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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US helps Saudis defend border with Yemen

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is helping Saudi Arabia defend its border with Yemen by providing intelligence from aerial surveillance while Saudi warplanes bomb rebels who have thrown Yemen into chaos, a senior U.S. military officer said Thursday.

The U.S. intelligence is allowing the Saudis to monitor potential security threats to their border, and is giving them a better view of movements inside Yemen by the Houthi rebels, the officer said.

The officer also said the U.S. Central Command has been authorized to provide aerial refueling for Saudi warplanes in support of their bombing campaign against the Houthis, although no refueling missions have been flown yet.

Any U.S. refueling flights would be conducted outside of Yemeni airspace, the officer said.

The officer said the U.S. also has placed a small group of officers in an air operations center in Riyadh to coordinate opera-

Saudis airdrop arms to Yemeni forces

SANAA, Yemen — A Saudi-led coalition trying to halt the advance of Yemen's Shiite rebels airdropped weapons to beleaguered fighters in a southern port city on Friday, while al-Qaida militants captured a key Yemeni military base in the east, further expanding their foothold in this impoverished country.

On Thursday, al-Qaida militants overran Mukalla, a major port city in southern Yemen and the provincial capital of the country's largest province, Hadramawt, seizing government build-

tions with the Saudi air force.

The officer, who spoke to a small group of reporters at the Pentagon under condition of anonymity, said Saudi ground forces in the vicinity of the Yemen border are postured de-

ings and freeing inmates from a prison, including a top Saudi-born leader.

On Friday, the militants consolidated their hold of Mukalla, capturing its port and a major army base in the city, facing little resistance, said military officials.

Coalition planes early on Friday airdropped weapons to fighters battling Houthi rebels in Aden.

Street battles intensified Friday in several Aden districts, including the vicinity of a major weapons depot, according to the military officials. They said that weapons were dropped above the city's port.

From The Associated Press

ensively and not in a way that would suggest they are prepared to invade Yemen.

The Houthi rebels' power grab, combined with nationwide chaos, forced the United States last month to pull out military

advisers who were backing the Yemeni military against al-Qaida's branch in Yemen, known as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, which Washington regards as the most dangerous branch of al-Qaida.

The senior U.S. military officer acknowledged that the U.S. pullout has diminished U.S. counterterrorism capabilities against al-Qaida. But he also said the Houthi rebels' advances have "sidelined" al-Qaida's plotting of external attacks while it focuses on how to respond to the emergence of an apparent civil war.

The officer also offered a cautious assessment of progress in Iraq against the Islamic State group. He said the U.S. is doubtful, for a variety of reasons, that Iraqi forces will be ready to begin an assault on Mosul, the Islamic State's northern power base, before autumn. He said the U.S. believes the Iraqis will move sooner against the town of Beiji, which is home to an important oil refinery and is along the main supply route from Baghdad to Mosul.

Negotiations on Iran nukes move to Washington

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After securing a surprisingly broad and detailed framework for a nuclear agreement with Iran, President Barack Obama must now subject his signature foreign policy pursuit to the gauntlet of partisan American politics.

A blueprint finalized Thursday after marathon negotiations in Switzerland did little to ease the standoff between Obama and some lawmakers over Congress' role in a final accord. The president has

vowed to veto legislation giving Congress the ability to approve or reject a deal, and he made a fresh appeal for lawmakers to give the U.S. and its international partners space to hammer out a comprehensive agreement ahead of a June 30 deadline.

"The issues at stake here are bigger than politics," Obama said. "These are matters of war and peace."

But Republican leaders reaffirmed their intent to vote on legislation giving Congress the last word. Tennessee Republi-

can Sen. Bob Corker, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said the panel will vote on such a measure when lawmakers return from a spring recess on April 14.

Some Democrats have backed Corker's quest for a congressional vote on an Iran deal, raising the possibility that lawmakers could override a presidential veto. New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, who is stepping down as top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after his indictment on corruption charges, is among

those who backs congressional action.

"If diplomats can negotiate for two years on this issue, then certainly Congress is entitled to a review period of an agreement that will fundamentally alter our relationship with Iran and the sanctions imposed by Congress," Menendez said in a statement Thursday.

For Obama, achieving a nuclear deal with Iran would be a crowning foreign policy achievement and a validation of his pursuit of diplomacy.

