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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Drone program under scrutiny after deaths

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — After weeks of aerial surveillance, CIA analysts reached two conclusions about a compound to be targeted in a January drone strike: that it was used by al-Qaida militants, and, in the moment before it was hit, that it had exactly four occupants.

But as six bodies were removed from the rubble, the drone feeds that continued streaming back to CIA headquarters carried with them a new set of troubling questions, including who the other two victims were, and how the agency's pre-strike assessments could have been so flawed.

In his grim statement on Thursday, President Barack Obama described the deaths of two Western hostages held by al-Qaida as unfortunate but not necessarily a result of negligence. He cited the "fog of war" and said that preliminary assessments indicate the strike "was fully consistent with the guidelines under which we conduct counterterrorism efforts."

But current and former U.S. counterterrorism officials said Thursday's disclosures undercut years of U.S. claims about the accuracy of the drone program and provided new ammunition for skeptics of ad-

ministration policies that are supposed to require "near certainty" that no civilians will be harmed.

Despite Obama's equanimity in public, officials said that his reaction behind closed doors was considerably harsher. Obama's advisers have for years told him that "this would never happen, and now it did," said a former senior U.S. counterterrorism official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "It is going to be a big deal."

The disclosures Thursday went beyond the deaths of the two hostages — Warren Weinstein, an American held by al-Qaida since 2011, and Giovanni Lo Porto, an Italian who was kidnapped in 2012.

The administration also revealed that Weinstein was one of three Americans killed in a pair of CIA drone strikes in Pakistan in January.

The others, Ahmed Farouq and Adam Gadahn, were members of al-Qaida. Even so, the CIA appears not to have known that the two men were present at the sites it targeted. As a result, the operations that killed them didn't adhere to rules that Obama imposed, requiring a Justice Department review and other measures before Americans are targeted in counterterrorism operations overseas.

Dismal statistics

Their deaths, while not deemed civilian casualties, add to an increasingly dismal set of statistics on U.S. citizens. Since 2002, at least eight Americans have been killed in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen. Only one — Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born cleric later accused of serving as a senior al-Qaida operative in Yemen — was targeted intentionally.

Human rights groups lashed out at the White House for acknowledging the deaths of two Western hostages while continuing to withhold information about the broader civilian toll of the drone campaign.

Weinstein and Lo Porto "are far from the first innocents to die by our drones, and in no other case has the U.S. apologized for its mistake," said Alka Pradhan, an attorney for Reprieve U.S., an organization that has represented civilian victims in drone cases. "Inconsistencies like this are seen around the world as hypocritical and do the United States' image real harm."

The deaths of the hostages follow other recent developments that have revealed divisions among the CIA and other agencies over whether to capture or kill a U.S. citizen.

Muhanad Mahmoud al-Farekh was recently arraigned

in a U.S. court on federal terrorism charges after he was captured by Pakistan and secretly flown to New York.

His arrest raised questions about the frequency with which the U.S. government asserts that capturing terrorism suspects is not feasible. The CIA had been pushing to kill Farekh for more than a year before his arrest, current and former U.S. officials said.

Obama said he has ordered a "full review" of the strikes disclosed Thursday, and White House officials signaled that the administration is already considering whether the guidelines that govern such operations go far enough in eliminating the prospect of such errors.

But others said U.S. counterterrorism policies may already be approaching the limits of how much risk can be eliminated while still allowing the CIA and the U.S. military to launch missiles at al-Qaida targets.

"To demand a higher standard of proof than they had here could be the end of these types of counterterrorism operations," said Rep. Adam Schiff, of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

US mulls larger role for Iraqis in extremist battle

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is considering training Iraqis to handle ground control for airstrikes, a move that would significantly expand their role in the fight against the militant group Islamic State, a senior administration official said Thursday.

The administration has been reluctant to put U.S. special forces at risk by deploying them on the ground in Iraq to call in strikes against targets associated with the Islamic State group. At the same time, officials have been reluctant to rely on the Iraqis for a job that requires lengthy training.

But the absence of what the

military calls joint terminal attack controllers has lengthened the time it takes to direct airstrikes, raising the risks for Iraqi forces on the ground.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi complained during his visit to Washington last week about delays in launching strikes and asked for American help in reducing the lag time.

Ground controllers are likely to be valuable in the close-quarter fights U.S. officials expect to have with Islamic State militants in Iraq's cities.

