

searches yielded no survivors, and the Marines — assigned to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463, Marine Aircraft Group 24, 1st Marine Airlift Wing at Marine Corps Base Hawaii — were officially declared dead about a week later.

The remains of Sgt. Dillon Semolina, Sgt. Adam Schoeller and Cpl. Christopher Orlando were not recovered, the statement said.

Capt. Cassandra Gesecki, a Marine Corps spokeswoman, described the remains of the others, found in February, as

"trace DNA elements."

"Significant wreckage from both helicopters has been recovered," the statement said.

The USNS Salvor — a Military Sealift Command rescue-and-salvage ship — and Marine Group 24 used remotely operated underwater vehicles to search the crash site and map the debris field, which was strewn across an area roughly 300 feet below the surface. More than 100 dives were conducted at the site, the statement said.

Before wrapping up their ef-

forts, "units twice swept the entire debris field, the surrounding area and the flight path from the debris field back up to the initial aircraft collision site," the statement said.

The cause of the crash is still under investigation.

Anyone who discovers additional debris washed ashore should call either the Honolulu Police Department at 808-529-3111 or the Marine Aircraft Group 24 duty officer at 808-590-6961.

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Proposed cuts to Post 9/11 GI Bill decried

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Veteran advocates and House lawmakers rallied Thursday on Capitol Hill to oppose cuts to the Post 9/11 GI Bill that they say would break a “sacred” trust.

The national groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and nine Democrats decried an effort to balance budgets by slashing housing payments to college students using their parents’ GI Bill benefits.

More than 1 million veterans who served on active duty since the 9/11 attacks and their family members have used the GI

Bill benefits to get an education since it was created in 2009. Despite the popularity, the House cut a section of the benefits in February to pay for a massive veteran reform package, and the Senate is now weighing whether to take up the measure.

“When we ask our troops to make a promise to us to run into battle, we don’t accept it when they turn around and say, ‘You know what, now that the bullets are flying the cost is a little bit high,’” Rep. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., said. “So how dare we decide years later after we’ve made this promise, after people have enlisted or stayed in the military partly partially because of this benefit, to say, ‘You

know what, we decide it’s too expensive, you cost us too much.’”

Duckworth, a combat veteran who lost both legs in Iraq, said she used the GI Bill’s education benefits, and her husband passed his benefits on to their child.

The 50 percent reduction in housing stipends proposed in the House bill would break what they consider a sacred trust with veterans, the veterans and lawmakers said.

Paul Rieckhoff, the founder and CEO of IAVA, said the proposal is a new low point for Congress. He pointed out that the GI Bill has never faced any cuts up until now.

“We are drawing a line in

the sand,” Rieckhoff said. “Do not use the GI Bill as a piggy bank.”

The reduction in housing money is one measure in a much larger omnibus bill aimed at improving veterans’ services. The larger bill was written by various lawmakers and sponsored by Rep. Brad Wenstrup, R-Ohio.

To pay for the veterans bill, the Republican leadership in the House required lawmakers to cut spending within veterans programs, and the GI Bill became the target, said Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., who rallied against the cuts Thursday.

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2nd strong quake hits Japan

Associated Press

MASHIKI, Japan — A powerful earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.1 struck southern Japan early Saturday, a day after a smaller quake hit the same region and killed nine people.

Japanese broadcaster NHK said a number of calls were coming in from residents reporting people trapped inside houses and buildings, and rescue workers were scrambling to help.

The quake shook the Kumamoto region at 1:25 a.m. Saturday, and several aftershocks soon followed. Japan’s Meteorological Agency issued an advisory for a tsunami up to 3 feet high along the coast west of the epicenter in Kumamoto; the advisory was lifted less than an hour later.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority said no abnormalities were found at the Sendai nuclear plant, where the only two of Japan’s 43 operable reactors are online.

Thursday’s weaker, magnitude 6.5 earthquake brought down buildings and injured about 800 people, in addition to the nine deaths. The epicenter of Saturday’s earthquake

was about 8 miles northwest of Thursday’s, and at a depth of about 6 miles, Saturday’s quake was shallower.

It hit residents who were still in shock from the previous night’s horrors and had suffered through more than 100 aftershocks in the interim.

On Friday, Yuichiro Yoshikado described the horror of the earthquake striking as he was taking a bath in his Mashiki apartment.

“It’s as if all control was lost. I thought I was going to die, and I couldn’t bear it any longer.”

