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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Al-Qaida exploits Yemen chaos to rebuild

The Washington Post

The CIA's drone base in the rippled surface of the Saudi Arabian desert has undergone major renovations over the past few years. Satellite imagery shows dozens of additions that appear to include living quarters, a new clamshell hangar for hiding aircraft and neat rows of freshly planted palm trees.

That base is one of the few components of the Obama administration's counterterrorism campaign in Yemen that remain intact.

Agency and U.S. military personnel have been pulled out of Yemen amid escalating sectarian violence in recent weeks. Elite Yemeni units that the United States trained to hunt al-Qaida have been scrambled by the government's collapse.

And millions of dollars in U.S.-provided military equipment has been destroyed in a span of days by Saudi airstrikes aimed at rendering those arms useless to the Iran-backed rebels who control the capital.

The vacuum, U.S. officials say, appears to have allowed al-Qaida in the Arabian Pen-

insula to focus on rebuilding its strength after years of U.S. drone strikes against its leaders.

An opening for AQAP

A prison break in eastern Yemen on Thursday freed as many as 300 inmates — including a senior AQAP leader — in an operation seen as part of a broader effort by the group to shore up its ranks.

U.S. officials said the CIA's armed drones are still flying over Yemen, prepared to launch strikes against AQAP members.

But the counterterrorism fight has gone from the most active battlefield in Yemen to a secondary conflict, swallowed up by a civil war that is serving as a proxy for a broader regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The United States has not carried out a drone strike in Yemen since mid-February, when Houthi rebels formally declared their takeover of the government. The drone campaign has been characterized by such pauses for several years, but

U.S. officials said that they are likely to become more common and lengthy as ground-level intelligence missions in the country grind to a halt.

The chaos would appear to give AQAP a major opening, a chance to ramp up terrorist plotting against the West while also asserting itself as the defender of Sunni Muslims across Yemen who are threatened by advancing Shiite-dominated Houthi militias.

Before the Thursday prison raid, though, AQAP had been relatively inactive. Aside from claiming credit for a series of small-scale attacks against Houthi fighters — who see Sunni-dominated al-Qaida as an adversary — the group has avoided exposure to more direct confrontations or lingering American drones.

"The initial evidence is actually that the Houthi advance has caused [AQAP's] external plotting to be sidelined while they figure out how they're going to deal with ... what appears to be an emerging civil war," said a senior U.S. military official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the

sensitivity of the matter.

Danger to the US

U.S. officials continue to see AQAP as posing the most direct danger to the United States, even amid the rise of new terrorist groups including the Islamic State.

The CIA's airstrip in Saudi Arabia has been a critical hub in the U.S. assault on AQAP, serving as a base for remotely piloted aircraft that have carried out dozens of strikes.

Satellite images show that the remote facility has undergone significant expansion since then, underscoring its importance to a campaign whose reliance on U.S. technical prowess has defined President Barack Obama's counterterrorism approach.

But other aspects of that strategy — including the U.S. dependence on local security forces to shoulder on-the-ground risk — have unraveled since its most staunch supporter in Yemen, former President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, was forced from office and then fled the country.

UN official: Attacks on refugee camp 'beyond inhumane'

The Associated Press

BEIRUT — Shelling and sporadic clashes struck a Palestinian refugee camp under attack by Islamic extremists in the Syrian capital Monday, a situation that a U.N. official described as "beyond inhumane."

Hatem al-Dimashqi, an activist based in an area just south of Damascus, said the Yarmouk camp was under attack Monday. Both Al-Dimashqi and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also said Syria's air force has dropped

several barrel bombs on the camp since Sunday.

Islamic State militants stormed the camp Wednesday, marking the extremist group's deepest foray yet into Damascus. Palestinian officials and Syrian activists said they were working with rivals from the al-Qaida affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front. The two groups have fought bloody battles against each other in other parts of Syria, but appear to be cooperating in the attack on Yarmouk.

The Nusra Front said in a

statement it is taking a neutral stance in the camp.

Chris Gunness, a spokesman for the U.N. agency that supports Palestinian refugees known as UNRWA, told The Associated Press in Barcelona late Sunday that the agency has not been able to send any food or any convoys into the camp since the fighting started.