Bergdahl hearing scheduled for July

BY JON HARPER
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl will face a preliminary hearing in July into charges that he deserted his unit and engaged in “misbehavior before the enemy” in Afghanistan, the Army announced Thursday.

The Article 32 preliminary hearing will take place July 8 at Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where Bergdahl is stationed.

The Army set the date after consultations with Bergdahl’s defense attorneys, U.S. Army Forces Command said in a statement.

The soldier is charged with one count of Article 85 and one count of Article 99 under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Article 85, or “desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty,” carries a maximum potential punishment of five years in prison, dishonorable discharge, reduction to the rank of private and total forfeiture of all pay and allowances.

Article 99, or “misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit or place,” carries a maximum potential penalty of life in prison, dishonorable discharge, reduction to the rank of private and total forfeiture of all pay and allowances.

An Article 32 preliminary hearing is similar to a civilian grand jury inquiry. It is designed to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to merit a court-martial.

Bergdahl spent nearly five years in captivity after walking away from Combat Outpost Mest-Lalak in Paktika province, Afghanistan, in June 2009.

Kenya reeling from deadly attack

The Associated Press

GARISSA, Kenya — The Islamic extremists who slaughtered 147 people at a college in northeast Kenya as they shouted “God is great” appeared to have planned extensively, even targeting a site where Christians had gone to pray, survivors said Friday.

In Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, family members went to a morgue where some bodies had been airlifted from Garissa, victims of the worst attack in Kenya since the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy by al-Qaida which killed more than 200 people. Screaming and crying relatives were assisted by Kenyan Red Cross staffers, who tried to console them.

Some Kenyans were angry that the government didn’t take sufficient security precautions. The attack at Garissa University College happened six days

after Britain advised “against all but essential travel” to parts of Kenya, including Garissa.

One day before the attack, President Uhuru Kenyatta dismissed the warning as well as an Australian one pertaining to Nairobi and Mombasa, saying: “Kenya is safe as any country in the world. The travel advisories being issued by our friends are not genuine.”

Kenyatta would have been mindful that previous travel warnings, like for popular Kenyan beach areas, have hurt the country’s tourism industry.

One man posted a photo on Twitter showing about 100 bodies lying face-down on a blood-smeared courtyard with the comment: “Our inaction is betrayal to these Garissa victims”

Babu Owino, the chairman of the Students Organization for Nairobi University, said the government’s behavior shows it is

not serious in fighting extremist attacks.

John Njue, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Nairobi, who celebrated Good Friday services, cited the “murdered” students and said, “This is a tremendous challenge in our country.”

Police on Friday were at the campus of Garissa University College taking fingerprints from the bodies of four assailants and of the students and security officials who died. The town lacks the facilities to store all the bodies.

One of the first things that the al-Shabab gunmen did when they assaulted the campus early Thursday, survivor Helen Titus said, was to head for a lecture hall where Christians were in prayer.

Al-Shabab is a Somalia-based Islamic extremist group with ties to al-Qaida.

Germanwings co-pilot sped up on descent

The Associated Press

PARIS — The co-pilot of the doomed Germanwings flight repeatedly sped up the plane as he used the automatic pilot to descend the A320 into the Alps, the French air accident investigation agency said Friday.

The chilling new detail from the BEA agency is based on an initial reading of the plane’s

“black box” data recorder, found blackened and buried at the crash site Thursday.

It strengthens investigators’ initial suspicions that co-pilot Andreas Lubitz intentionally destroyed the plane — though prosecutors are still trying to figure out why. All 150 people aboard Flight 9525 from Barcelona, Spain, to Duesseldorf, Germany, were killed in the

March 24 crash.

The BEA said the preliminary reading of the data recorder shows that the pilot used the automatic pilot to put the plane into a descent and then repeatedly during the descent adjusted the automatic pilot to speed up the plane. The agency says it will continue studying the black box for more complete details of what happened.

After 66 days at sea, man rescued off NC coast

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A man who set sail from South Carolina two months ago was rescued on the overturned hull of his sailboat 200 miles off the coast of North Carolina, and he said he got by by rationing his water and praying for help.

“Every day I was like, ‘Please God, send me some rain, send me some water,’” Louis Jordan, 37, told WAVY-TV.

The crew of a German-flagged container ship found

Jordan floating on his vessel, the 35-foot Angel, on Thursday afternoon.