A bright spot broadcast repeatedly on TV Friday was the rescue of an apparently uninjured baby, wrapped in a blanket and carried out of a collapsed home.

Police said Friday that concern about aftershocks kept many people from starting the huge task of cleaning up. Since Saturday’s quake was bigger, Thursday’s was technically a foreshock.

About 44,000 people stayed in shelters after Thursday’s quake.

The dead included five women and four men, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said.

Army OKs 22 women for combat

USA Today

WASHINGTON — The Army announced Friday the first 22 women to be commissioned as infantry and armor officers under new rules that open all ground combat jobs to females this year.

The move is a major step toward integrating women into so-called ground combat jobs, placing them in leadership roles in occupations that were never open to them.

The 22 women are near completion of their officer training and will be commissioned as second lieutenants in coming

weeks. They need to successfully complete the specialty schools and meet the physical requirements before fully qualifying in the fields.

The military had expected only a small number of women to volunteer for the jobs, at least initially. The Marine Corps said about 200 women a year would likely join newly opened ground combat positions, including the infantry.

The latest Army numbers seem to reflect that forecast, though the numbers could grow as more women enter the fields and pave the way for others.

Ship could have fired on Russian planes

MIAMI — Secretary of State John Kerry said Thursday that under U.S. military rules of engagement, the Navy ship that Russian military jets buzzed in the Baltic Sea this week could have opened fire.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Donald Cook reported that pairs of Russian Su-24 attack planes made numerous close-range passes on Monday and

Tuesday. The planes appeared to be unarmed. On at least one occasion, an Su-24 came within an estimated 30 feet of the Cook, which was in international waters about 70 nautical miles from the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which hosts Russian military forces.

In remarks to CNN Espanol in Miami, Kerry condemned the Russian actions and said that “under the rules of engagement,” it “could have been a shutdown.”

From The Associated Press

As Curry seeks second title, James looks to reclaim crown

Associated Press

The Golden State Warriors don't want a record without a championship.

Those 73 victories were quite an achievement, but they also guaranteed nothing more than the right to open every playoff series at home. Now, they're chasing 16 more.

As Michael Jordan said after the Warriors' broke his Chicago Bulls' record for victories: "I look forward to seeing what they do in the playoffs."

That starts Saturday, when the Warriors host the Houston Rockets in a rematch of last year's Western Conference finals. They went on to beat Cleveland for the championship, and they enter the postseason as the favorites to win again.

They know what it means if they don't. "We have an opportunity to win 16 games and can accomplish that goal and do it all. It would suck to not finish the job off," Stephen Curry said.

"I know having gone through that experience last year a lot goes into each playoff series in that journey to win a championship and it's entirely different than the regular season, so I think we're prepared for that. But I mean it's hard to say right now how we'll feel if we don't because we don't have that mindset. So it's all about winning and we're still in good position right now."

Also Saturday: No. 2 Toronto hosts seventh-seeded Indiana in the Eastern Conference and No. 5 Boston visits No. 4 Atlanta. In the West, third-seeded Oklahoma City hosts No. 6 Dallas.

On Sunday, it's East champion Cleveland against No. 8 Detroit, with No. 3 Miami following against No. 6 Charlotte. San Antonio hosts Memphis in the opener of the 2-7 series in the West and the fourth-seeded Clippers are home against No. 5 Portland.

The Spurs, Thunder and Clippers all are formidable teams, but then again the Warriors went 10-1 against them. And if Golden State does make it through the West, there's a good chance of an NBA Finals rematch.

LeBron James has been on his top of his game lately, and the Cavaliers are loaded for their second shot with Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love after neither was healthy after Game 1 of last year's series.

"If Cleveland plays well, I mean, they've got the best team.

And the thing that they have, and a couple of other teams have it too, but when you have a superstar, he can elevate his game," Charlotte coach Steve Clifford said.

"If they play well, it'll be difficult for anybody in the East to beat them four times. Somebody can beat them once or twice maybe, but not four times in my opinion."

Some things to watch during the postseason:

Raptors ready? Toronto lost in the first round as a higher seed the last two years, getting swept last season by Washington. But the Raptors went 56-26 in their best regular season ever, have an All-Star backcourt in Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan, and believe they are ready after posting a winning record against every other East playoff team.

"We've learned from it, I know we've grown from it, we showed remnants of growing from it throughout the season," coach Dwane Casey said, "and there will be no difference going into the playoffs and being in those similar situations."