"That means that there is no food, there is no water and there is very little medicine," he said. "The situation in the camp is beyond inhumane. People are

holed up in their houses, there is fighting going on in the streets.

"There are reports of ... bombardments. This has to stop and civilians must be evacuated."

He said 93 people have been evacuated from the camp so far.

The United Nations says around 18,000 civilians, including a large number of children, are trapped in Yarmouk. The camp has been under government siege for nearly two years, leading to starvation and illnesses.

Hostage in Mali freed by French

The Associated Press

PARIS — French special forces on Monday freed a Dutchman held hostage since being kidnapped in 2011 by extremists in Mali, the military said. There was no immediate word on the fate of two other men abducted at the same time.

The military said the rescue of Sjaak Rijke took place at 5 a.m. Monday in far northern Mali and that several militants were captured. Monday's statement did not identify who was holding Rijke, but the Dutchman appeared in a video posted in November by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

Some 3,000 French forces are taking part in the mission to stabilize Mali, which was overrun by al-Qaida-linked Islamic extremists until French troops came to the aid of Malian soldiers in January 2013.

Kenya strikes back at militants in Somalia

NAIROBI, Kenya — Kenya launched airstrikes against Islamic militants in Somalia following an attack on a college that killed 148 people, a military spokesman said Monday.

Some relatives of those who died gathered at a funeral home in Nairobi to view their loved ones. They prayed under an awning together and were led into the funeral home after an employee read out their names. Many emerged in tears.

Kenyan army troops on Monday walked through Garissa College University in the northeast where the bloodiest attack by al-Shabab on Kenyan soil occurred on Thursday.

Kenya's warplanes targeted Somalia's Gedo region Sunday afternoon and early Monday, said Col. David Obonyo, of the Kenyan military. Gedo is directly across Kenya's border.

From The Associated Press

DOD: Strikes have destroyed 5,547 Islamic State targets

By JON HARPER
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — As of March 31, the U.S. and its coalition partners have damaged or destroyed 5,547 Islamic State targets in the air war against the group, according to a Pentagon battle damage assessment released Monday.

The targets include U.S.-made Humvees, tanks and other items that belonged to the Iraqi security forces but were captured by the Islamic State when the militants routed the Iraqi army in a sweeping offensive last year.

The list does not include estimates of how many Islamic State fighters have been killed in the airstrikes. The Pentagon is wary of providing "body counts" as it did during the Vietnam War, when success was often measured by the number of enemy killed rather than the strategic situation on the ground.

As of Monday, the international coalition has carried out 3,141 airstrikes against the Islamic State, 1,808 of which were conducted in Iraq and 1,333 in Syria. Of those 3,141 strikes, 2,501 — about 80 percent — have been launched by

the U.S.

Some airstrikes have resulted in the destruction of multiple targets.

The other coalition countries that have participated in the bombing campaign are Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The air campaign began in August when President Barack Obama authorized military action against the Islamic State.

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Carter seeks to re-energize Asia 'rebalance'

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Islamic extremists grab parts of Iraq and Syria. Yemen slides into civil war. Iran's nuclear program strains U.S. relations with Israel. Ukraine fights Russia-backed separatists.

At a time of crisis across the Middle East and beyond, the Obama administration is trying to keep its focus on a widely advertised shift to Asia.

The administration has pursued the strategy since 2011, arguing that no region is more important to the United States' long-term interests.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter will visit Japan and South Korea this week, part of a series of planned trips to the region during his first year as Pentagon chief. He will visit India and attend an international security conference in Singapore in May, and he may visit China later in the year.

Before he became defense secretary in February, Carter was a supporter of what the Obama administration calls its "rebalance" to Asia. That term

meant to rebut the implication that by giving more attention to Asia, Washington is pivoting away from its traditional allies in Europe and its extensive commitments in the Mideast.

While serving as the deputy secretary of defense, Carter said in May 2013 that international terrorism, persistent Mideast turmoil, nuclear proliferation and cyberthreats would continue to require Pentagon attention.

"We also see great opportunities," Carter said then. "Among them, to shift the great weight of the Department of Defense, both intellectual and physical, that has been devoted to Iraq and Afghanistan, to the Asia-Pacific region, where America will continue to play its 7-decade-old pivotal stabilizing role into the future."