Jordan said he initially did not believe the container ship was real when he saw it.

A Coast Guard helicopter crew from North Carolina airlifted Jordan from the ship to a hospital in Norfolk, Va., on Thursday night. He had a shoulder injury and was dehydrated, the Coast Guard and his family said.

But Jordan was in good con-

dition and refused treatment at the facility, according to Sentara Norfolk General Hospital. Jordan left the hospital with his parents around 2 a.m. Friday.

Jordan had been living on his sailboat at a marina in Conway, S.C., until January, when he told his family he was “going into the open water to sail and do some fishing,” said his mother, Norma Davis. He sailed out of the marina on Jan. 23, Coast Guard officials said, and had not been heard from since.

Fans give Cats an advantage

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — John Calipari has endeared himself to Big Blue Nation because he does what Wildcats fans demand — win.

He's delivered a championship, competes annually for national titles. Now he can immortalize himself in the eyes of Kentucky's rabid fans by giving them something they've never had — an undefeated national championship.

And you can bet your last Bluegrass dollar that Indianapolis will be overwhelmingly blue with throngs flocking to see firsthand if their unbeaten Wildcats can get two more wins at the Final Four.

Then again, they always are. "Ever since we've been going to games we've hoped for a season like this, unbeaten and perfect," said Roy Holsclaw, 81, who attended Kentucky's 1958 title-clinching game with his wife Katherine and has been a season ticket holder since 1959.

"I never thought we'd experience anything like this. It's a once-in-a-lifetime possibility and we hope to see it happen."

An estimated 10,000 turned out in Louisville for the Midwest regional and filled the lower bowl of the rival Cardinals' home court — for practice. Yes, we're talking about practice!

"I think they're crazy, but I've said it before," Calipari said of his fan base. "They're nuts. But it makes them what they are and they're passionate about letting everybody know, 'I'm a Kentucky fan.'"

Friday's open practice at 71,000-seat Lucas Oil Stadium leaves room for at least twice as many Wildcats fans to invade in hopes of giving Kentucky (38-0) a decided advantage in Saturday night's Final Four rematch with Wisconsin (35-3). Fans of

the Badgers, Duke and Michigan State no doubt have similar ideas and are known to travel just as well.

That's just fine with Big Blue Nation, which welcomes challengers to their boasts of being national champions in fandom as well. The fans will take over the city because that's what they do.

During last month's Southeastern Conference tournament, Wildcats faithful swarmed Nashville to turn Bridgestone Arena to Rupp Arena South, buying up tickets as other schools were eliminated. When the SEC tournament was held in Atlanta, there were so many Wildcats fans the city became known as "Cat-lanta."

Tipoff for the first semifinal game was still more than 36 hours away, and no disrespect to the Badgers, but Kentucky fans had already accounted for 17 percent of early ticket sales to Monday night's championship on StubHub.com to see if the Wildcats can pick up a ninth NCAA championship.

"Nobody else is close," company spokesman Cameron Papp said. "Kentucky has always driven sales for the NCAA (Tournament), and this year they're undefeated."

Kentucky's following rivals the fan bases of the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers and Major League Baseball's New York Yankees, both well known for seizing opposing venues. Steelers fans once turned the Washington Redskins' FedEx Field into a sea of black and yellow, as Pittsburgh followers snapped up unwanted tickets online.

The Yankees? Forget about it. Good luck finding someplace other than maybe Boston's Fenway Park where there are just as many spectators dressed in pinstripes — if not more — as there are fans in the home team's colors.

But the scene in Indianapolis might be over the top for even Kentucky fans.

The Wildcats have the most victories ever (2,178), are just three behind UCLA with eight NCAA championships. A pipeline of blue chip talent arrives with NBA projections and ratchets up expectations of winning another title, and nothing else matters.

"People are kind of spoiled in Kentucky, but we look at it realistically," said former Wildcats forward Larry Stamper, who played from 1969-73. "If we get great players coming in, we should always be great the next year."

Kentucky has had unbeaten seasons in 1912 (9-0) under E.R. Sweetland and 25-0 in '53-54 under the legendary Adolph Rupp, who won four titles. But the Baron of the Bluegrass couldn't pull off the unbeaten champion feat.