Four threes: Four teams in the East finished tied for third with 48-34 records. So take away the numbers in their seeds, and there is no real difference between Miami and Charlotte, or Boston and Atlanta, setting up the possibility for lengthy, competitive series.

Fear the Beard? The Warriors handled the Rockets in five games last year and appear too deep for this Houston team that needed to win its final three games just to finish .500 and earn a playoff spot on the final night of the season. But James Harden makes them dangerous after averaging 29 points, second only to Curry's 30.1, and also ranking sixth in the NBA with 7.5 assists per game.

"I believe James Harden is good enough for one game," TNT's Chris Webber said.

Who wins? The Cavaliers are the class of the East, but the Warriors are better than everyone — and better than anyone in the NBA's ever been in the regular season. They seem too good to lose — unless James can do something spectacular.

"His team needs him to do everything," Webber said. "The Warriors are the front runners. He is going to have to play the best ball we've seen."

WNBA takes UConn players in first 3 picks

UNCASVILLE, Conn. — It took three picks for Breanna Stewart, Moriah Jefferson and Morgan Tuck to make WNBA history.

The UConn trio, who led the Huskies to four consecutive national championships, went 1-2-3 in the draft Thursday night. It's the first time that three players from the same school were the top three.

"It shows how special of a group we are. When we do something with the three of us, we do it together," Stewart said. "We went in as freshmen together. We won four national championships together. Now, we all were drafted together."

Stewart — the three-time AP Player of the Year — went first to Seattle, Jefferson second to San Antonio and Tuck third to Connecticut. Stewart was talking to the media when she heard Tuck was drafted third by the Sun.

"I'm so happy," she said. "That might have me more happy than being No. 1 overall. To see her go through all that she's been through, to leave with us and then for us to go 1-2-3, that's picture perfect."

No draft in any major sport has ever had the top three picks come from the same school, according to information provided to the WNBA by the Elias Sports Bureau.

Bills' Harvin retiring after 7 NFL seasons

Percy Harvin's tumultuous career has come to an abrupt end.

The 27-year-old wide receiver is retiring after seven NFL seasons, Harvin's agent, Joel Segal, confirmed to The Associated Press on Friday.

Harvin played five games for the Buffalo Bills last season before being placed on injured reserve with lingering hip and knee injuries.

Harvin's decision was first reported by Pro Football Talk.

The Bills were Harvin's third team in two years after he was traded by the Seattle Seahawks to the New York Jets during the 2014 season.

Olympic soccer draw set for US women

The U.S. women's soccer team will open its quest for a fourth straight Olympic gold medal against New Zealand, then play France and Colombia in the first round of the tournament in Brazil.

The Americans were drawn Thursday to play New Zealand on Aug. 3 at Belo Horizonte. The U.S. meets France three days later, also in Belo Horizonte, then plays Colombia on Aug. 9 at Manaus in the Amazon, where the American men tied Portugal 2-2 at the 2014 World Cup.

Brazil, China, South Africa and Sweden are in Group E, and Australia, Canada, Germany and Zimbabwe are in Group F.

Canada and the United States each qualified for the Olympics at the CONCACAF qualifying tournament in Texas earlier this year.

There are 12 teams in the women's tournament.

— Associated Press

Kerr enjoying ride with Golden State

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Steve Kerr makes one thing perfectly clear: This special season is not about him. Far from it. Even if he is so perfectly entwined with the record-setting Golden State Warriors and the Chicago Bulls group Kerr played for 20 years ago that just lost its all-time wins record to the team he now leads.

Kerr will tell you he didn't even coach the first 43 games and that record 24-0 start, after all. And he wants Luke Walton to receive the proper credit for the initial, special stretch of the season before the Warriors' second-year coach returned Jan. 22 from a leave of absence, which began the first week of training camp in October following complications from two back surgeries.

Kerr jokes how easy he has had it this time around, with a deep lineup starring reigning MVP Stephen Curry and triple-double machine Draymond Green.

"We try to pick our spots. Over 82 games, a coach's voice gets old quickly, so fortunately Luke coached the first (43), so they didn't hear mine that often," Kerr said in his usual good-natured tone. "But I think the thing we

try to do is to not really worry about wins and losses. It's more how we're playing."

Yet in recent weeks, Kerr faced constant questions about victories and chasing records — Golden State's pursuit of his old 72-10 mark with the 1995-96 Bulls, to be exact. While Kerr acknowledged being uneasy about putting so much effort into a goal other than winning a title, he relented because of his players' wishes.