His Tokyo visit beginning Tuesday is meant in part to smooth the way for Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Washington in late April. That trip will coincide with a historic reworking of the guidelines that govern U.S.-Japan defense cooperation in

a way intended to give Japan's self-defense forces a more active role in Asian security.

Japan's post-World War II constitution limits the country's use of force, but Abe last year approved a reinterpretation of the constitution, and his government has proposed legislation to enable defense changes.

Carter plans to cap his week in Asia with meetings with South Korean government officials in Seoul and visits to U.S. troops.

Among the hottest defense topics in South Korea is the prospect of deploying an advanced U.S. missile defense system. The U.S. is thought to want to place the weapon system in South Korea as a defense against North Korean ballistic missiles, but Seoul has balked, in part out of concern that China opposes the move.

U.S. relations with Japan and South Korea are strong, but the alliances are sometimes tested by differing views on how to handle North Korea's periodic provocations and China's rapid military modernization.

Capitals clinch playoff berth

The Associated Press

DETROIT — With the Stanley Cup playoffs about a week away, Braden Holtby is rounding into form for the Washington Capitals.

Holtby stopped 35 shots, and Mike Green added a goal and an assist, as the Capitals beat Detroit 2-1 on Sunday, putting the Red Wings in an anxious spot as they try to extend their streak of postseason appearances.

"I was really happy with the way we played in the first period," Capitals coach Barry Trotz said. "In the second we got some outstanding blocks, good saves, things that you really need. I thought in the third, we managed it well."

Washington clinched a playoff spot when Ottawa lost 3-2 in a shootout at Toronto later Sunday night.

Darren Helm scored Detroit's lone goal, and Petr Mrazek finished with 26 saves.

The Red Wings, trying to reach the playoffs for the 24th straight season, remained tied with Boston for third place in the Atlantic Division — just two points ahead of the Senators, who are ninth in the Eastern Conference.

Detroit created plenty of chances late in the game, but it couldn't come back late, especially after a slow start that saw Washington with 10 shots in the first 10 minutes.

Evgeny Kuznetsov put the Capitals ahead 3:38 into the game, firing a shot that bounced off Drew Miller's stick and past Mrazek.

"They usually come out pretty hard in this building and we were aware of that," Holtby said. "We created a lot of scoring opportunities and it probably should have been more than 1-0. But we didn't let that frustrate us."

Green made it 2-0 at 4:42 of the second as he ripped a shot that hit the top of Mrazek's glove before settling in the top right corner of the net for his 10th of the season.

Detroit was playing without Abdelkader, who left Saturday's game

against Minnesota after being hit in the hand by the puck. Daniel Cleary was thrust into the lineup in his place, and it didn't take long before his impact was felt. It just wasn't the impact Babcock and the Red Wings were hoping for.

Cleary took a high-sticking penalty 1:51 into the first period, giving the Capitals, who boast the NHL's top power play, a man advantage that proved costly.

Moments after Mrazek stopped his shot from the bottom of the right circle, Kuznetsov ripped another from nearly the same spot into the back of the net.

Holtby was making his 23rd consecutive start, setting a franchise record for the longest streak in a season. Wayne Stephenson started 22 games in a row in 1980.

Flyers 4, Penguins 1: Steve Mason made 46 saves, and host Philadelphia scored three power-play goals to beat Pittsburgh. Jakub Voracek, Brayden Schenn and Michael Del Zotto all scored with the man-advantage, and Ryan White also had a goal for the Flyers.

Philadelphia, which is eliminated from playoff contention, completed a season sweep of its Pennsylvania rival.

The Penguins have dropped 10 of their last 13 games and suddenly face the prospect of playing for a postseason spot.

Canadiens 4, Panthers 1: Carey Price stopped 24 shots to pick up his league-leading 42nd win and Tomas Plekanec scored his 200th career goal as visiting Montreal beat Florida.

Blues 2, Blackhawks 1: Olli Jokinen and David Backes scored in the second period as host St. Louis won its third straight to move into first place in the Central Division.

The Blues improved to 105 points, one more than idle Nashville, with three games remaining for both teams.

