

STARS AND STRIPES®

Friday, April 1, 2016

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Marine Corps recruit commander fired

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A recruit battalion commander at Parris Island, S.C., has been fired following a Marine Corps Inspector General probe into allegations of misconduct, the Marines announced Thursday.

Lt. Col. Joshua Kissoon was relieved of command of the 3rd Recruit Training Battalion at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot East in South Carolina on Thursday, Marine Capt. Gregory Carroll said in a statement.

Marine Col. Paul Cucinotta, the commander of the Recruit Training Regiment, relieved Kissoon, who had commanded the battalion since June 25, 2014, because of “a loss of trust

and confidence in Kissoon’s abilities to serve in command” after he reviewed the IG investigation that was completed in late February.

Carroll, a spokesman for the recruit depot, did not provide details about the allegations against Kissoon. Cucinotta’s decision to remove the lieutenant colonel was made March 17, Carroll added, one day before a recruit in Third Recruit Training Battalion fell to his death.

“The decision to relieve Lt. Col. Kissoon was based solely on specific, isolated acts associated with allegations of misconduct and is not a reflection of the performance of the battalion or its Marines,” Carroll said.

The death on March 18 of Raheel Siddiqui, 20, remains under

investigation, but no foul play is suspected, a spokesperson for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service said.

Kissoon is a native of Guyana who was raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., and commissioned as a ground supply officer in 1996. He has extensive service in South America where he has served as an adviser to Colombian marines and as a Latin American foreign area officer in Peru.

Kissoon has also served deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He was nearing the completion of his assignment at Parris Island, where battalion command typically lasts two years, Carroll said.

He is the second Marine to be removed from command

of one of Parris Island’s four recruit battalions recently. Lt. Col. Kate Germano was controversially relieved of command of the Marines’ all-female 4th Recruit Training Battalion in June after a command investigation alleged she was overly abusive and hostile toward female recruits.

“The Marine Corps remains highly committed to ensuring that all who seek the title ‘Marine’ are provided with leaders and instructors who represent our core values of honor, courage and commitment,” Carroll said. “As an institution, we hold all Marines, especially commanders, to a high set of standards.”

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Navy eases tattoo policy in effort to boost recruitment

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

Sailors will be allowed neck tattoos and more tattoos below elbows and knees, a decision that makes the Navy the most relaxed among the services when it comes to body ink.

The decisions on tattoos and other appearance-related regulations were announced Thursday in Washington in a Navy statement, following feedback

from sailors and senior enlisted leaders.

Neck tattoos must not be visible more than an inch in any direction, according to the new policy. Sailors may also now have an unlimited number of tattoos below the elbow and knee.

The regulation also allows recruiters and sailors working within recruiting commands to have sleeve tattoos.

“This policy update is being made in response to the increased popularity of tattoos for those currently serving and in the population from which the Navy draws its recruits,” the Navy statement said. “It is also meant to ensure the Navy does not miss opportunities to bring in talented young men and women who are willing to serve.”

All services continue to bar

racist or sexist tattoos, or any others deemed “prejudicial to good order and discipline.”

In a concurrent order, the service also authorized sailors wearing Navy working uniforms two and three to wear “coyote brown” ball caps as head covers.

The new regulations go into effect April 30, according to a Navy statement.

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Tortoises limit Marine training plans in Calif.

An adult desert tortoise weighs about 12 pounds and can take days to travel a mile, yet the reptiles managed to get one of most formidable forces on earth — the United States Marine Corps — to reconsider a large training mission.

The Marines plan to con-

duct live ammunition training in August at their Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, Calif.

To prevent harming about 1,400 tortoises living in this stretch of the Mojave Desert, the military now plans to limit operations in its combat center expansion area in the Johnson Valley northwest of Landers, Calif.

The Marines had hoped to airlift the reptiles this spring to federally managed habitat land near Barstow to get them safely out of the way.

But military officials and federal land managers recently announced that the relocation can’t proceed until they analyze how the move would affect tortoises and other wildlife already living in the recipient

areas.

The spring move was canceled shortly after an environmental group, the Center for Biological Diversity, filed a legal challenge to it. Desert tortoises are protected by the Endangered Species Act because they are listed as threatened with extinction.

From wire reports

Army approves long-term waiver for Sikh officer's beard, turban

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. Army Capt. Simratpal Singh, 28, expressed relief Friday that he can continue his “lifelong dream” of military service while properly observing his religious obligations as a Sikh.