Last month, he called a team meeting and asked his players if they wanted to go for the record or get some rest for the playoffs. When the majority desired to take a run at 73, Kerr agreed only with the guarantee that they would be honest with him about their health and when they needed a breather.

"He's the coach of the year. Any time you coach a team to the record we have and the behind the scenes stuff, he's been orchestrating everything," guard Klay Thompson said. "He's our head honcho and all these great ideas always flow for him. He's really a players' coach. He knows what we're going through."

Kerr played alongside Michael Jordan — "Yet another time the two of us are mentioned in the same breath. Whatever," Kerr

quipped — on the record-setting Bulls team, then his Warriors bested that mark by beating Memphis in Wednesday's regular-season finale. Golden State hosts Houston on Saturday to start the playoffs.

Kerr played all 82 games for Chicago that season, and did so in four straight years overall — from 1993-94 through 1996-97. He takes pride in that durability and stability he brought the Bulls while winning three championships.

He went on to win two more titles as a player in San Antonio before launching a successful career off the court.

After a stint as general manager in Phoenix and then his TV work, Kerr immediately left his mark on the Bay Area. For all of those who questioned his ability with no experience, there's no denying now that he's a top-flight NBA coach — capturing a championship in his first season and setting the wins record in his second.

"Steve, he's a terrific leader. This is not anything that's new," said New Orleans coach and former Kerr top assistant Alvin Gentry. "He's been preparing for this for a long time. He put in so much work. I didn't have any doubt that he was going to be a great coach."



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Velasquez, Phils blank Padres

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Call him Vinny the K. Vince Velasquez struck out a career-high 16 in a dominant three-hitter, Ryan Howard homered and the Philadelphia Phillies beat the San Diego Padres 3-0 Thursday.

"My emotions were running high," Velasquez said. "That was very fun."

Velasquez (2-0) had no walks and extended his scoreless streak to 15 innings with his first shutout in nine career starts. The 23-year-old right-hander, acquired in the trade that sent former closer Ken Giles to Houston, had nine strikeouts in six innings in a 1-0 win at the New York Mets last Saturday.

"He's something else," Phillies manager Pete Mackanin said. "Very impressive."

The Padres became the first team in major league history to be shut out five times in the first 10 games. They scored one run — with two outs in the ninth on Wednesday — in the last three games.

"We have to be more competitive," Padres manager Andy Green said. "It's time for us to make more mental adjustments in the box."

Lefty Drew Pomeranz (1-1) tied his career best with eight strikeouts in six innings, allowing three hits and two runs.

Cardinals 7, Brewers 0: Jaime Garcia pitched a one-hitter, allowing only Domingo Santana's lined single into right field with two outs in the sixth inning, in St. Louis' victory over visiting Milwaukee.

Garcia struck out 13, three more than his previous career high, and caught eight of them looking at third strikes. The left-hander is 4-1 with a 1.44 ERA in his last five starts against the Brewers.

Marcus Stroman (2-0) allowed two runs and three hits in eight innings to win his seventh consecutive decision. Stroman retired the final 11 batters he faced, and improved to 5-1 with a 2.39 ERA in six career starts against the Yankees. Roberto Osuna finished for his fourth save.

Royals 6, Astros 2: Ian Kennedy threw seven strong innings, and Eric Hosmer hit a two-run double during a five-run sixth and visiting Kansas City had a season-high 13 hits to beat Houston.

Kennedy (2-0) started with five hitless innings and retired 14 straight before Carlos Gomez's leadoff single to center in the sixth. Kennedy struck out seven and allowed a run on two hits and two walks.

Mike Moustakas hit a solo homer in the first and went 2-for 4 with a walk. The defending World Series champs are 7-2 after winning the final three games of the four-game set with the Astros.

Rangers 6, Orioles 3: Rougned Odor had a tiebreaking double in a five-run sixth inning and host Texas handed Baltimore its second straight loss after a 7-0 start.

The Texas rally preserved a career-best nine-game winning streak for ace Cole Hamels, who struggled after retiring the first eight hitters and left facing a 3-1 deficit in the sixth.

After Tom Wilhelmson (1-0) kept the Rangers close by getting an inning-ending double play, five straight Texas hitters reached in the sixth against Baltimore starter Chris Tillman (1-1).