U.S. and Iraqi forces are now preparing for what is expected to be a tough battle for Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, which is under the militant group's control.

Airstrikes in Yemen intensify

The Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen — Attempts to ease fighting in Yemen appeared to falter Thursday as Shiite rebels pressed an offensive in the south and a Saudi Arabia-led coalition intensified its airstrikes less than two days after it said it was scaling back the campaign.

All sides have declared their willingness to enter talks, but none has taken any steps to end the conflict that has killed more than 1,000 people.

At least six airstrikes targeted an air base, a military camp and weapon caches in the western port of Houdida. In the western city of Taiz, jets bombed the headquarters of Battalion 35, led by pro-Saleh commanders. In the nearby city of Ibb, the planes targeted educational facilities suspected of storing weapons, officials said.

On Tuesday, Saudi Arabia announced an end to the first

phase of its coalition's month-old air campaign against the Houthis, who swept out of the north and advanced toward southern Yemen. The Saudis said a new phase called "Renewal of Hope" was beginning, focused on diplomacy.

The rebels and their allies have lost little ground despite the airstrikes, with Houthis controlling the north and the capital of Sanaa, while trying to make inroads in the southern and central provinces.

The Saudis — joined in the coalition by other Gulf countries, Egypt and Sudan — view the rebels as an Iranian proxy bent on expanding Tehran's influence across the region.

In a thinly veiled reference to Iran, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi said Thursday that Egypt will not permit any country to threaten the national security of any other Arab country.

"With help of our brotherly Arabs, we will not allow any force to expand its power (influence) or plots on the Arab world," he said.

Many have been concerned about a convoy of Iranian ships that was steaming toward Yemen.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Wednesday the Iranian ships might be carrying weapons to the Houthis, but he would not say whether the U.S. would forcibly stop and board one of the Iranian ships if it entered Yemeni waters. On Friday, Pentagon spokesman Col. Steve Warren said the Iranian flotilla is now headed northeast away from Yemen at a rate of 5 to 6 knots.

Warren said the Pentagon doesn't know why the ships turned around, and it's not clear if they are returning to Iran.

Still, he called the move a positive development.

Many Sea Dragons grounded by inspections

The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot

Two months after the Navy ordered new inspections of every heavy-lift helicopter in its fleet, most of the aircraft — including all but one based in Norfolk, Va. — remain grounded until thousands of repairs are made to potentially unsafe fuel lines and electrical wires.

It's a time- and labor-intensive process, complicated further by the age of the helicopters: Some parts needed to repair the Cold War-era aircraft are out of production and must be made in-house or custom ordered.

The renewed safety push comes more than a year after an MH-53E Sea Dragon crashed off the coast of Virginia Beach, killing three crewmembers. A fuel line had chafed against an electrical wire in the cabin, igniting an explosive fire.

Afterward, the Navy required inspections of every Sea Dragon and is Marine Corps variant, the CH-53E Super Stallion, for signs of damaged wires and fuel lines.

In February, nearly a year after that work was reportedly finished, a spot check revealed a problem: Either the engineers who wrote the original inspection guidelines hadn't done a good job explaining their intent, or maintenance crews hadn't grasped the importance of the work.

Either way, engineers found that many bad wires and fuel lines hadn't been fixed, and the increased risk of fire hadn't been eliminated.

A day after The Virginian-Pilot reported those internal concerns, Naval Air Systems Command in Maryland drafted the new inspection plan and issued temporary flight restrictions that are in effect until the work is finished.

As of Thursday, crews had finished inspecting 118 of 177 Super Stallions and Sea Dragons.

Petraeus gets probation, fine for breach

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — His outstanding career in the military and national security has been ruined; so have his political aspirations, because he mishandled classified information.

But when former CIA Director David Petraeus was sentenced Thursday to two years' probation and was fined \$100,000 for what a federal judge called a "serious lapse of judgment," some argued that he received preferential treatment.

"There is a double standard that has been displayed by the U.S. government that is inequitable, unconscionable and just simply unfair," said Mark Zaid, a Washington attorney who regularly represents government employees and military members in national security cases.

The sentencing came two months after Petraeus agreed to plead guilty to a federal misdemeanor count of unauthorized removal and retention of classified material.