The Army has granted the West Point-educated engineering officer a long-term religious accommodation allowing him to wear a beard and unshorn hair under a turban, requirements of his faith.

“The best thing about it is I can just go back to doing my job,” Singh said Friday in an interview with Stars and Stripes. “I can put all this stuff behind me and move forward and just go back to being a regular soldier.”

Singh, 28, a Ranger-qualified officer who earned a Bronze Star Medal for his service in Afghanistan, received permission to abide by those tenets of his faith as long as they do not potentially impair his safety under hazardous conditions, Debra S.

Wada, the assistant secretary of the Army for manpower and reserve affairs, wrote in a memo released Friday.

Singh is the first active-duty Sikh soldier to be granted such a long-term waiver.

The captain had initially been granted a temporary religious accommodation in December after filing an official request in October 2015, when he began growing his beard and hair for the first time since entering the U.S. Military Academy in 2006. He'd sought a religious accommodation at that time, but it was ultimately denied.

After arriving at the United States Military Academy, Singh said he made the “excruciating decision” to allow his hair to be cut and his beard to be shaved. “For a couple days ... it was hard for me to look in the mirror,” he said. “Up until that point, I had a certain image of what a Sikh is supposed to be and of how I'm supposed to live my life. To have all of that shattered in literally a couple of minutes — it was hard to take in.”

For nine years, the decision

weighed on Singh, until he was advised that he could file an official request for religious accommodation following a change in Defense Department policy in 2014. That new policy allowed such requests to be considered on a case-by-case basis and stated that the military should grant religion-based exemptions to uniform and grooming standards as long as they do not impact military readiness.

Wada, citing that policy, wrote in her memo that she would re-evaluate her decision in one year and reserved the right to “withdraw or limit” Singh's exemption “for reasons of military necessity.”

She also set several conditions for granting the accommodation. Among them, Singh's beard and hair must be worn in “a neat and conservative manner that presents a well-groomed appearance,” she wrote. The captain must roll and tie his beard to a 2-inch length while in garrison and 1 inch in length for field training, physical training or when deployed. the future.

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Breach, crash at Calif. NAS investigated

The Fresno (Calif.) Bee

FRESNO, Calif. — The commander of Naval Air Station Lemoore said Thursday “many investigations” will follow a fatal incident in which two people managed to breach security Wednesday night and crash into an F/A-18E warplane. Both occupants of the Jeep, a male driver and a female passenger died.

The commander, Capt. Monty Ashliman, said neither person who died had any military affiliation, and that there is no reason to believe the naval air station was the target of a terrorist attack. But in a press conference at the base, he did not provide specifics about how the Jeep was able to get past a “control point,” and damage the multimillion-dollar jet.

Lemoore has a heavily-fortified main gate with steel barriers that must be lowered before vehicles can enter. The gate is guarded by military police armed with assault rifles. Officials indicated the Jeep did not enter through the gate, but deflected questions about how it reached the jet, which Ashliman said was near a runway at the north end of the station, about 7 miles away from the gate.

“Whether it's our fault, or someone else's fault ... a tragedy happened that shouldn't happen, and we've all got to take a look and see where we can get better so that it doesn't happen again,” Ashliman said.

The incident began when California Highway Patrol officers spotted a car on the side of Highway 41 and stopped to investigate. The driver sped away, driving the wrong way on Highway 198. About 11:30 p.m., the Jeep went through the gate and onto the base. Naval security forces picked up the pursuit while a CHP helicopter tracked the vehicle.

The driver collided with the horizontal stabilizer of an F/A-18E fighter jet, authorities said. The driver was taken to a hospital, where he died. The passenger died at the scene.

Obama hails Iran deal as ‘substantial success’

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama hailed the nuclear deal with Iran on Friday as a “substantial success” and a model for future diplomacy as world leaders took stock of the world's most worrisome nuclear threats.

Hosting his last nuclear security summit, Obama sought to use the controversial Iran deal as an argument for his carrot-and-stick approach to deterring nuclear proliferation, and he credited Iran with taking steps to meet its commitments.

Critics of the deal in the U.S. and abroad are livid about the sanctions relief Iran is receiving in response.

“It will take time for Iran to reintegrate in the global economy, but Iran is already beginning to see the benefits of this deal,” Obama said as he met with the leaders of China, France and other U.N. Security Council members who negotiated the Iran deal alongside the U.S.