"It would be really be extra special and a tribute to Kentucky basketball and what it's done," said Humzey Yessin, 87, a team manager from 1945-49 which includes Kentucky's immortal '48 NCAA championship squad known as the Fabulous Five.

The Wildcats have managed to ignore the hype, scrutiny and projections as seemingly everyone wants to see if they follow through on a quest that Indiana State (1979), UNLV (1991) and Wichita State (2014) fell short of achieving. They are trying to become the first undefeated to win it all since Indiana did it in 1976.

If they do, Calipari will join Rupp as the only Kentucky coach to win multiple titles.

Given the fact that former coach Joe B. Hall — an assistant who succeeded Rupp and won the 1978 title during a 12-year stint — has a statue outside the players' dormitory, there has been mild buzz about bestowing the same honor upon the Wildcats' beloved Coach Cal.

Hall jokes, "there will never be another statue."

Maybe not, but a 40-0 season would surely fuel the debate.

Badgers turn to alter-egos

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Frank the Tank takes credit for Captain America.

Nigel Burgundy is not at the Final Four this year for Wisconsin. But his alter ego, forward Nigel Hayes, is — and he's brought with him a newfound obsession for stenography.

Welcome to fun-loving Wisconsin, which has a cast of characters that sounds as if it is straight out of a Will Ferrell movie.

But once coach Bo Ryan whistles practice into session, it's all business for the Badgers.

"Believe me, when they get on the practice court, they're looking at film, they're playing in the games," Ryan said before practice Thursday. "They understand what competition is about."

The chemistry has developed over two seasons into one of the best teams in the country. Wisconsin has returned to the national semifinals with largely the same roster, led by player of the year candidate Frank Kaminsky.

Once shy before the cameras, Kaminsky has blossomed, somewhat reluctantly, into a media darling for a deadpan delivery and the way he pokes fun at himself.

It's a good thing that Kaminsky has gotten more comfortable in front of the cameras this year given all the attention that he has received for his inside-out play.

"Personally, I like doing the fun stuff," Kaminsky said this week at a news conference in Madison. "Sitting up here in front of you guys gets boring, so whenever we get out and get an opportunity to do something that's fun and there is something that we actually get out of it, it's a lot of fun!"

The student section serenaded Kaminsky with "Frank the Tank" chants, a mantra that the 7-footer has embraced.

Kaminsky assigned guard Josh Gasser the nickname of "Captain America." The fifth-year senior dives for loose balls, takes charges and generally plays as if he's wearing a suit of armor.

"Credit Frank for the 'Captain America,'" cracked Kaminsky, referring to himself in the third person.

Hayes was the sixth man a year ago. He walked around the locker room during NCAA Tournament media availabilities with a camera and microphone to conduct his own mock interviews as "Nigel Burgundy." That name was play off the mustachioed, bumbling reporter that Ferrell played in the comedy "Anchorman."

Hayes had one of the most viral moments of the tournament for — of all things — a fledgling interest in transcription. To keep one stenographer at the news conference on alert, Hayes started an answer to one question with the words "cattywampus, onomatopoeia and antidisestablishmentarianism."

The big-word buzz apparently generated interest in stenographer classes at a Madison-area school, and "cattywampus" T-shirts are selling out.

Randle helps Cardinal claim NIT crown

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Chasson Randle wraps up his Stanford career with 2,375 points, and the last two won him another NIT title.

Two days after setting the school's career scoring record, Randle made the go-ahead free throws with 3.4 seconds left in overtime, and the Cardinal edged Miami 66-64 on Thursday.

Sheldon McClellan's double-pumping three-point attempt that would have won it at the buzzer wasn't close to going in.

The short-handed Hurricanes had rallied from a 13-point second-half deficit to force OT and led 64-61 with less than a minute left. But Randle twice got to the line, making four straight foul shots for the victory.

"We were going to put the ball in Chasson's hands and he was going to decide it for us," coach Johnny Dawkins said.

The senior finished with 25 points to earn most outstanding player honors. He

scored 15 as a freshman in the 2012 NIT title game.

The experimental 30-second shot clock being used in the NIT proved critical after Randle's free throws pulled Stanford to 64-63 with 38.9 seconds left. Under the regular 35-second clock, the Cardinal (24-13) probably would have needed to foul. Instead, they played defense, and Deandre Burnett missed a three-point attempt that might have clinched it.