Maple Leafs 3, Senators 2 (SO): Peter Holland scored the winning goal in the seventh round of the shootout to lift host Toronto.

Joffrey Lupul and James van Riemsdyk scored in regulation for the Maple Leafs, and Jonathan Bernier had 43 saves through overtime.

Spurs end Warriors' streak

The Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Kawhi Leonard matched his career-high with 26 points and set a career-high with seven steals and the San Antonio Spurs rolled past Golden State 107-92 on Sunday, ending the Warriors' 12-game winning streak while extending their own to seven straight.

San Antonio also extended its home winning streak over Golden State to 32 straight.

Stephen Curry had 24 points, but was harassed into 9-for-17 shooting by Leonard. Klay Thompson was held to six points on 3-for-11 shooting for Golden State.

Pacers 112, Heat 89: Paul George's season debut provided a needed boost Sunday as host Indiana put itself back in playoff contention.

George finished with 13 points in 15 minutes — his first action since breaking his right leg Aug. 1. The Pacers moved into a tie with Miami for the No. 9 spot in the Eastern Conference. Both teams trail Boston by one game for the conference's eighth and final playoff spot.

Rockets 115, Thunder 112: James Harden scored 41 points, and Houston overcame Russell Westbrook's triple-double to beat host Oklahoma City.

Harden and Westbrook, the league's top two scorers, both entered the game averaging 27.5 points. Harden made 12 of 22 shots and 6 of 9 three-pointers before fouling out with 33 seconds left. The Rockets hung on to win for the seventh time in eight games.

Westbrook finished with 40 points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds. It was his 11th triple-double of the season and the 18th of his career.

Cavaliers 99, Bulls 94: LeBron James recorded his first triple-double since returning to Cleveland, and the Cavaliers made 16 three-pointers while winning their 18th straight home game.

James finished with 20 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds, his first triple-double in a Cleveland uniform since May 13, 2010, two months before he left as a free agent for Miami.

Clippers 106, Lakers 78: Blake Griffin scored 18 points, DeAndre Jordan added 16 points and 11 rebounds, and the visiting Clippers sent the Lakers to their team-record 56th defeat of the season.

Jazz 101, Kings 95: Rodney Hood scored 13 of his season-high 25 points in the fourth quarter as visiting Utah Jazz pulled away.

Knicks 101, 76ers 91: Andrea Bargnani scored 25 points and Shane Larking added 15 and 11 rebounds, and host New York ended a nine-game losing streak.

Lincicome claims second LPGA major

The Associated Press

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. — Long-hitting Brittany Lincicome outlasted Stacy Lewis with finesse after powering her way into a playoff Sunday in the ANA Inspiration.

When caddie Missy Pederson suggested Lincicome go for the green on the par-5 18th in two in a playoff, Bam Bam decided to play it safe.

"She wanted me to hit 3-wood into the green one of the times and I was like, 'No, my wedges are good. We're just going to lay it up and let the wedges do all the work,'" Lincicome said.

After hitting a 5-iron 190 yards on the final hole of regulation to set up a 10-foot eagle putt that ended up forcing overtime, Lincicome laid up on all three extra holes in more difficult wind conditions. She made three pars, with the last one enough to finish off Lewis.

Instead of hitting a ball into the water, Lincicome found herself splashing around in Poppie's Pond after her second surprise victory leap in the major championship.

"Super emotional," Lincicome said at the 18th green. "I'm standing here, physically, shaking like a leaf still. It's over and I'm still shaking."

Playing a group ahead of Lewis, Lincicome — too nervous to look at leaderboards — didn't know where she stood when she played the 18th in regulation.

"I thought I was so far out of the tour-

namment that I never had a chance," Lincicome said.

In 2009 at Mission Hills, Lincicome hit a hybrid from 210 yards to 4 feet to set up a winning eagle in a one-stroke victory over Cristie Kerr and Kristy McPherson.

Lewis, the 2011 winner, had three chances to win on the 18th. She missed birdie putts from 13 feet in regulation, 15 feet on the first extra hole and 12 feet on the second.