Obama acknowledged that the nuclear deal hasn't swept away other issues the U.S. and other nations still have with Iran: Support for terrorism and Tehran's ballistic missile program typically top that list. Still, he said, all the nations that negotiated the deal could agree that it's been an effective way

to address the narrower issue of nuclear proliferation in Iran.

“This is a success of diplomacy that hopefully we will be able to copy in the future,” Obama said.

The huddle on the sidelines of the nuclear summit started off the final day on an optimistic note, as Obama worked to illustrate that progress has been made on his watch on stopping the spread of nuclear weapons.

Yet the dozens of world leaders assembled were equally focused on other threats that have only increased in recent years, such as the harrowing prospect of the Islamic State group or other extremists getting their hands on a nuclear bomb.

Tenth-seeded Syracuse not your average tournament Cinderella

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Syracuse would certainly love to win a national championship. As for being considered the Cinderella of this Final Four for making it as a double-digit seed, not so much.

"I don't know if we look at ourselves as Cinderella. We're Syracuse," senior guard Trevor Cooney said Thursday. "We're not normally a 10 seed, and I think that we've proved that through this tournament."

The Orange have lost five of six games, including their ACC Tournament opener, when the 68-team NCAA Tournament field was announced three Sundays ago. Now they are in the Final Four and facing the only remaining No. 1 seed, North Carolina, their conference rival that beat them twice this season.

"It's just a reminder that we can't take them lightly," Tar Heels guard Joel Berry said.

"You just have to think about what's on the line," North Carolina senior Marcus Paige said. "The fact that we beat them twice earlier this year doesn't give us any extra points. It's a chance to play for a national championship."

North Carolina (32-6) and Syracuse (23-13) both got their first look inside NRG

Stadium on Thursday, working out under the massive roof of the building more well-known as the home of the NFL's Houston Texans.

The last double-digit seed to make it to the Final Four was No. 11 seed VCU, five years ago in Houston. VCU lost to Butler, which lost to UConn in the title game.

The Orange have already knocked off a No. 1 seed in this NCAA Tournament, beating Virginia in the Midwest Regional final by overcoming a 16-point deficit in the second half. But they also beat two double-digit seeds — No. 11 Gonzaga and No. 15 Middle Tennessee State, the team that shocked No. 2 seed Michigan State in the first round.

"Not getting Michigan State, even though (Middle Tennessee) won the game, but it is still going to be looked like as a break. We played a great second half against them," coach Jim Boeheim said. "We played really well at the end of the Gonzaga game. We played really well at the end of the Virginia game. For us to continue playing, we're going to have to continue to play better."

And beat North Carolina, who the Orange were within a point of going into the final 2 minutes on Feb. 29 at Chapel Hill before the Tar Heels pulled out a 75-

70 victory. The Tar Heels won 84-73 at Syracuse in early January.

That second loss came during the closing stretch when Syracuse was sputtering.

"At that particular time, no, I didn't even think about a tournament. We were just trying to get some wins under our belt in ACC play," Syracuse leading scorer Michael Gbinije said. "It's a huge turnaround. ... Once we got in the tournament, us as a team knew how capable we were."

Like Boeheim, who is in his fifth Final Four and won a national title in 2003, North Carolina coach Roy Williams has been to multiple Final Fours. This is Williams' fourth at UNC after four with Kansas, and both of his national titles are with the Tar Heels — including their last Final Four appearance in 2009.

When asked if the Final Four experience is different after winning a title, Williams quickly said it wasn't.

"I'm still like a little puppy dog," the 65-year-old Hall of Fame coach said. "I think it's fantastic, love that part of it. It means you've accomplished something. It means there's a great prize out there."

US women file EEO complaint

Associated Press

Five stars with the World Cup-winning U.S. women's national team filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission accusing the U.S. Soccer Federation of wage discrimination.

Alex Morgan, Hope Solo, Carli Lloyd, Megan Rapinoe and Becky Sauerbrunn allege that they are paid far less than their counterparts on the less-successful U.S. men's team.

The team saw a surge in popularity following last year's 5-2 World Cup victory over Japan, and the group generated more revenue than the men's team. The U.S. women have won three total World Cup titles and four Olympic gold medals, while the men have not won either event.

But the issue over equitable pay is more complicated than it appears.

The players and their union are currently embroiled in a legal dispute with U.S. Soccer over the status of their collective bargaining agreement. The federation filed a lawsuit earlier this year seeking to clarify that its contract with the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team Players Association runs through the Rio Olympics until Dec. 31. The union maintains the memorandum of understanding from March 2013 can be terminated at any time. That case is pending.