Randle then leaned into Davon Reed on a jumper to draw a foul.

"That's what you saw down the stretch of the game, the last few minutes and in overtime, just a will to win," Dawkins said.

Miami (25-13) threw the ball away on the ensuing inbounds, and after Anthony Brown made a free throw with 3.1 seconds to go, the Hurricanes appeared to do it again. But the officials went to the monitor and reversed the call, ruling Stanford touched the ball last. That gave Miami one last chance with the ball under

the basket and 1.8 seconds left.

The Hurricanes had rallied from double-digit deficits to win their last two games, and almost did it again, despite missing starting point guard Angel Rodriguez (wrist) and center Tonye Jekiri (concussion). Backup point guard Manu Lecomte (knee) played only five minutes, none after halftime.

"I know our guys are very, very disappointed, but I told them I love them," coach Jim Larranaga said. "I'm very, very proud of them. They did a fantastic job. This last three weeks has been a blast."

With the score tied 55-all and just over a minute left in regulation, the game became a contest of the teams' top scorers driving to the hoop. Twice Randle hit shots to put Stanford ahead only for Sheldon McClellan to draw a foul on the other end and drain both free throws to tie it.

After McClellan made it 59-59 with 16.8 seconds to go, Stanford worked the ball around for an open three-point attempt by Marcus Allen.



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Smart leaving VCU for Texas

The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Shaka Smart has been a hot coaching commodity since leading Virginia Commonwealth to the Final Four in 2011. He had reportedly shunned several big-time offers, but the lure of Texas was finally too much to turn down.

VCU sports information director Scott Day confirmed Thursday night that Smart was leaving the Richmond university to take over the program in Austin. Smart met with VCU players earlier in the evening at the Siegel Center, the team's home arena, and at least one player was seen crying when he left.

Smart, who has won at least 26 games in each of his six seasons at VCU, is bolting for a Texas program that hasn't been able to unseat Kansas atop the Big 12. But the Longhorns also boast the wealthiest athletic department in the country and easy access to some of the nation's most fertile recruiting grounds in Dallas and Houston.

Terms of Smart's contract were not immediately released and VCU said a statement would be released Friday. Barnes made \$2.62 million last season, while Smart made \$1.8 million with the Rams.

Texas athletic director Steve Patterson had zeroed in on bringing Smart to Texas immediately after firing former Longhorns coach Rick Barnes last weekend. Patterson flew to Richmond on Thursday to close the deal. Texas officials did not have any immediate comment on the hire.

Smart did not speak to the media gathered Thursday and VCU players were escorted

from the building by university public relations without offering comments.

That Barnes was pushed out shows Patterson, a former NBA executive, expects big things from basketball. Barnes won three Big 12 titles and recruited elite talent to Austin. Former Longhorns T.J. Ford (2003) and Kevin Durant (2007) won national player of the year honors.

But the program had plateaued and the early-round exits in the NCAA Tournament started to mount, despite rosters full of future NBA talent.

At VCU, Smart took over a program that had had great success under Jeff Capel, and then Anthony Grant. He hopes to avoid the pitfalls at Texas that his predecessors encountered when they left to take over programs at universities considered "football schools."

Capel lasted five years at Oklahoma before being fired, and Grant spent six at Alabama before he was dismissed.

By leaving before May 1, Smart owes VCU a \$500,000 buyout. His contract also contains a provision that if he became a head coach at another institution, that school would have to play VCU in a home-and-home series, or pay VCU \$250,000.

Barnes led Texas to 16 NCAA Tournaments in 17 seasons but his teams haven't made it out of the first weekend since 2008.

His best years came from 2003-2008, when Texas made its first Final Four in more than 50 years and twice more reached the tournament's final eight. Texas also earned the program's first No. 1 ranking in the 2009-2010

season.

Smart had some success right away at VCU when the Rams won the CBI postseason tournament in his first year.

But it was VCU's monumental run in the NCAA Tournament the following year that really got Smart noticed. The Rams went from being a questionable selection, barely getting a bid and playing in the First Four in Dayton, Ohio, to beating five major-conference schools to reach the Final Four.

The Rams have been back in the NCAA Tournament each of the past four seasons, but were eliminated in the round of 32 in 2012 and 2013 and lost their first game in overtime each of the past two seasons.