Nationals 6, Braves 2: Bryce Harper hit his first grand slam to reach 100 career home runs, launching a shot that smashed a panel on an electronic scoreboard and sent host Washington over Atlanta, and the Braves to 0-9.

Atlanta and Minnesota, which fell to 0-9 hours earlier, are the first major league teams to lose nine in a row to start a season since Detroit in 2003, STATS said. Atlanta moved closer to the team-worst 0-10 beginning in 1988.

Harper connected for his slam in the third inning and became the eighth-youngest player to hit 100 homers. The reigning NL MVP is 23 years, 181 days old — Hall of Famer Mel Ott was more than a full year younger when he became the youngest to do it.

White Sox 3, Twins 1: Minnesota dropped to 0-9, falling to Mat Latos, Avisail Garcia and visiting Chicago.

The Twins have scored only 14 runs this season.

The White Sox (7-2) won their fourth in a row, extending their best start since an 8-1 run in 1982. They're 6-1 on the road after recording their first sweep at Minnesota since 2012.

Blue Jays 4, Yankees 2: Josh Donaldson hit a three-run home run, Troy Tulowitzki added a solo shot and host Toronto beat New York.

Marcus Stroman (2-0) allowed two runs and three hits in eight innings to win his seventh consecutive decision. Stroman retired the final 11 batters he faced, and improved to 5-1 with a 2.39 ERA in six career starts against the Yankees. Roberto Osuna finished for his fourth save.

Donaldson erased a 2-0 deficit with a second drive to center in the fifth. Tulowitzki snapped a 0-for-10 slump with a first-pitch blast in the sixth. Both homers came off Nathan Eovaldi (0-1).

Tigers 7, Pirates 4: Jordan Zimmermann pitched six shutout innings, Nick Castellanos homered and drove in four runs and Detroit beat Pittsburgh to

improve to 4-0 on the road.

Zimmermann (2-0), who signed a five-year, \$110 million deal with Detroit last December, gave up six hits and two walks while striking out four. He has yet to give up a run for the Tigers.

Castellanos hit a two-run double in the fourth off Gerrit Cole (0-2) and added a two-run homer in the eighth off Tony Watson. Francisco Rodriguez pitched a perfect ninth for his second save.

Indians 6, Rays 0: Danny Salazar gave up three hits in six innings, Marlon Byrd hit one of Cleveland's three home runs and the Indians beat host Tampa Bay.

Cleveland took two of three in the series, limiting the Rays to 15 hits.

Salazar (2-0) struck out nine and walked three. Zach McAllister, Bryan Shaw and Trevor Bauer completed a five-hitter. Chris Archer (0-3) gave up three runs and seven hits in 5 1/3 innings. He is 0-6 with a 5.83 ERA in nine starts since beating Baltimore on Aug. 31.

Rockies 11, Giants 6: Jorge De La Rosa had two hits, drove in two runs and pitched into the seventh inning to lead Colorado past visiting San Francisco.

De La Rosa (1-1) allowed four runs — three earned — struck out seven and walked one in 6 2/3 innings. He was coming off a Saturday outing against San Diego in which he gave up seven runs in four innings.

Brandon Belt homered for the second straight game for the Giants.

Dodgers 5, Diamondbacks 2: Kike Hernandez hit a two-run double during a five-run seventh inning to back another solid outing from rookie Ross Stripling, and host Los Angeles beat Arizona.

Stripling allowed two runs on five hits but trailed 2-0 when he exited after six innings. He tossed 7 1/3 hitless innings against San Francisco in his major league debut last week.

Arizona starter Robbie Ray was charged with the first two runs in the seventh. Randall Delgado (0-1) allowed an RBI single to Justin Turner and then Hernandez's drive to the wall in left-center. Andrew Chafin then gave up RBI singles to Yasiel Puig and Adrian Gonzalez.

Cubs 8, Reds 1: Jason Hammel pitched six scoreless innings, drove home a run and scored another to lead host Chicago past Cincinnati for its best start since 1969.

The Cubs swept the three-game series and improved to 8-1 for the first time in 47 years. They won 11 of 12 to start the '69 season en route to a second-place finish.

Dexter Fowler and Addison Russell had three hits, and Kris Bryant hit his second home run.

Islanders knock off Panthers

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Whenever the New York Islanders got behind, they fought their way out of trouble.

And when they finally got the lead, they didn't give it back.

