

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, April 14, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Vets return to Mideast to battle terrorists

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — A decade after his first Iraq tour, former U.S. Marine Jamie Lane has returned to the battlefields of the Middle East to fight a still unvanquished enemy and wrestle with the demons of his past.

The 29-year-old from Mt. Pleasant, Mich., served as a machine gunner from 2004 to 2008, mainly in the western Anbar province, where he saw fierce fighting against al-Qaida in Iraq. Now, as a private citizen suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, he is back in the region to battle its successor, the Islamic State group.

"In order to aid my recovery from PTSD, I have taken it upon myself to fight on my terms, against an enemy I know is evil," said Lane, who joined Kurdish militiamen in Syria. "It is redemption, in a sense."

He is one of a small but growing number of Iraq War veterans who are making their way back to the Middle East, not as uniformed soldiers, but as individuals waging their own personal battles.

Many describe feeling a sense of unfinished business as they watched the Islamic State group rampage across the country last summer, seizing territory they had fought and bled for during the U.S.-led intervention.

Some express remorse for taking part in that war, while others say they are driven by the same sense of moral obligation that brought them here in the first place, joining their fate to that of a deeply troubled country.

Scott Curley, another U.S. veteran of the Iraq War, returned to join the Kurdish peshmerga fighters after Islamic State militants in Syria beheaded Peter Kassig, a former U.S. Army Ranger who had returned to the region to provide humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians.

"I'm just a man with a gun, but whatever little difference I can do," he said. "There

'In order to aid my recovery from PTSD, I have taken it upon myself to fight on my terms, against an enemy I know is evil. It is redemption, in a sense.'

Jamie Lane

a former Marine who served in Iraq as a machine gunner from 2004 to 2008 and is fighting the Islamic State with Kurdish militiamen in Syria

weren't many Western volunteers (with the peshmerga), so I figured I could help here."

'Random Westerners'

A U.S.-led air campaign began targeting the Islamic State group in Iraq in August, helping Iraqi and Kurdish forces halt the extremists' advance and begin rolling them back. The Pentagon plans to supply some \$1.6 billion worth of arms and training to Kurdish and Iraqi forces.

But after more than a decade of inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has no interest in sending ground troops back to the Middle East. And as the vets learned at great cost on their various deployments, territory cannot be won and held by airstrikes and arms deliveries alone.

"I'm not a mercenary or in love with killing people," said Bruce Windorski, a former Army Ranger and ex-police officer now training Kurdish fighters with the Syria-based People's Protection Units, or YPG. The Green Bay, Wis., native said he

would rather see a "random Westerner" fighting alongside the Kurds than another full-scale invasion.

"I wouldn't want our American servicemen and women to have to fight a third war in two decades," Windorski said. "I've lived through the loss of loved ones fighting on foreign soil. I have seen families with deployed loved ones. It's hell on everyone involved."

Most of the U.S. vets are fighting alongside Kurdish forces, who have invited foreigners with military experience to join their ranks. A Facebook page called "The Lions of Rojava" offers the chance to "send terrorists to hell and save humanity," and features portraits of smiling Kurdish female fighters.

Iraq's Kurdish forces, known as the peshmerga, once strictly banned non-Kurdish fighters from joining. But when Islamic State militants came within 20 miles of their regional capital, Irbil, last summer, they began bending the rules in an act of desperation.

"During wartime, necessity imposed itself," said peshmerga spokesman Halgurd Hekmat. "It's an extraordinary situation,

and it's not a secret that the peshmerga wasn't prepared for this battle," he said.

Experience, knowledge

So far, the U.S. hasn't banned Americans from fighting with militias against the Islamic State group, though it considers the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party, commonly known as the PKK, a terrorist organization. The PKK has been fighting alongside the YPG in northern Iraq and northern Syria.

The American vets say the Kurds need all the help they can get, but that potential volunteers should come with military experience and knowledge of the region.

"Don't show up and look stupid not knowing what you're doing," said Matthew Van Dyke, 35, a Baltimore native who fought alongside Libyan rebels in 2011 and now fights with the Kurds. "It will get you killed. It's more important to have knowledge of the region than to have military training."