The plea agreement carried

a possible sentence of up to a year in prison. Prosecutors had recommended two years' probation and a \$40,000 fine, but Judge David Keesler increased the fine to "reflect seriousness of the offense," that stood in "stark contrast to 37 years of achievement."

Petraeus made a brief statement before he was sentenced, apologizing "to those closest to me and others, including this court, for the pain my actions have caused."

Suspected terrorists planned Vatican attack

MILAN — Islamic extremists suspected in a bomb attack in a Pakistani market that killed more than 100 people had also planned an attack against the Vatican in 2010 that was never carried out, an Italian prosecutor said Friday.

Wiretaps collected as part of an investigation into an Islamic terrorism network operating in Italy gave "signals of some preparation for a possible attack" at the Vatican, prosecutor Mauro Mura told a news conference in Cagliari, Sardinia. That included the arrival of a suicide bomber in Rome. He eventually left Italy, Mura said, although it wasn't clear why.

The revelation about the planned attack against the Vatican came Friday as police said they were arresting 18 suspected extremists, including two purported bodyguards for Osama bin Laden accused of staging attacks in Pakistan aimed at stopping that government's actions against the Taliban.

From The Associated Press

Warriors stun Pelicans in OT

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Stephen Curry wasn't about to turn down the music, or put any kind of damper on a giddy locker room celebration that seemed more reminiscent of a series-clinching triumph.

The Golden State Warriors still need one more victory to close out their first-round playoff series with New Orleans, yet couldn't help but exchange congratulatory embraces after the stunning, character-defining rally they pulled off in Game 3.

Curry scored 40 points, including a three-pointer in the final seconds of regulation to complete a 20-point, fourth-quarter comeback, and the Warriors beat the Pelicans 123-119 in overtime Thursday night to take a 3-0 series lead.

"You know how big of a deal it is to come back from a deficit like that in the playoffs on the road, in a game we knew was very important for us to really take control of this series," Curry said. "So I think we should celebrate the accomplishment."

Curry hit seven threes, including one to start overtime that gave the Warriors the lead for good.

Klay Thompson had 28 points for the Warriors, who trailed 89-69 after three quarters, then outscored New Orleans 39-19 over the next 12 minutes.

"We haven't been in that position a lot this year, but mental toughness and resilience is probably (among) our best traits," Thompson said. "It was an amazing way to finish the game."

Golden State coach Steve Kerr called the comeback miraculous, and at least one statistic provided by the Warriors backed him up.

Since the NBA instituted the shot clock, Golden State had been down 20 to start a

fourth quarter 358 previous times — and won none of those games.

Now the Warriors can end the series in Game 4 on Saturday night.

Anthony Davis had 29 points and 15 rebounds for the Pelicans, but his missed free throw with 9.6 seconds left — as the crowd chanted "M-V-P!" — allowed Curry's late three to tie it.

The Pelicans expected Curry to shoot and his first attempt in the final seconds bounced out. But Marreese Speights corralled the offensive rebound and handed it to Curry in the corner. The Warriors' sharp-shooter wasn't going to miss twice, not even with defenders, including Davis, closing fast and running into him on his follow-through.

Kerr called the shot "as good as it gets."

"To make that shot shows everything that Steph is about," Kerr said, adding that officials could have called a foul, too. "His confidence level is just off the charts. He's fearless. He wants every big shot."

In a hallway outside the locker room after the game, Thompson playfully serenaded Curry with his own chants of "M-V-P!"

In the other locker room, there was largely stunned silence.

"There's not that much you can say. We know what we did wrong," Davis said. "We've got to try to get our minds right for Saturday."

Davis had a chance to tie it in the final seconds of overtime, but Warriors center Andrew Bogut forced him into a difficult driving shot, which missed badly.

Davis said he was trying to be aggressive but that it never should have come to that.

"Against a team like this, you can't relax," Davis said. "You've got to keep

being aggressive and we missed shots. ... We've got to do a better job executing and following our game plan, especially late in the game."

Ryan Anderson, who had hit only two of 11 shots through the first two games of the series, responded with 26 points in Game 3, making 10 of 14 shots.

His second three-pointer with 1:11 left in overtime pulled the Pelicans to 119-118. Soon after, the Pelicans had a chance to take the lead, but Eric Gordon's attempt to surprise the Warriors with a quick three backfired.

Draymond Green had 12 points and 17 rebounds for Golden State, which finished with 22 offensive rebounds and 30 second-chance points.