Here are the answers to some of the questions surrounding the issue:

Does the women's team generate more revenue than the men? U.S. Soccer released financial details at its last general meeting that projects the women will generate \$17.6 million in the 2017 fiscal year, while the men bring in an estimated \$9 million. The women's team has already qualified for the Rio Olympics; the men's team failed to qualify. For the 2016 fiscal year, the national teams were expected to operate at a deficit of \$420,929 but instead generated revenues of \$17.7 million, thanks in part to the women's World Cup victory and subsequent tour. The women were far more visible because it was a World Cup year for them.

What are the differences in salary between the men's and women's teams? The top players on the women's team are paid a salary of about \$72,000 a year by U.S. Soccer, along with bonuses, to play in a minimum of 20 exhibitions per year. They are awarded bonuses if they win those games, with the potential to earn \$99,000, the complaint said.

USMNT players are also required to play at least 20 exhibitions a year, earning a minimum of \$5,000 for each appearance. Players can earn up to \$263,320 if they win all of their games, according to the complaint.

The male players are typically offered greater compensation as incentive to appear in the exhibition games, one attorney explained, because many have demanding schedules with their club teams.

Members of the USWNT are allocated across the National Women's Soccer League, and U.S. Soccer pays their club salaries.

MSU's Valentine, Kansas' Self win AP player, coach of year

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The names Denzel Valentine and Buddy Hield have been virtually inseparable during college basketball's postseason.

The national player of the year awards have gone to one or the other without anybody else getting any hardware.

Valentine was selected Thursday as The Associated Press' Player of the Year, taking it in a close vote over Hield.

Bill Self of Kansas was chosen the AP's Coach of the Year with Xavier's Chris Mack finishing second.

"We spent time together this summer at a basketball camp and we built a relationship," Valentine said of his fellow senior.

"During the season we would give each other words of encouragement," Valentine said. "He was first person to text me when I got hurt and I thought that was pretty big time of him. He deserves everything he's getting."

Valentine, who missed four games after having minor knee surgery, received 34 of 65 votes from the national media panel that selects the weekly AP Top 25. Hield was the only other player to receive votes.

Hield and Valentine were the only unanimous selections to the AP All-America team.

The 6-foot-5 Valentine led Michigan State (29-6) to a second-place finish in the Big Ten regular season and was the conference player of the year. He averaged 19.4 points, 7.6 rebounds and 7.6 assists while directing the Spartans' offense. He shot 44.7 percent from three-point range and 85.3 percent from the free-throw line.

The Spartans were ranked No. 1 for four weeks and finished second in the final AP Top 25. They lost to Middle Tennessee State in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

"The last two weeks have been tough and it's hard to duck the tournament. It's wherever you go," said Valentine, the first Michigan State player to win the award. "You go into a restaurant and a game's on. You just can't duck it."

Self was also AP Coach of the Year in 2009, becoming the eighth coach to win the award more than once. John Wooden of UCLA won it five times and other multiple winners include Bob Knight, Roy Williams, Ray Meyer and Guy Lewis.

He received 21 votes while Mack had 15 and Dana Altman of Oregon had 13.

"I would much rather be here with my team playing," Self said. "This is great and there are dozens of people worthy of this award. But to be in that group (of multiple winners) is something I'll always respect and treasure."

The Jayhawks spent a total of five weeks at No. 1 this season and won the Big 12 for the 12th consecutive season to move within one of UCLA's record for consecutive titles. They were the overall No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament, losing to Villanova in the regional final.

"It was a great season. I don't think you can call it a special season unless you get here," Self said. "Looking back, I don't think I could ever have a team sacrifice more or be more unselfish. It will always be one of my most special groups I've had."

Both Valentine and Self said they would give up their awards to be on a team playing at the Final Four where they were presented their trophies.

"You want to get here," Valentine said. "You talk about it all season and it's what every team plays for."

Voting was done before the NCAA Tournament.



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James moves up scoring list

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James continues to move up the NBA's career scoring list, but he has more important matters on his mind.

James scored 24 points to move into 12th place and the Cleveland Cavaliers defeated the Brooklyn Nets 107-87 on Thursday night.

He passed Dominique Wilkins with a three-point play in the first quarter. The four-time MVP, who didn't play in the fourth quarter, has 26,689 career points.

"It's great to be in that position," James said. "It's an honor."