Even for seasoned American soldiers, this battle is different. Gone are the sprawling, heavily guarded U.S. bases, the state-of-the-art surveillance and communications equipment, the helicopters that once ferried them across hostile territory and the direct air support they could once call upon during intense fighting.

A number of foreign fighters have been killed, including an Australian man, a British man, and a German woman.

Lane, who had recently returned from the front line with the YPG, said "fighting with them is certain, 100 percent death."

"I am shaken by my last battle," he said. "The YPG is a very young, new military, and they need all the help they can get against the bastards in ISIS (the Islamic State group) who are well-trained and well-equipped. It is a miracle we aren't all dead."

Ex-Blackwater guards sentenced for Iraq shootings to appeal

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense lawyers are vowing to appeal the convictions of four former Blackwater security guards after a federal judge handed down lengthy prison terms for their roles in a 2007 shooting of unarmed civilians in Iraq.

Attorneys identified several issues Monday as likely forming the basis of an appeal, including vindictive prosecution and whether State Department contractors could be charged under a federal law that covers the overseas crimes of Defense Department civilian employees.

The move comes after U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth sentenced former guard Nicholas Slatten to life in prison and three others to 30-year terms for their roles in the shootings that killed 14 Iraqi civilians and wounded 17 others in Baghdad's Nisoor Square.

Slatten, who witnesses said was the first to fire shots in the melee, was sentenced to life after being convicted last October of first-degree murder. The three

other guards — Paul Slough, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard — were each sentenced to 30 years and one day in prison for charges that included manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and using firearms while committing a felony.

The incident strained U.S.-Iraq relations and caused an international uproar over the use of private security guards in a war zone.

Lamberth announced the sentences after a daylong hearing at which defense lawyers had argued for leniency and presented character witnesses for their clients. At the same time, prosecutors asked that those sentences be made even harsher. He rejected both requests.

Appearing in court wearing leg shackles and prison garb, the former contractors insisted they were innocent.

"The verdict is wrong, you know that I am innocent, sir," Slatten told the judge.

"I feel utterly betrayed by the same government I served honorably," Slough said.

But Lamberth said he fully agreed with the jury's guilty verdicts.

Nearly 100 friends and relatives packed the courtroom to show support for the men, with many openly weeping throughout the proceedings. Several came to the podium, some choking back tears, to speak glowingly of the men they knew as role models and patriots who only wanted to help serve their country.

In Baghdad, taxi driver Bara Saadoun Ismael, who received two bullets in his abdomen in addition to 60 pieces of shrapnel in different parts of his body in 2007, is not satisfied with the verdict, demanding capital punishment.

"This verdict is less than what they deserve," Saadoun, 36, told The Associated Press in a phone interview in Baghdad. "They did hurt us a lot, and for what they did to us they must face execution."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Patrick Martin described the shooting as an unprovoked ambush of civilians and said the men haven't shown remorse or taken responsibility. Defense lawyers countered that the men were targeted with gunfire and shot back in self-defense with guns the State Department had provided them for

safety.

"This was no unprovoked massacre, and we'll never accept that it was," said Brian Heberlig, an attorney for Slough.

Mohammad Kinani al-Razzaq spoke in halting English about the death of his 9-year-old son as a picture of the smiling boy, Ali Mohammed Hafedh Abdul al-Razzaq, was shown on courtroom monitors. He demanded the court show Blackwater "what the law is."

"What's the difference between these criminals and terrorists?" Razzaq asked.

Defense attorney David Schertler, who represents Heard, said he would argue on appeal that the sentences violate the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment given the circumstances.

Thomas Connolly, who represents Slatten, said his client would appeal on a claim of vindictive prosecution. Slatten originally was charged with manslaughter in 2007, but an appeals court threw out the charge and the statute of limitations lapsed. Connolly said prosecutors then unfairly charged his client with a more serious charge of murder.