Shaun Livingston had 12 points and Harrison Barnes added 11.

Tyreke Evans had 19 points and Norris Cole added 16 for New Orleans, which lost despite outshooting the Warriors 51.1 percent (46-for-90) to 41.1 percent (42-for-104).

"You can't sugarcoat it," Pelicans coach Monty Williams said. "We're all feeling like dirt right now, so obviously you want to build them up, but there is nothing that can build you up in a situation like that. It can be a growth moment for us. ... We've got to deal with it and own it."

The Pelicans used a stunning 19-0 second-quarter run to open a double-digit lead that endured most of the game.

Davis started the surge with a putback dunk and Cole scored seven points during the run, including a three and a reverse layup, the latter putting the Pelicans up 39-25.

New Orleans led by as many as 16 in the quarter before Golden State trimmed it to 63-52 at halftime, thanks in part to Thompson's fifth three.

Bulls go up 3-0 on Bucks

The Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Jimmy Butler intercepted the errant pass and darted the other way for a fast-break basket.

Finally, the Chicago Bulls were able to shake free from the pesky Milwaukee Bucks.

Derrick Rose scored 34 points, and Butler added 24 in the Bulls' 113-106 double-overtime victory Thursday night to take a 3-0 lead in their Eastern Conference playoff series.

Butler got the second overtime off to a rousing start, converting the bad pass from Giannis Antetokounmpo into a dunk and starting an 8-0 run that gave Chicago a 109-101 lead with 2:44 left. It was one of four steals in the final period for Chicago.

"Jimmy set the tone for that," Bulls coach Tom Thibodeau said about the late defense.

Rose played a huge part, too. The Chicago backcourt has been bugging Milwaukee all series.

"Playing with Derrick, he makes everything easier for everybody," Butler said.

The Bulls will go for the sweep on Saturday in Milwaukee. No NBA team has ever come back from a 3-0 deficit to win a series.

Antetokounmpo had 25 points and Khris Middleton added 18 for Milwaukee, which went scoreless for more than 6 minutes between the first and second overtimes.

"We just got sloppy and stagnant," Middleton said.

Or exactly the opposite of how Rose played for most of the game.

He finished 12-for-23 from the field and 5-for-9 from three-point range, adding eight assists and five rebounds.

It's the most aggressive that Rose has looked this year since coming back from a right knee injury earlier this month, Thibodeau said.

Another good sign for Chicago: Rose played 48 minutes.

"It's playoff basketball. I'm still trying to catch a rhythm," Rose said. "Sometimes I get winded. I catch a second wind and I come back good. But I can't think about that."

He atoned for a missed free throw with 4 seconds left in regulation that left the game tied. He scored six points in the second overtime, including a layup off an offensive rebound with 2:15 left for a 10-point lead.

Chicago appeared to have wrapped things up with 2:50 left in regulation after Tony Snell hit his second straight 3 for a 94-84 lead, rousing an often Bulls-friendly crowd. The Bradley Center at times felt like a northern outpost for Bulls fans who made the barely 90-minute drive from Chicago.

But the young Bucks didn't quit and their fans backed them up, too.

"The effort was there the whole night. The guys played their hearts out and gave us a chance to win," Bucks coach Jason Kidd said.

James' 31 points leads Cavs past Celtics

The Associated Press

BOSTON — LeBron James got to the arena early. When he left the Cleveland Cavaliers had a chance to put an early end to the series.

James scored 31 points in his first playoff game in Boston since a masterful performance in the 2012 postseason. And Cleveland moved one win away from a sweep in its first playoff series in five years with a 103-95 victory Thursday night.

James arrived an hour early at the morning shootaround, accompanied by teammate J.R. Smith. It was a sign of his leadership, according to coach David Blatt.

"He didn't necessarily have to" after scoring 30 points in Game 2, Blatt said, "but he wanted to be with his teammate."

Smith had his best game of the series with 15 points.

"We were together last night watching playoff games," James said. "He said he wanted to go early and I said, 'Let's go.'"

Cleveland can complete the sweep of the best-of-seven series Sunday in

Boston. No NBA team has won a series after trailing 3-0.

"You want to make sure that we play as well as possible for however many games we have left," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said.