"The initial reaction is disappointed, obviously," Lewis said. "But I played great and I hit some really good putts there, especially at the end. ... I just played solid all day, so I have to remind myself of that and not get too frustrated. It just wasn't quite meant to be today."

On the third extra hole, Lewis left her 103-yard approach from a sand-filled divot short of the green and her chip stopped 12 feet in front of the pin. Her par putt came up an inch short, and Lincicome finished it off — missing a 10-footer and holing out from 1½ feet.

Lincicome finished with a 69. Lewis closed with a 70 in the tricky wind.

Lincicome lost a playoff to Inbee Park last year in the LPGA Championship.

"I just took from that that it was nice to be in contention again," Lincicome said. "Just didn't let it get to me."

Two strokes ahead of playing partner Sei Young Kim and four ahead of Lincicome with five holes left, Lewis missed a chance for her third major title. She has 11 LPGA Tour victories and 18 runner-up finishes,

three in seven starts this year.

The Texan bogeyed the par-4 13th and 15th — missing from 6 feet on 13 and 5 feet on 16 — and closed with three pars.

Morgan Pressel was third at 8 under. Her approach on 18 hit the hole and stayed out, leaving her a short birdie putt for a 70.

PGA Tour: J.B. Holmes used a strong start Sunday for a Houston Open victory in a three-way playoff against Jordan Spieth and Johnson Wagner.

The 32-year-old Holmes birdied the first five holes and nine of the first 12 after starting the day six shots back of Jordan Spieth.

He had a 64, the day's low round, and won on the second playoff hole for his fourth PGA Tour victory and the \$1,188,000 check. Although Holmes' missed birdie putt had given Wagner another chance, his short putt for par lipped out.

Spieth, the hottest player on the PGA Tour heading into the Masters, was trying to win his second playoff in three weeks, sandwiched around a runner-up finish in the Texas Open last Sunday.

But he bowed out on the first playoff hole after his approach shot landed in a bunker and, lying two, he couldn't get close to the cup on his chip.

Holmes' final-day rally was the biggest on the PGA Tour since Matt Jones also came from six down to beat Matt Kuchar in a playoff last April.



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Cubs drop opener to Cardinals

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago Cubs had Joe Maddon in the dugout, and Jon Lester on the mound. Wrigley Field had a new look, with a giant videoboard in left field and pictures of Ernie Banks draped over the closed bleachers.

The St. Louis Cardinals had Adam Wainwright, and a bunch of familiar faces in the lineup. And it was more than enough for the NL Central champs.

Opening night went to the old guard. Wainwright threw six innings of five-hit ball, leading the Cardinals to a 3-0 victory over Lester and the Cubs on Sunday in the major league opener.

"I was fortunate to throw some good pitches when I needed to throw some good pitches," Wainwright said.

Jason Heyward had three hits in his St. Louis debut, and Matt Holliday drove in two runs. Throw in Matt Carpenter's two hits, and the top third of the Cardinals' lineup went 7-for-14 with three RBIs.

"Selfishly, I like the idea of hitting between those two," Heyward said. "Holly can do damage and Carp sees so many pitches and has good (at-bats). I'm going to be kind of spoiled hitting there."

Playing their most anticipated opener in years, the Cubs went 0-for-13 with runners in scoring position. Lester, who got a \$155 million, six-year contract during free agency, allowed three runs and eight hits over 4⅓ innings in his fifth straight opening day start.

"Just wasn't real sharp," Lester said. "Ball was flat. Anytime I get that many fly balls I know that I'm not where I need to be."

The addition of Lester and Maddon ramped up the expectations for Chicago after five straight losing seasons. But it was more of the same in their first game.

The biggest difference for the home team was the towering videoboard, part of a major renovation for the iconic neighborhood ballpark. Images of Banks, a Hall of Fame slugger who played for Chicago for 19 seasons and died in January at age 83, covered the famed bleachers.

The Cubs honored Banks with a pregame moment of silence, and his sons Jerry and Joey Banks each threw out a ceremonial first pitch. The club also extended its condolences to the Cardinals for Oscar Taveras, an outfield prospect who died in a car crash in his native Dominican Republic last October.

"The ballpark was absolutely electric," Maddon said. "The pregame was wonderful. Everything was great. We just have to come through with a couple knocks now and then, but we will. I thought it was a really, really — for lack of a better term — a really good night."