Iraq offered \$200M in US aid

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama pledged \$200 million in humanitarian aid to Iraq Tuesday to help those displaced by Islamic State militants, an offer of assistance that appeared to fall short of the Iraqi prime minister's request for greater military support.

Obama made the financial commitment during an Oval Office meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Speaking to reporters at the end of the meeting, Obama said Iraqi forces are getting better equipped and trained since al-Abadi's election seven months ago. He also noted that Iraq and a U.S.-led coalition have recovered about one-

fourth of the territory the Islamic State group had captured in the country.

However, Obama said the process of pushing back the militant group will be long and that it is crucial for the U.S. to help support families who have been displaced by the militants.

Al-Abadi told reporters Monday that an increase in U.S. airstrikes, weapons deliveries and training has helped roll back Islamic State forces, but he needed greater support from the international coalition to "finish" them. "We want to see more," he said.

The Iraqi leader made a similar appeal in the Oval Office, saying he hoped for more international cooperation to minimize the crisis in the region.

Police: College shooting may be hate crime

The Associated Press

GOLDSBORO, N.C. — Police said Tuesday they were investigating the fatal shooting of a gay community college worker as a possible hate crime.

The shooting victim, 44-year-old campus print shop director Ron Lane, was gunned down by former student Kenneth Morgan Stancil III on Monday morning, police said. Lane dismissed Stancil from the print shop's work-study program in March because he had too many absences.

Police have not released a motive in the shooting and said the men's relationship was purely a supervisor-student one.

Lane's supervisor at the college said Lane was gay, but police refused to say why a hate crime was being investigated.

"At this time, I'm not prepared to divulge that information," Goldsboro police Sgt. Jeremy Sutton said at a news conference.

An expert who tracks hate groups said Stancil's facial tattoo with the number "88" was a clear indication of a neo-Nazi, who have been accused of attacking gays. However, police have not said whether Stancil held white supremacist beliefs.

Police say the 20-year-old Stancil entered the Wayne Community College print shop where he used to work and fired once with a pistol-grip shotgun, killing Lane, his former supervisor, just as Lane was arriving for work. The shooting sparked a campus-wide lockdown as police stormed the building searching for Stancil, who immediately fled on a motorcycle.

House lawmakers vie for DOD priorities

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Hardware, unit deactivations, open-carry on base. House lawmakers sounded off Tuesday during the first rounds of debate on the annual defense authorization bill.

Calls to keep Apache helicopters with the National Guard, bar the elimination of C-130s at Fort Bragg, N.C., and relax gun regulations at U.S. bases could be rolled into the House's version of the massive piece of legislation, which sets the military priorities for the coming fiscal year.

The House Armed Services Committee is scheduled to hammer out its final version of the bill by the end of the month, setting the stage for a final debate and passage on the chamber floor later this year. The Senate will also craft its version of the National Defense Authorization Act and the two will eventually be combined.

Rep. Keith Rothfus, R-Pa., told the Armed Services Committee that a plan to transfer National Guard Apache attack helicopters to the active-duty Army and replace them with Black Hawks will degrade the guard's readiness and combat capabilities.

"I have long opposed this plan and for the second year in a row I ask, 'Savings at what cost?'" Rothfus said.

The House agreed to examine the plan, but Senate lawmakers were able to pass a measure last year allowing the Army to transfer 48 of the aircraft. Rothfus called for the NDAA to place a freeze on any transfers until an analysis is completed, the Army and National Guard comment and a final decision is made by the House.

"How does it make any sense to allow the Army to transfer these Apaches before the committee completes its work?" he said.

Fort Bragg also faces the loss

of aircraft crucial to training and operations, said Rep. Renee Ellmers, R-N.C., whose district borders the base.

The Air Force has targeted the 440th Airlift Wing for deactivation. Ellmers said the unit is the only wing of C-130H cargo aircraft that will be completely closed in the United States and should be protected in this year's NDAA.

"This is a decision that essentially takes the air out of airborne," she said.

The congresswoman called the deactivation "incredibly shortsighted" and said it will leave the 18th Airborne Corps in the lurch by reducing training opportunities.

Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, again proposed an amendment to the annual authorization bill that would ease restrictions on servicemembers carrying weapons on U.S. bases, which the congressman said could provide more protection against mass shootings.

Iran expects to get Russian missile system by year's end

The Associated Press

MOSCOW — Iran expects Russia to deliver the S-300 air defense missile system by the end of the year, the head of the Iranian security council said Tuesday.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday lifted a five-year ban on delivery of the missile system to Iran, drawing criticism from the United States and Israel.

The S-300 would significantly bolster the Islamic republic's

military capability by providing a strong deterrent against any air attack.

Iran had responded to the Russian ban by filing a lawsuit with a court in Geneva seeking \$4 billion in damages for breach of contract.

Ali Shamkhani, who heads Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said Tuesday in Moscow that the lawsuit will be withdrawn only after delivery of the S-300, which he hoped would happen by the end of the year, Russian news agencies reported.

Canadian teams crash party

The Associated Press

The NHL's postseason dominoes tumbled throughout the regular season's wild final week. When the last ones fell Saturday night, they revealed that the league is set up for an extremely interesting spring.

This Stanley Cup tournament features seven teams that missed the playoffs last year. A whopping five Canadian teams earned berths, the most from hockey's heartland since 2004.

Defending champion Los Angeles won't be there, and neither will perennial power Boston. The New York Rangers and Anaheim landed atop the two conferences, but contenders with a tantalizing array of veteran talent and hungry youth are right behind them.

And expect fierce competition this season: The postseason contenders were separated in the standings by only 16 points, the smallest gap in the 16-team postseason era.

The puck drops Wednesday night in Montreal, Washington, Nashville and Vancouver. The action won't stop until a new champion raises the Cup in June.

Here's what to watch when the NHL postseason begins on Wednesday:

Home cooking: Sure, Canadian players and coaches are prominent on every NHL team. But when franchises based in the Great White North make the playoffs, there's an extra excitement — and this postseason will have plenty after a mad rush for position left five Canadian teams in the field and two all-Canadian first-round matchups.

Montreal was a no-doubt playoff contender, and remains a Stanley Cup favorite as long as Carey Price continues his unbelievable season in net.

Vancouver comfortably earned its postseason spot and second place in

the Pacific Division with a remarkable bounce-back season under new coach Willie Desjardins.

Yet the Canucks' first-round opponent will be the upstart Calgary Flames, who defied expectations and the loss of injured captain Mark Giordano to end their five-year playoff drought.

The Winnipeg Jets also hung on late to earn their city's first home playoff games since 1996.

And then there are the Ottawa Senators, who went 23-4-4 over their final 31 games to earn a first-round showdown with Montreal. The Senators shocked the league with incredible play from Andrew Hammond, a mid-tier AHL goalie nicknamed "The Hamburglar" who has gone 20-1-2 since his February recall.

New blood: The playoffs will go on without the teams that won three of the past four Stanley Cup titles — and for the first time in NHL history, the teams that won the previous season's championship and the team with the last Presidents' Trophy both missed the postseason.

The Los Angeles Kings struggled at mid-season and flopped in the final week, finishing ninth in the West and ending their spectacular run of two championships, 10 playoff series wins and a record 64 post-season games over the past three years. For the first time since 2007, the playoffs won't feature the defending champion.

The Boston Bruins, who won the 2011 title and had the NHL's best regular-season record last year, joined the Kings on the golf course after seeing their hopes crushed in the final hours of the season.

No reward: The top seeds in each conference drew tough matchups in the first round.

The Rangers emerged from a pack of top teams and streaked past Anaheim to claim the Presidents' Trophy in the final weeks, but their dubious reward is a per-

ilous first-round matchup with superstar Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and the Pittsburgh Penguins, who squeaked into the postseason on the final day.

Anaheim led the overall league standings for much of the season before clinching the top spot in the West in its final game. Yet the high-powered Ducks' first opponent is the Winnipeg Jets, who made a late-season surge for their first playoff berth since the erstwhile Atlanta Thrashers moved north nearly four years ago.