Kevin Love added 23 points for Cleveland, none bigger than two three-pointers after Boston cut the lead to 95-92 on Evan Turner's three with 2:45 left. Those shots put Cleveland up 101-93 with 26 seconds to go.

"Kevin has been great," Blatt said. "Maybe he didn't score as much in the second game as he did tonight, or in the first game, but he's been engaged at both ends" of the court. Turner had 19 points and Avery Bradley added 18 for Boston while Isaiah Thomas managed just five points and missed seven of nine shots after scoring 22 in the first two games.

"They're paying him a lot of attention," Stevens said. "For whatever reason, he was having an off night."

It was James' first postseason game in Boston since Game 6 of the 2012 Eastern Conference finals when he was with Miami.

He had 45 points and 15 rebounds in that game to avoid elimination.

On Thursday he was booed nearly every time he touched the ball in the first half. The Celtics led 48-44 before the Cavaliers closed with a 12-0 run for a 56-44 lead. In the last 40 seconds, James had six points and a steal.

Boston tied it at 56 by scoring the first eight points of the third quarter. Then Cleveland went on another spurt and took a 77-66 lead on a three-pointer by Kyrie Irving with just under 4 minutes left in the period.

The Cavaliers led 84-76 after three quarters before James opened the fourth by scoring Cleveland's first seven points for a 91-82 lead then fed Tristan Thompson with an alley-oop pass.

Cleveland is in its first playoff series since 2010 when it lost the Eastern Conference semifinals to Boston in six games. Two months later, James left for the Heat and led them to the NBA Finals in all four of his seasons, winning two championships before returning to the Cavaliers this season.

James finished with 11 rebounds.



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After brawl, Royals top ChiSox

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago White Sox momentarily lost their cool and then fell again to the Kansas City Royals.

A benches-clearing fight led to five ejections several innings before Eric Hosmer hit the go-ahead double in the 13th to lead the Royals to a 3-2 victory over the White Sox on Thursday night.

With two outs, Hosmer's hit off Chicago's Jake Petricka (0-1) brought in Jarrod Dyson. Wade Davis pitched a scoreless 13th for his fourth save, giving Franklin Morales (2-0) the victory.

That handed the White Sox their fourth loss of the season to Kansas City, during a night that tempers flared.

In the seventh, Yordano Ventura snagged a grounder from Chicago outfielder Adam Eaton and they appeared to exchange words before Ventura threw to first to end the inning. Eaton had to be restrained from Ventura, who was ejected from a second straight start.

Players from both dugouts and bullpens ran onto the field and punches were thrown during a fight that lasted a couple of minutes.

"With the brawl, I respect the hell out of that team. I really do," Eaton said. "I think they play the game the right way. They have some great pitching and some good hitters over there that play the game the right way."

Ventura was thrown out after the fight. On Saturday, after he allowed a three-run homer to the Athletics' Josh Reddick, he hit Brett Lawrie and was ejected.

The four others tossed were Lorenzo Cain and pitcher Edinson Volquez for Kansas City, along with Chicago pitchers Chris Sale and Jeff Samardzija.

Mets 6, Braves 3: Daniel Murphy drove in four runs as host New York matched a franchise record with its 11th straight victory Thursday by beating Atlanta behind Bartolo Colon.

With the top record in the majors despite injuries to several critical players, the Mets finished their first homestand 10-0 after sweeping a trio of NL East rivals. This is the fifth time the Mets have won 11 games in a row, and the first since

1990.

Colon (4-0) allowed three runs over six innings to win his first four starts for the first time in his big league career.

Julio Teheran (2-1) walked three of his first four batters, and Murphy hit a bases-clearing double to right field.

Giants 3, Dodgers 2 (10): Justin Maxwell, robbed of a big hit in his previous at-bat, singled home the winning run with one out in the 10th off Juan Nicasio (0-1) as host San Francisco completed a three-game sweep.

The Giants tied the score in the ninth when Casey McGehee led off with a single and Brandon Crawford tripled against Joel Peralta.

Santiago Casilla (2-0) pitched the 10th. The Dodgers arrived in San Francisco riding a seven-game winning streak.

Brewers 4, Reds 2: Kyle Lohse (1-3) allowed two runs and three hits in seven innings, lowering his ERA from 10.34 to 7.94, as host Milwaukee (3-13) stopped an eight-game losing streak.

Jean Segura drove in the go-ahead run with a two-out single in the seventh off Kevin Gregg (0-2).