Heyward got the majors' first hit of the season when he doubled and scored on Holliday's single in the first. Holliday had another RBI single in the fifth.

It was more than enough for Wainwright, who was slowed by an abdominal injury early in spring training, but looked just fine in his fourth opening day start. The 6-foot-7 right-hander made the most of umpire Mike Winters' wide strike zone, striking out six with no walks.

"He's fun to watch," manager Mike Matheny said. "There's just special guys like that, when they get in tough situations, big games they're able to make the big pitch when they need to."

Carlos Martinez, who won the fifth starter job in training camp, then worked the seventh for St. Louis. Jordan Walden got three outs before Trevor Rosenthal struck out the side for the save.

UConn advances over Maryland

The Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Breanna Stewart and Morgan Tuck have UConn back in the championship game for the third straight year. Now the Huskies are one victory away from a third straight title.

Stewart scored 25 points and Tuck added 24 to lead UConn to an 81-58 win over Maryland on Sunday in the Final Four.

UConn will face Notre Dame for the title on Tuesday night in a rematch of last season's championship game.

"Every time we play Notre Dame, it's something. I just have a lot of respect for what they've been able to do," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "They've got a heck of a team and their team has gotten a lot better as the season has gone on. Jewell's a great player, obviously, but all their other players have gotten significantly better since the beginning of the season."

The Huskies have won nine titles overall and a victory over the Irish would tie Auriemma with vaunted UCLA men's coach John Wooden for the most all-time with 10. It would also be the second threepeat for UConn, which won three straight championships from 2002-04.

Making the Final Four seems like a rite of spring for the Huskies (37-1) lately as the team has appeared in the last eight national semifinals.

UConn had cruised through the NCAA Tournament, but Maryland coach Brenda Frese said her team wouldn't be intimidated by the Huskies.

"I think the biggest thing against

Maryland is they can break you down with their guard play, and then they're so big inside," Auriemma said. "If you make a mistake on their guards, you've got the big guys to deal with. We needed to try and make sure that we only gave up one thing, that we didn't give up both. So we tried to concentrate on taking away their threes, which they're really good at. And then try to create some mismatches on this end with Tuck and Stewie because I thought that's where we had the advantage."

"These guys are great to coach. You give them a game plan and they followed it."

The Terrapins took it right at them from the start, hanging with UConn for the first 10 minutes. Maryland only trailed 22-19 before UConn scored seven straight points capped by Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis' three-pointer that made it a 10-point game. Maryland (34-3) didn't back down getting back and pulled within 39-33 on Lexie Brown's three-pointer with 1:52 left in the half.

Then Tuck took over.

She scored the final five points of the half to give the Huskies a double-digit advantage going into the break.

Tuck missed last season's championship run while she was recovering from microfracture surgery on her right knee that allowed her to only play in eight games. The redshirt sophomore made her presence felt on the game's biggest stage, finishing just two points short of her career high.

She started the second half with another three as UConn scored the first nine points to break the game open. Her layup

capped the burst and gave UConn a 53-33 advantage. The Terrapins could only get within 14 the rest of the way as Stewart and Tuck answered every Maryland run.

"Tuck was a big time X-factor for them tonight," Frese said. "The stat line of Kaleena, she hits one three but gives seven assists. goes into facilitator, get everyone else going."

Stewart, who was The Associated Press Player of the Year for the second straight season, added eight rebounds.

The loss ended a school-record 28-game winning streak for Maryland, which hasn't won in its four meetings with the Huskies.

Brianna Jones scored 14 points and Lexie Brown added 12 to lead the Terrapins, who cruised through the Big Ten in their inaugural season in the conference going undefeated.

Brown had some extra support at the game as her father, former NBA slam dunk champion, Dee Brown was in attendance. He is an assistant coach with the Sacramento Kings and was able to skip their game Sunday and see his daughter play for the first time this season.

He was sitting near former Celtics teammate Pervis Ellison, whose daughter Aja also plays for the Terrapins. Former NFL star Donovan McNabb was also in the crowd cheering on his niece Kia Nurse, who is a freshman at UConn.