The MTS Centre and the famed Portage and Main intersection in that prairie metropolis will be packed with white-clad, success-starved fans when the Ducks fly into town.

"I think they're going to be crazy," Jets forward Mark Schiefele said. "They've been with us all year and they've been unbelievable. I think playoffs will just hit that next level for sure."

Divisional rivals: The NHL realigned its postseason last year to create more matchups between divisional rivals, and the effect will be felt particularly by Central Division teams this year.

Division champion St. Louis drew a meeting with Minnesota, which finished with the Western Conference's sixth-best record. The other Central matchup is a brawl between high-powered Chicago and surprising Nashville, which held off the 2013 champion Blackhawks down the stretch for home-ice advantage.

Steady on: The Detroit Red Wings made the playoffs for the 24th consecutive season, and they've never had a postseason series against the Tampa Bay Lightning and general manager Steve Yzerman, who is a bit of a celebrity in Michigan. The Wings' playoff exploits could play a role in the future of coach Mike Babcock, who could be available to the highest bidder this summer.

Ex-NFL RB suspect in killing of cellmate

The Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. — Former National Football League running back Lawrence Phillips is suspected of killing his cellmate in a Central California prison, officials said Monday.

Phillips' cellmate at Kern Valley State Prison was found lifeless early Saturday and later pronounced dead, prison spokesman Lt. Marshall Denning said in a statement.

Phillips, 39, was once one of the top U.S. college football players at Nebraska. He played for the St. Louis Rams in the NFL, until being released in 1997 for insubordination. He also played for the Miami Dolphins and San Francisco 49ers.

Phillips is serving a sentence of more than 31 years. He was convicted of twice choking his girlfriend in 2005 in San Diego and later that year of driving his car into three teens after a pickup football game in Los Angeles.

He is suspected of killing Damion Soward, a 37-year-old inmate from San Bernardino County serving 82 years to life for a first-degree murder conviction.

West Point unveils new team branding

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Army is getting a new look.

The academy unveiled a rebranding Monday night after an 18-month collaboration with Nike.

One goal is to strengthen the connection between Army and West Point. The academy will now refer to its teams as Army West Point instead of just Army.

All 28 of the school's sports teams will have a new main logo featuring a shield, sword, star and helmet. The primary colors are the traditional black, gold, gray and white.

The academy will continue to use Black Knights as a nickname.

Steelers' CB Taylor announces retirement

PITTSBURGH — Steelers cornerback Ike Taylor is retiring, ending a 12-year career in which he helped lead the team to two Super Bowl victories.

The 34-year-old player announced the decision Tuesday.

Taylor became a free agent last month and said he couldn't envision playing for another team. He finishes his career with 17 interceptions, including three in the playoffs.

In other NFL news:
■ The Oakland Raiders have agreed to a deal with free agent wide receiver Michael Crabtree.

Blackhawks may have Kane for playoffs

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — It was the most important "pushing and shoving" of the season for the Chicago Blackhawks.

Patrick Kane was cleared for contact and practiced with the team on Monday. The dynamic winger, who broke his collarbone in February, then received medical clearance to play in Game 1 of the playoffs on Wednesday night in Nashville.

"Patrick has been working extremely diligently with his rehabilitation and has recently returned to full-contact practice without any difficulty," team physician Dr. Michael Terry said in a release. "After discussions with Patrick and the team, and examining Patrick today, we collectively feel it is appropriate, with minimal risk, for him to return to full participation."

Kane wasn't hit hard in practice, but said he is nearly ready for the physical demands of a game. After he had surgery on Feb. 25, Terry said a full recovery would take "approximately 12 weeks."

"I wouldn't necessarily call that con-

tact," he said of Monday's skate. "It was more like pushing and shoving."

Kane missed the final 21 games of the season, and the All-Star still finished second on the team with 27 goals and 64 points. He was a candidate for the Hart Trophy for NHL MVP when he was hurt in the first period of a 3-2 shootout win over Florida on Feb. 24.

"We'll see how he does again tomorrow," coach Joel Quenneville said long before the Blackhawks issued the statement with Terry's comments. "I thought he had real good progress today. He got cleared for contact and handled everything pretty well."