Beyond the Final Four run, this year might have been Smart's best coaching job at VCU.

The Rams lost Briante Weber, the leader of their "havoc" defensive style, on Jan. 31 to a knee injury, and played the last month and a half with scoring leader Treveon Graham bothered by a high left ankle sprain, sometimes even sidelined.

VCU (26-10) lost six of 10 late in the season, enduring its first three-game slide in Smart's six seasons, before winning five straight, including four in four days, to win the Atlantic 10 title.

Smart's 26 wins in six consecutive seasons is a feat matched only by Duke. With the interest he has generated in basketball, a \$25 million basketball practice facility is under construction and scheduled to be ready for use in the fall.

Barnes, Warriors edge Suns

The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Harrison Barnes made two huge defensive mistakes in the final minute. He redeemed himself and the Golden State Warriors with one big shot.

That's just how things have gone for Golden State this season.

Barnes hit a running shot in the lane with less than a second remaining, lifting the Warriors to a wild 107-106 win over the Phoenix Suns on Thursday night.

"Coach (Steve) Kerr kind of looked at me after I made the shot like, 'You messed up on those two defensive possessions, but it's OK,'" Barnes said, chuckling.

That's all the Warriors could do following the game — laugh it off.

Barnes' big shot came after Eric Bledsoe broke free for a reverse layup — when Barnes should've rotated to the basket — to put Phoenix ahead with 4.5 seconds to play. And Bledsoe's layup followed Stephen Curry's go-ahead three-pointer that seemingly sent the Warriors ahead for good.

Instead, it took all 48 minutes for the NBA-leading Warriors (62-13) to extend their latest winning streak to 11 games. They fell behind by four under 3 minutes to play and traded scores with the fading Suns (38-38) in a furious finish.

With little left to play for other than pride, the Warriors continued their franchise-record roll toward the playoffs — though it was anything but smooth. Curry collected 28 points, eight rebounds and five assists, Klay Thompson scored 16 and Barnes had just four — none bigger than his last.

Barnes caught the ball off an inbound pass and dribbled toward the basket. With Archie Goodwin guarding him and Bledsoe trying to strip the ball, Barnes rose up and finished from 5 feet out to finish off Phoenix.

"It was probably good for us to feel that situation," Kerr said, "and have to deal with the pressure."

Bledsoe had 18 points and 11 assists, and Markieff Morris had 17 points and 12 rebounds, and Brandon Wright added 16 points and 12 rebounds for the Suns, who have lost five in a row.

And while Phoenix is still mathematically in the race for the Western Conference's final playoff spot, its postseason hopes are all but finished.

"It was a tough one to swallow," Wright said. "We're not quitting. We're hanging on by a small, small thread."

Cavaliers 114, Heat 88: Miami star Dwyane Wade went down with a knee injury in the first half, and visiting Miami's playoff chances took another major blow.

Wade bruised his left knee in the first half and Miami didn't have the firepower to stop Cleveland, which got 23 points apiece from LeBron James and Kyrie Irving and won its 17th straight at home. James added eight rebounds and seven assists against his former team.

The Heat dropped into a tie for eighth place in the East with idle Boston.

Rockets 108, Mavericks 101: James Harden scored 24 points and former Dallas guard Jason Terry hit a tiebreaking three-pointer in visiting Houston's win.

The Rockets (52-24) moved a half-game ahead of Memphis in the race for the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference.

Even with the loss, the Mavericks (46-30) are likely to end up with the seventh seed after a win over Oklahoma City on Wednesday put them four games up on the Thunder and gave them the tiebreaker. They're now 3½ ahead with six to go.

Rangers wrap up Metropolitan crown

The Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The New York Rangers clinched the Metropolitan Division title, naturally, on the road.

There's a lot left on their to-do list, though.

J.T. Miller scored the go-ahead goal in the third period, less than a minute after Minnesota tied the game, to give the Rangers a 3-2 victory over the Wild on Thursday night that assured them of at least the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference.

"It's a huge accomplishment. There's a lot of tough teams in there," said defenseman Ryan McDonagh, who had two assists.

After Thomas Vanek scored for the Wild, Miller's tip-in came 55 seconds later at the 6:48 mark.

"That felt good. I've been taking a little bit of a beating here. I'm going to try to go through a game without getting hit in the head," said Miller, two nights after Winnipeg's Dustin Byfuglien delivered a vicious cross-check to his head late in that game that brought a four-game suspension.