The former athletes weren't the only stars at the game. Three-time Academy Award nominee Tom Cruise was sitting in a suite, though it wasn't clear who he was rooting for.

Notre Dame headed back to final

The Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Notre Dame keeps finding ways to win. One more victory and the Irish will be national champions again.

A young team that lost three starters from last year's squad is back in the NCAA title game after fighting off a gallant comeback by Final Four newcomer South Carolina 66-65 on Sunday night.

All-American Jewell Loyd scored 22 points as the Irish (36-2) advanced to the championship game for the fourth time in five years, but it took a basket from an unlikely source to survive a scoring drought that lasted more than seven minutes down the stretch.

Madison Cable's putback for her only points of the night put the Irish in front for good.

"I was just crashing any way to try to get a rebound, and it kind of just bounced right where I was," Cable said. "I turned around and had an open shot and took it. Luckily, it went in."

Loyd said no one boxed out Cable on her game-winning basket, adding: "She's done it all year. She's the MVP."

Now, Notre Dame will face two-time defending champion Connecticut (37-1) Tuesday night in a rematch of last year's title game.

The Irish ran out to double-digit leads against South Carolina, but the Gamecocks wouldn't go away.

"We didn't rebound, missed a bunch of shots," said Notre Dame coach Muffet McGraw. "Just a great basketball game. We went to Jewell. She had to do everything. Everyone contributed."

Notre Dame is looking to win it all for the first time since McGraw led them to their only national title in 2001.

South Carolina (34-3) overcame a 12-point, first-half deficit and did it again in the closing minutes. The feisty Gamecocks used a 13-0 run to take their only lead on Aleighsa Welch's offensive stickback with 1:12 remaining.

"It came down to them making a play when they needed to make a play and we didn't," South Carolina coach Dawn Staley said.

Brianna Turner scored 17 points and grabbed eight rebounds before fouling out for Notre Dame. Taya Reimer had 16 points for Notre Dame.

Freshman A'ja Wilson came off the bench to lead South Carolina with 20 points. She scored 10 straight for the Gamecocks at one point in the second half to keep her resilient team within striking distance.

Notre Dame led 64-52 with 7:51 to go. The Irish missed eight straight shots before Cable wiped out South Carolina's short-lived lead. South Carolina All-American Tiffany Mitchell's off-balance three-point attempt bounced high off the backboard as time ran out on the best season in school history.

Mitchell fell to the court in dejection and was helped up by teammates.

"They were making it hard for me to try and find a shot. And when I tried to pass it, they deflected it," said Mitchell, who finished with 11 points on 5 of 11 shooting.

The Gamecocks hurt themselves, going 7-for-16 from the foul line, and missing six of seven in the closing minutes while they were trying to catch up.

"That's key. We left a lot of points at the free throw-line," Staley said. "But you know, still we overcame that to put ourselves in a position to take the lead."

Notre Dame lost to Connecticut in

a matchup of unbeaten teams in last year's title game. The Irish came up short against Texas A&M in 2011 and Baylor in 2012.

"It's surreal right now, can't believe that we're here," Loyd said of advancing to Tuesday night's title game. "Glad we played the early game and can get some rest."

South Carolina looked like a Final Four newcomer early, falling behind 15-3 in the first five minutes of the game. The Gamecocks settling and getting a pair of layups from Alaina Coates during a 12-4 surge that helped them get back in the game.

Staley has spent the past seven seasons transforming South Carolina from a struggling program into a national contender that spent much of this season ranked No. 1 in the country. The former Virginia star, who participated in the national semifinals three times as a player joined Kim Mulkey as the only women to play and coach in the Final Four, and she drew on personal experience to try to prepare her team for what encounter during its trip.

The Gamecocks began to solve the multiple defensive looks Notre Dame threw at them, with Coates inflicting damage inside and Mitchell and Bianca Cuevas picking up the pace of the game once Irish guard Lindsay Allen left the game with two fouls. Wilson's jumper trimmed South Carolina deficit to 25-24, but Notre Dame wouldn't crack.

The Irish found a way to advance despite not getting any points from Allen, who missed all five shots she took before fouling out. The sophomore guard scored 23 in Notre Dame victory over Baylor in the Oklahoma City Regional final.