So could Kane be in the lineup Wednesday?

"Yeah, he could," Quenneville said. Speaking before Terry's statement, Kane said his return hinges on getting medical clearance.

"I feel pretty good," he said. "Obviously itching to play. Any hockey player who would be in this situation where you're off for almost seven weeks (would be).

"But obviously you don't want to go back to Square One. You want to be able to contribute and be able to help the team out."

Forward Brad Richards and defenseman Kimmo Timonen, a pair of veterans who were acquired to give Chicago depth for a long playoff run, both said they are ready to play after missing the last three regular-season games with upper-body injuries.

Richards signed a \$2 million, one-year contract with the Blackhawks last summer after being bought out by the New York Rangers.

The center, who turns 35 on May 2, is on the second half of a stellar career, but has produced in spurts for Chicago this season. He had 12 goals and 37 points in 76 games.

"Today was another day that was a step in the right direction for Kaner and for other guys," Richards said. "Either way, it's exciting for everybody ... the best part of what we do is starting Wednesday night."



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MLB offense off to slow start

The Associated Press

Batters stayed stuck in the deep freeze in the sport's offensive ice age during the first week of the new major league season, with scoring remaining near its lowest level in more than two decades.

There was an average of 8.34 runs per game through Sunday, according to STATS, down from 8.38 through the first eight days of last season and the second-lowest since 1992. Back in 2006, teams averaged 10.51 runs a game over a similar span.

"There is a noticeable decline in offensive production measured in a variety of different ways, and that is an issue that we're watching carefully," new baseball commissioner Rob Manfred said Monday in Toronto.

Houston's Evan Gattis is 0-for-20 with 12 strikeouts. Boston's Mike Napoli was 0-for-18 before an eighth-inning single Sunday.

"This game is about rhythm and being in there a lot," Napoli said. "I'm pretty sure that once everyone gets into rhythm it's going to be good times."

The .241 big league batting average is down from .246 in the first week last year and the second-lowest in 24 years, ahead of only 2012. Before hitters had a good day at the plate Sunday, the average was .236 — the lowest since 1972.

Home runs are up slightly to 1.81 from last year's 1.70, the smallest average since 1993.

"Pitching is so good now that it's just gotten tougher and tougher and tougher on these hitters," said Bruce Bochy, manager of the World Series champion San Francisco Giants. "The game's changed. The velocity on these pitchers has gone up quite a bit, particularly in the bullpen."

There were shutouts on each of the first seven days of the season for the first time since 2002. The 20 total blankings equaled two years ago for the most over the first eight days since 1972, STATS said.

"People overanalyze everything," Oakland outfielder Josh Reddick said. "We're what, six games in right now? It's just nothing."

Still, sometimes early trends do hold up. Last year's final big league batting average of .251 was the lowest since 1972. Only 12 players had 100 or more RBIs, down from a record 59 in 1999.

"We've been monitoring the situation with respect to offense going back to last year," Manfred said. "We are in a mode where we feel we need additional data in order to make a good decision as to whether we have an aberration, a big correct or whether we have a trend that is going to need to be addressed in some way. Realistically, this is going to be a

data-gathering year for us."

Texas slugger Prince Fielder points to the increase in pitchers' velocity. These days, miles per hour is scrutinized as much as ERA.

"You don't have too many guys just throwing 86, 88 no more," he said. "They're throwing 93, 95 with the same kind of movement as a guy throwing 86. You've got to tip your cap. Guys are good."

And it's not just power pitching. Throw in tougher testing for steroids and defensive shifts suggested by computer programs, and the sport looks far more like the era of Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale and Bob Gibson in the 1960s than the big bopper days of Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa and Barry Bonds in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"I think a better drug-testing policy has something to do with it," Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "Beyond all that I think it's all the advanced information, it just slants to pitching and defense. There's really nothing out there that helps a hitter right now."

Texas rookie manager Jeff Bannister says the onus is on batters to change their ways.