Ryan Suter took a double minor in this game for high-sticking Miller, bloodying the bridge of his nose.

The Rangers improved to 26-11-2 away from home, set a franchise record for road wins and stayed in first place in the conference with 105 points and five games to go.

"You've got to play the right way, and we try to do that every time we step on the ice, whether we're in front of our fans or on the road," coach Alain Vigneault said.

Dominic Moore scored against one of his eight former teams and Rick Nash followed in the first period with his 41st goal for the Rangers, who finished 18-5-5 against Western Conference opponents this season. Henrik Lundqvist made 26 saves for the Rangers, who have played one fewer game than Montreal (103 points) and two fewer than Tampa Bay (102 points) in the race for the top seed.

"I feel better and better. Making better reads. I feel more comfortable, and it's fun to be out there and play," said Lundqvist, who missed most of February and March because of a neck injury.

Jason Pominville scored and Matt Dumba had two assists for the Wild, whose five-game winning streak ended after a rare late-season four-day break.

"They're a good team. Let's give them a little credit. They've got good players. It's not just we had a slow start," left wing Zach Parise said.

Panthers 6, Hurricanes 1: Roberto Luongo earned his 400th career win, and Jaromir Jagr had a goal and an assist to tie Ron Francis for fourth place on the NHL's career points list to lift host Florida over Carolina.

Luongo made 31 saves to become the 11th NHL goalie to record 400 wins as the Panthers recorded their largest margin of victory this season. With his two points against the Hurricanes, Jagr has 1,798.

Capitals 5, Canadiens 4 (SO): Troy Brouwer scored the winner in the fourth round of the shootout, leading visiting Washington past Montreal.

Alex Ovechkin and Joel Ward each scored a pair of goals for the Capitals in regulation time. Braden Holtby made 23 saves and improved to 6-0-2 in his career against Montreal.

Blue Jackets 4, Islanders 3 (SO): Ryan Johansen scored late in regulation to tie it and then added the clinching goal in the shootout to lead host Columbus over New York, extending its streak to eight straight wins.

After Mark Letestu scored to lead off the shootout, Johansen slowed as he went in on goalie Jaroslav Halak and slid the puck between his leg pads. Sergei Bobrovsky, who stopped Frans Nielsen in the first round, then stopped Kyle Okposo to lock up the victory.

Senators 2, Lightning 1 (OT): Patrick Wiercioch scored 4:43 into overtime, leading host Ottawa past Tampa Bay.

Mark Stone also scored for the Senators, and Andrew Hammond made 28 saves to improve to 16-1-1 as an NHL starter.

Bruins 3, Red Wings 2: Zach Trotman scored his first career NHL goal with 2:08 remaining to lift visiting Boston past Detroit.

Trotman's wrist shot got between Petr Mrazek's glove and jersey and trickled past the goal line to give Boston its fourth straight win. Carl Soderberg and Loui Eriksson also had goals for the Bruins, who got 35 saves from Tuukka Rask.

Blues 4, Flames 1: Jaden Schwartz had a goal and an assist and Jake Allen got light work in net for host St. Louis, which ended a three-game home losing streak and clinched a playoff spot.

Paul Stastny, Jori Lehtera and Patrik Berglund also scored for the Blues, who reached 100 points for the third time in four seasons without top forwards Vladimir Tarasenko and Alexander Steen. St. Louis is in second place in the Central Division with 101 points, two behind Nashville, with five games to go.

Blackhawks 3, Canucks 1: Jonathan Toews and Marcus Kruger scored in the third period, and host Chicago clinched a playoff spot with a victory over Vancouver.

Kruger also had an assist on Teuvo Teravainen's first-period goal, and Corey Crawford made 34 saves in Chicago's third straight win. The Blackhawks (47-24-6) remained one point back of St. Louis for second in the Central Division.

Kings 8, Oilers 2: Marian Gaborik and Jeff Carter scored two goals apiece, and host Los Angeles moved up in the playoff chase with a victory over Edmonton.

Drew Doughty and captain Dustin Brown ended lengthy goal-scoring droughts in the first period to kick off the Kings' highest-scoring performance in a half-decade. They added three third-period goals against Edmonton goalie Tyler Bunz, who made his NHL debut.