Yankees 2, Tigers 1: Jacoby Ellsbury hit a leadoff double in the eighth off Tom Gorzelanny (0-1), took third on Brett Gardner's sacrifice bunt and scored the tiebreaking run on Brian McCann's groundout.

On an afternoon with a game-time temperature of 33 degrees in Detroit, Dellin Betances (3-0) pitched 1²/₃ scoreless innings and Andrew Miller had a perfect ninth for his sixth save.

Marlins 9, Phillies 1: At Philadelphia, David Phelps (1-0) tossed three-hit ball over seven scoreless innings for his first win since joining Miami after three seasons with the Yankees.

Martin Prado drove in four runs, Adeiny Hechavarria had four hits and three RBIs and Giancarlo Stanton hit a two-run homer. Miami has won two straight games after losing five in a row.

Pirates 5, Cubs 4: Gregory Polanco got three hits, including a go-ahead single in the seventh off Phil Coke.

Radhames Liz (1-1) picked up his first major league win since 2008 with two

innings of shutout relief, and Mark Melancon worked a perfect ninth for his third save. Sean Rodriguez hit his first home run this season as host Pittsburgh rallied from a 4-1 deficit.

Cardinals 4, Nationals 1: Michael Wacha (3-0) allowed one run and five hits in seven innings to lower his ERA to 1.33 and outduel Max Scherzer (1-2), who gave up two runs and six hits in seven innings.

Matt Adams hit a tiebreaking single in the sixth for visiting St. Louis, which won its fourth consecutive series. Trevor Rosenthal pitched a perfect ninth for his sixth save.

Rockies 2, Padres 1: Corey Dickerson hit a go-ahead homer against Tyson Ross (1-1) leading off the fifth inning, his third solo shot in two days despite playing with pain in his left heel caused by plantar fasciitis.

Jordan Lyles (2-1) allowed one run and six hits in 6²/₃ innings, and John Axford struck out Alexi Amarista to end the game for his second save. The Rockies said it was only the 25th game with a 2-1 score at Coors Field, which opened in 1995.

Rays 2, Red Sox 1: Rene Rivera had an RBI single in the bottom of the ninth as Tampa Bay beat visiting Boston.

Allan Dykstra opened the ninth with a single off Anthony Varvaro (0-1). Pinch-runner Tim Beckham went to second on Kevin Kiermaier's one-out single and scored the winning run on Rivera's hit down the third-base line.

Blue Jays 7, Orioles 6: Josh Donaldson hit a two-run homer, Drew Hutchison pitched eight strong innings and Toronto completed a three-game sweep.

Toronto won for the fourth time in five games and finished its season-opening homestand at 5-5.

Angels 2, Athletics 0: Nick Tropeano pitched five-hit ball into the seventh inning in his Angels debut, and Kole Calhoun's two-run homer was the Angels' only hit in a victory over visiting Oakland.

Calhoun homered in the third and four pitchers combined on an eight-hit shutout, allowing the Angels to salvage a split in the four-game series with their upstate AL West rivals.

A-Rod keeping Yankees relevant

The Associated Press

The New York Yankees missed the playoffs the last two years while saying goodbye to a pair of greats. Mediocrity — or, worse yet, irrelevance — was a very real possibility heading into 2015.

Of all people, it's Alex Rodriguez who might keep this team from becoming an afterthought.

Rodriguez is back from a season-long drug suspension, and it's certainly fair to wonder how much the Yankees even wanted him around. But in one of the more intriguing developments of the past few weeks, A-Rod is producing.

Now a 39-year-old designated hitter, Rodriguez has four home runs, and he's given New York fans something to cheer about after the team's underwhelming start.

"The one thing I've seen about Alex, since he's been back, he's having fun and he's enjoying what he's doing," manager Joe Girardi said. "Hopefully that just continues for him."

The stage is now set for a fascinating scene Friday night, when the crosstown Mets bring the majors' best record and a team record-tying 11-game winning streak to Yankee Stadium. That will be Rodriguez's first game back from a 10-game road trip in which he flashed some of his old power.

The Mets look like a definite threat to wrest New York's attention away from the Bronx Bombers this year, and A-Rod might be the man best positioned to prevent that from happening.

The Yankees lost four of their first five games but have played well since then.