"Teams play shifts because hitters are unwilling to move the ball around the yard, hit the other way," he said. "Be a hitter. Put a foot down and be a hitter. Let slugging happen."

Westbrook helps keep Thunder's hopes alive

The Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Russell Westbrook made the most of his second chance.

The NBA's scoring leader tallied 36 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists, and the Thunder beat the Portland Trail Blazers 101-90 on Monday night to keep their playoff hopes alive.

Westbrook almost didn't get to play. He picked up his 16th technical at Indiana on Sunday. The automatic one-game suspension that usually accompanies that number would have kept him out of what turned out to be a must-win game. But the technical foul was rescinded Monday morning.

Enes Kanter added 27 points and 13 rebounds for the Thunder, who would have been eliminated from the Western Conference playoff race with a loss. Now, the Thunder need a win at Minnesota and a loss by New Orleans at home against San Antonio on Wednesday to advance. Any other scenario and New Orleans secures the No. 8 seed.

Pelicans 100, Timberwolves 88: Anthony Davis had 24 points, 11 rebounds and six blocks to move the New Orleans Pelicans one step closer to a playoff berth with a victory over host Minnesota.

Warriors 111, Grizzlies 107: Klay Thompson scored 26 of his 42 points in a sensational second quarter as host Golden State beat undermanned Memphis.

Clippers 110, Nuggets 103: Blake Griffin scored 22 points and DeAndre Jordan had a double-double as host Los Angeles eked out a victory over Denver and moved into a three-way tie with San Antonio and Houston for the No. 2 seed in the West.

Bulls 113, Nets 86: At New York, Nikola Mirotic scored 26 points and Pau Gasol had 22 points and 11 rebounds as Chicago clinched home-court advantage in the first round of the playoffs with a victory over Brooklyn.

Cavaliers 109, Pistons 97: LeBron James returned from a day off to record a triple-double as host Cleveland got ready for the playoffs with a win over Detroit.

James had 21 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds as the Cavs improved to 33-9 since Jan. 15.

Bucks 107, 76ers 97: Michael Carter-Williams matched his season-high with 30 points in his first game back in Philadelphia to lead playoff-bound Milwaukee over the 76ers.

Rockets 100, Hornets 90: James Harden scored 29 points and Josh Smith had a double-double as visiting Houston defeated Charlotte for the ninth straight time.

Knicks 112, Hawks 108: At Atlanta, rookie Langston Galloway scored a career-high 26 points, hitting all six of his three-point attempts for New York.

Heat 100, Magic 93: Hassan Whiteside tied a career high with 24 points and grabbed 13 rebounds and Dwyane Wade scored 22 points as host Miami kept its playoff hopes alive.

Jazz 109, Mavericks 92: Rudy Gobert had 20 points, 17 rebounds and three blocks to help Utah at home.

Kings 102, Lakers 92: Omri Casspi had 26 points, nine rebounds and six assists for host Sacramento, which ended a three-game losing streak.

Royals rout Twins, stay unbeaten

The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Kansas City Royals became the only unbeaten team in the majors as Danny Duffy pitched into the seventh inning and Kendrys Morales homered in a 12-3 romp over Minnesota, spoiling the Twins' home opener Monday.

The defending American League champions improved to 7-0. It's the second-best start in Kansas City's history, behind the 2003 club that won nine in a row to begin the season.

Detroit, which had been the only other undefeated team in the big leagues, lost 5-4 at Pittsburgh earlier in the day.

Duffy (1-0) went 6¹/₃ innings, giving up three runs. He's 4-1 with a 2.37 ERA in his career against the Twins and is undefeated in four starts at Target Field.

Minnesota Timberwolves icon Kevin Garnett, who hasn't played in a game since March 7 for the NBA team that plays across the street, threw out the ceremonial first pitch to his longtime friend Torii Hunter.

Hunter, who returned to the Twins this season after seven years away, tipped his helmet during a brief step out of the box to acknowledge the standing ovation during his first at-bat. The cheers were scant the rest of the afternoon.

Alcides Escobar, Lorenzo Cain on his 29th birthday and Eric Hosmer each drove in two runs for the Royals, who had five players tally two hits apiece.