James is more focused on securing the best record in the Eastern Conference. Cleveland (53-22), which leads Toronto by 2½ games for the top seed, took another step in that direction.

"I would love to have the No. 1 seed," James said. "I understand some of the players might need some rest over the last couple games, but we worked so hard all season to be No. 1. I'm never a guy (who wants) to finish second."

Kevin Love added 19 points. Thaddeus Young led Brooklyn with 18 points.

James, who also had 11 assists, sparked a 25-6 run to end the second quarter. After returning with 7:27 remaining, he scored eight points as Cleveland turned a five-point margin into a 63-39 lead at halftime.

James sat out Tuesday against Houston to rest, a game Cleveland lost after leading by 20 points in the third quarter.

The Nets defeated the Cavaliers 104-95 in Brooklyn last week, a game in which Cleveland scored 12 points in the fourth quarter.

The Cavaliers, with that embarrassing performance likely still in the back of their minds, took the lead for good late in the first quarter and continued to build the margin, which reached 32 in the fourth quarter. Coach Tyronn Lue was able to rest his starters in the final period.

"We had a nice win at home and they weren't happy about it," Nets interim coach Tony Brown said. "And they showed us they weren't happy about it tonight. We knew they would come back with a better effort."

Brooklyn dropped its eighth consecutive road game and has lost six straight at Quicken Loans Arena.

Kyrie Irving, who was listed as questionable after missing Thursday's shoot-around because he was sick, scored 10 points. The speculation about his playing status came as off-the-court issues surrounded the star guard.

Irving addressed a personal issue on Twitter late Wednesday night involving R&B singer Kehlani, who the player was dating at one time. He subsequently deleted the tweets regarding their relationship.

Asked about the matter following the game, Irving said: "It hasn't been difficult. I've been through a ton of adversity in my life. There's nothing anything or anyone can say that I can't get through. I've been through enough already in my short 24 years that most people can say for their whole entire lives. For me, it's just coming to work every single day, doing what I need to do in order to provide for my family and be there for my brothers."

James offered his support to Irving, and Lue said he spoke to him.

"We're all just there for him," Lue said. "He's a part of this team and it's our job to make sure he's OK. He's in good hands."

Nets center Brook Lopez, the team's leading scorer, was given the night off to rest. Bojan Bogdanovic added 14 points for Brooklyn.

Bulls 103, Rockets 100: Nikola Mirotic scored 28 points and Jimmy Butler added 21 to lead visiting Chicago past Houston.

The Bulls won their second consecutive game following a four-game skid and trail Indiana by one game for the final playoff spot in the East.

James Harden had 24 points and eight

assists for Houston, which dropped a half-game behind Utah and Dallas, who are tied for the seventh and eighth seeds in the West.

Magic 114, Pacers 94: Evan Fournier scored 25 points and Nikola Vucevic added 24 to lead Orlando past host Indiana.

The Magic have won three straight since snapping a six-game losing streak, including their first win at Indiana since Feb. 4, 2012.

Pelicans 101, Nuggets 95: Luke Babbitt scored 22 points and Tim Frazier had 11 of his 17 points in the fourth quarter, leading the injury-riddled New Orleans past visiting Denver.

Toney Douglas added 20 points and a season-high 10 assists for the Pelicans.

Darrell Arthur tied a career high with 24 points for the Nuggets.

Trail Blazers 116, Celtics 109: Al-Farouq Aminu scored a career-high 28 points, including a career-best six three-pointers, and Portland extended its winning streak at home to a season-high six games with a win over Boston.

With only six regular-season games remaining, Portland (40-31) holds the sixth seed in the West. Boston (39-37) entered as the East's fourth seed, but fell to sixth with the loss.

Thunder 119, Clippers 117: Kevin Durant scored 31 points, Steven Adams hit a go-ahead tip-in with 26.9 seconds left and host Oklahoma City held on to avoid a potentially embarrassing loss.

Russell Westbrook added 26 points and 11 assists for the Thunder, who lead the Los Angeles Clippers by 5½ games in the race for the No. 3 seed in the Western Conference.

The Clippers played without usual starters Chris Paul, DeAndre Jordan and J.J. Redick, as coach Doc Rivers chose to rest them. Blake Griffin also was out, serving the last game of a four-game team-imposed suspension.

Colonials wrap up NIT title

Associated Press

NEW YORK — George Washington coach Mike Lonergan held his young daughter in his arms near center court at Madison Square Garden, waiting to climb a ladder and cut down the net.

Now he can replace that one his buddy sent him weeks ago for good luck.