Rodriguez has been a big part of the resurgence. He's hit four home runs with 11 RBIs, and his .265 batting average is coupled with an AL-leading 13 walks. He got a planned day of rest Thursday as the Yankees won 2-1 at Detroit.

Rodriguez hasn't played a full season since 2007 because of his suspension, operations on both hips and other injuries. He appeared in 44 games in 2013, playing during the stretch while appealing what was at first a 211-game ban stemming from an investigation by Major League Baseball into performance-enhancing drugs. An arbitrator ruled the following January he had to sit out the 2014 season.

There was some speculation his career might be over — that the time away would be the last straw for a player who was already showing signs of breaking down. Instead, Rodriguez looks refreshed after the long layoff.

"It was a blessing in disguise," Rodriguez said. "I had an opportunity to heal my hips and to heal my body a little bit, and the first time I've had a chance to train and not rehab in like five years. Hopefully that pays dividends, but I feel healthy and it feels good."

Rodriguez's arrival at spring training wasn't exactly the feel-good story the Yankees needed after Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera retired following the previous two seasons — and the fact the Yankees owed him \$61 million for the final three seasons of his contract didn't help.

But Rodriguez is doing his part to make the situation more palatable. He's been available to reporters, while avoiding comments that might cause a distraction or make the relationship between him and his front office more strained.

Johnson's OT goal lifts Tampa Bay

The Associated Press

DETROIT — The Tampa Bay Lightning spent all season showing they could score goals in bunches, and with a first-round playoff series seemingly slipping away, Tyler Johnson led their most important flurry yet.

Johnson scored 2:25 into overtime to lift the Lightning to a 3-2 victory over the Detroit Red Wings on Thursday night that evened their series at 2-2.

The winning goal capped a stretch in which Johnson had two goals and an assist in a span of 7:51, enabling Tampa Bay to wipe out a late two-goal deficit.

"Never a doubt, was there?" Lightning coach Jon Cooper joked.

The Red Wings led 2-0 in the third period before Johnson scored with 5:26 remaining. He then assisted on Ondrej Palat's tying goal 77 seconds later.

Early in the extra session, defenseman Victor Hedman led an odd-man rush from the right side and slid the puck across the goal mouth. It deflected ever so slightly off goalie Petr Mrazek, but Johnson was able to shoot into an open net from a tough angle on the other side for his

fourth goal of the series.

Capitals 5, Islanders 1: Rookie Evgeny Kuznetsov scored twice, Karl Alzner added a goal and an assist, and host Washington beat New York for a 3-2 lead in the first-round series.

Buoyed by a raucous crowd chanting "We are louder!" in reference to some back-and-forth among players about which team's fans produce more noise, the Capitals controlled the action most of the evening after falling behind 1-0.

Dominating despite no points from stars Alex Ovechkin or Nicklas Backstrom, Washington got goals from Kuznetsov, Brooks Laich and Jason Chimera in the third period, which it began ahead 2-1.

The Capitals can end the Eastern Conference series by winning Game 6 at New York on Saturday.

Predators 5, Blackhawks 2: Rookie Filip Forsberg had his first career hat trick and host Nashville forced a sixth game in its first-round Western Conference series with Chicago.

A triple-overtime loss in Chicago early Wednesday pushed the Predators to the brink of elimination, and these teams appeared headed for the third overtime

game of this series tied at 1-1 after two.

James Neal then got the go-ahead goal in the opening minute of the third to start a flurry of three goals in a span of less than 2½ minutes and the Predators pulled to 3-2 in the series with Game 6 Saturday night in Chicago.

Forsberg finished his hat trick with an empty netter in the final minute. Brad Richards had a goal and an assist, and Kris Versteeg also scored for Chicago.

Canucks 2, Flames 1: Daniel Sedin scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period and host Vancouver avoided elimination by beating Calgary.

Nick Bonino had the other goal for Vancouver, and Ryan Miller had 19 saves in his first start in the series after replacing Eddie Lack in Game 4.

David Jones scored for the Flames and Jonas Hiller stopped 41 shots.

Game 6 of the best-of-seven series is Saturday night at Calgary.

After the Flames were whistled for icing in the opening minutes of the third period, the Canucks put out their top line for the offensive-zone faceoff. Daniel Sedin took advantage, shoveling Dan Hamhuis' rebound through Hiller's pads at 1:47 for his second goal of the series.