Dodgers 6, Mariners 5 (10): Alex Guerrero hit a bases-loaded single with two outs in the bottom of the 10th inning, completing Los Angeles' comeback from a four-run deficit for a victory over visiting Seattle.

Nelson Cruz hit two of the Mariners' four home runs off Brandon McCarthy. Yasiel Puig homered for Los Angeles.

Rockies 2, Giants 0: Eddie Butler outduled fellow rookie Chris Heston and visiting Colorado spoiled San Francisco's latest World Series championship cel-

ebration in its home opener.

Troy Tulowitzki hit an RBI single in the fourth inning against Heston (1-1). San Francisco raised its third World Series winning flag in five years before the game.

Pirates 5, Tigers 4: Gerrit Cole shut down baseball's top-hitting team, allowing one run in six-plus innings as host Pittsburgh handed Detroit its first loss of the season.

The Tigers were trying to match the 7-0 start set by the 1984 club that went on to win the World Series.

Red Sox 9, Nationals 4: Mookie Betts hit a three-run homer, jumped to take away a home run from Bryce Harper and stole two bases on the same pitch, leading host Boston over Washington in its home opener.

Rick Porcello (1-1) won his Fenway Park debut, allowing four hits in eight innings. Ryan Zimmerman and Danny Espinosa homered off Porcello.

Mets 2, Phillies 0: National League Rookie of the Year Jacob deGrom and New York won their home opener, shutting down Philadelphia.

DeGrom (1-1) gave up seven hits in 6¹/₃ innings.

Brewers 5, Cardinals 4: Matt Garza overcame five walks to earn his first career win in St. Louis and Carlos Gomez had two hits and an RBI for Milwaukee.

Adam Wainwright (1-1) gave up five runs — three earned — in seven innings.

Rays 2, Blue Jays 1: Jake Odorizzi pitched eight impressive innings and Tampa Bay scored on two bases-loaded walks by R.A. Dickey to beat host Toronto.

Odorizzi (2-0) allowed one run and two hits, improving to 2-0 with a 2.00 ERA in four career starts against the Blue Jays. The right-hander set down the final eight batters he faced before Brad Boxberger finished for his third save.

Yankees 6, Orioles 5: Stephen Drew delivered a pinch-hit grand slam in the

seventh inning, and New York beat host Baltimore for its first winning streak of the season.

Down 4-2, the Yankees loaded the bases with two outs before Drew connected on a 3-1 pitch from Tommy Hunter (0-1).

Athletics 8, Astros 1: Billy Butler hit a three-run homer and Marcus Semien and Brett Lawrie connected to back a solid start by Scott Kazmir and give Oakland a win over host Houston.

Kazmir (2-0) allowed three hits and one run while striking out eight in six innings.

Angels 6, Rangers 3: Collin Cowgill and David Freese each hit two-run homers in the fifth inning for visiting Los Angeles, which rallied from an early deficit to beat Texas.

Matt Shoemaker (2-0) was down 3-0 after the first, but pitched into the seventh without allowing another run. He won his ninth consecutive decision over a 10-game stretch.

Cubs 7, Reds 6 (10): Jorge Soler homered twice and Arismendy Alcantara had a game-ending RBI single in the 10th inning to lift host Chicago over Cincinnati.

Chris Coghlan had three hits and a homer as the Cubs came back from three runs down to overcome a rough start by Jon Lester, who gave up six runs and 10 hits in six innings as his ERA ballooned to 7.84.

Braves 3, Marlins 2: Alberto Callaspo hit a tiebreaking single in his team's two-run fifth inning and Atlanta held off visiting Miami in the ninth to win a game slowed by two rain delays.

Jason Grilli gave up a run-scoring single in the ninth but earned his fourth save.

Diamondbacks 8, Padres 4: Ender Inciarte hit two doubles and a triple and drove in a career-high four runs to lead Arizona to a victory against host San Diego.

Inciarte hit a two-run double in the second and a two-run triple in the third-inning eighth to help break it open. He also doubled and scored in the seventh.