John Tavares had a goal and two assists, including one that set up Kyle Okposo's go-ahead goal early in the third period, and the Islanders beat the Florida Panthers 5-4 in Game 1 of the teams' Eastern Conference quarterfinal series on Thursday night.

Thomas Greiss survived a shaky beginning and made 42 saves for the Islanders in his first playoff start — the last of them coming off the stick of Jaromir Jagr after Florida pulled its goalie for an extra attacker in the final moments.

"It wasn't our best game but we certainly found a way," said Tavares, who was shaken up after getting hit in the leg with a puck but insisted postgame that he was fine. "We have to build on the win and know we can be better."

Brock Nelson, Frans Nielsen and Ryan Strome added goals for New York. And now home-ice advantage in the series belongs to the Islanders, who can take a 2-0 lead when the series resumes Friday.

Capitals 2, Flyers 0: John Carlson scored a power-play goal and Braden Holby made 19 saves to help host Washington beat Philadelphia in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference first-round series.

Washington's penalty kill went for 4-for-4 and frustrated the Flyers. Holby had seven saves on Philadelphia power plays to pick up his third career shutout in the playoffs.

Flyers counterpart Steve Mason stopped 29 shots he faced, giving up Carlson's second-period goal on a shot that deflected in off teammate Chris VandeVelde. Jay Beagle added a late goal.

The Flyers lost second-line center Sean Couturier to an upper-body injury in the second period.

Sharks 4, Kings 3: Joe Pavelski broke a tie with his second goal early in the third period, and visiting San Jose opened its playoff return with a victory over Los Angeles.

Brent Burns and Tomas Hertl scored for the Sharks in their first postseason game since losing four straight to the Kings in 2014, completing a seven-game flop in the first round. Los Angeles rode the momentum to its second Stanley Cup title, but both California rivals missed the playoffs last year.

San Jose's Martin Jones made 19 saves against his former Los Angeles teammates in his first career playoff start.

Trevor Lewis scored a short-handed goal and Jonathan Quick stopped 19 shots for the Kings.

Stars 4, Wild 0: Kari Lehtonen made 22 saves for his second career playoff shutout, Jamie Benn had a goal and two assists and host Dallas beat Minnesota in Game 1 of the Western Conference series.

Jason Spezza returned to the post-season with a nifty goal and added an assist.

Spezza was skating along the right side and initially faked a slap shot with just over 8 minutes left in the second period. After skating a few more feet to near the center of the faceoff circle, he took a wrist shot and sent the puck in the upper right corner to make it 2-0.

Patrick Eaves and Radek Faksa also scored.

Super Bowl rematch to open '16 NFL season

Associated Press

Super Bowl rematch. Minus Peyton Manning, of course.

The NFL season will begin the way the last one ended, with the Denver Broncos playing the Carolina Panthers.

Denver beat Carolina 24-10 in February in the Super Bowl, Manning's final game. The rematch will be on Thursday night, Sept. 8, in Denver.

"We're glad that it's out," Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway said.

"We knew who we were going to play and now we know when we're going to play them. It's always exciting to take that next step and look at the 2016 season. With the schedule coming out, that's

kind of the first step. With the draft coming up in the next couple of weeks, we're on to 2016."

It is the first Super Bowl rematch on opening weekend since 1970, when Minnesota beat champion Kansas City 27-10.

Among the highlights for opening weekend is the Rams' return to representing Los Angeles as they visit San Francisco in the nightcap of a Monday night doubleheader. Pittsburgh is at Washington in the first game.

Also facing off in Week 1 are the Patriots and Cardinals at Arizona on Sunday night, Sept. 11.

The Rams get their first home game in the LA Coliseum in Week 2, hosting Seattle. That night, the Vikings open their new stadium in Minneapolis against

Green Bay.

Week 3's Monday nighter has Atlanta at New Orleans to mark the 10th anniversary of the reopening of the Louisiana Superdome after Hurricane Katrina.

Week 16 will feature most games on a Saturday because Sunday is Christmas. There will be two games on Christmas Day: Baltimore at Pittsburgh in late afternoon, Denver at Kansas City at night. Houston hosts Cincinnati in a Christmas Eve night game.

A tripleheader on the other major holiday, Thanksgiving, will have the traditional home games for Detroit (vs. Minnesota) and Dallas (against Washington). The prime-time matchup is Pittsburgh at Indianapolis.

The regular season ends on New Year's Day 2017 with 16 divisional matchups.