"It was in the locker room tonight," Lonergan said after the Colonials beat Valparaiso 76-60 on Thursday for the school's first National Invitation Tournament championship. "I'm not a big motivation guy, but I'll tell you, I felt that net before every game. And I told those guys, 'We win, I'm wearing one of those nets. I don't care what we do with the other one.'"

Kevin Larsen scored 18 points, Patricio Garino added 14 and fourth-seeded George Washington (28-10) set a school record for wins in a season with a dominant performance in the second half.

The Colonials won their fourth straight game against a higher-seeded team and sent three senior starters out with a tournament trophy, softening the sting of being rebuffed by the NCAA selection committee.

"It makes it feel a whole lot better," Larsen said. "Like we said, we'd rather win the NIT than get bounced one-and-done in the NCAA Tournament. That's been the mindset."

Larsen, Garino and point guard Joe McDonald, part of Lonergan's first full recruiting class at George Washington, walked off winners in their final college game. They arrived with the Colonials coming off a 10-21 season, but made the NCAA Tournament as sophomores.

"These guys, I wanted (them) to leave a legacy. We didn't make the NAAs (this year) and we were all heartbroken and it's hard to bounce back, but they bounced back," Lonergan said. "We played our best basketball end of March. I told them I wanted, instead of senior night, I wanted it to be senior month. And that's what it was."

Junior forward Tyler Cavanaugh, the tournament's Most Outstanding Player, scored 12. He averaged 19.4 points and nine rebounds in five NIT games.

McDonald had 13 points, eight rebounds and four assists with no turnovers for George Washington, which extended a one-point halftime lead to 19 late in the game. The Colonials went 22-for-26 at the foul line, compared to 6-for-6 for Valpo.

"We're not there yet. I want to get to NAAs and make a run, but this is a great stepping stone," Lonergan said, with one of the two nets his team cut down draped around his neck.

"We're an up-and-coming program that has great history," he added. "So this is a big deal for our university, our players and our program, and I'm proud of these guys that helped put our program back on the map. But we are not where we want to be yet. We want to keep this thing growing."

George Washington, which started players from Argentina, Denmark and Japan, used its 1-3-1 zone to hold Valparaiso star Alec Peters to two points in the second half. Peters finished with 15 and was the only double-figure scorer for the top-seeded Crusaders (30-7), who went 8-for-28 from three-point range.

"It's going to stick with us throughout the offseason," Peters said.

The second unit helped GW rip off a 16-4 run early in the second half that pushed the advantage to 13.

Penguins inch closer to playoff berth

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Phil Kessel never gave up hope. Not through the early season funk that cost former coach Mike Johnston his job. Not during those bumpy first weeks under Mike Sullivan, when the Pittsburgh Penguins tried to simultaneously learn new habits while trying to forget bad ones.

Consider the process nearly complete. Kessel is scoring. The Penguins are flying. The playoffs are beckoning.

Kessel scored twice and Pittsburgh moved within striking distance of a 10th consecutive postseason berth with a 5-2 victory over the Nashville Predators on Thursday night. Buried in 11th in the East when Johnston was fired on Dec. 12, the Penguins are now second in the Metropolitan Division and can clinch a playoff berth Friday if Detroit loses in regulation to Minnesota.

Panthers 3, Devils 2: Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice to move host Florida back into first place in the Atlantic Division with a win over New Jersey.

Jaromir Jagr had a pair of assists and Al Montoya made 23 saves for Florida, which broke a tie with Tampa Bay for the division lead.

Stars 4, Coyotes 1: Jamie Benn scored his 40th goal, Antti Niemi made 31 saves and host Dallas beat Arizona to move two

points ahead in the Western Conference race.

Dallas (103 points) pulled away from second-place St. Louis (101). The Stars have four games remaining, and the Blues have five.

Hurricanes 4, Rangers 3: Victor Rask scored the go-ahead goal with 10:54 left, and host Carolina rallied to beat New York in former captain Eric Staal's return to his old home arena.

Jeff Skinner, Patrick Brown and Justin Faulk also scored for the Hurricanes, who trailed 3-2 after two periods.

Kings 3, Flames 0: Jeff Carter scored twice, Jonathan Quick made 21 saves in his fifth shutout of the season and host Los Angeles reclaimed the Pacific Division lead with a win over Calgary.

The Kings moved one point ahead of the idle Anaheim Ducks with their 46th win this season, tying the franchise record most recently set in their Stanley Cup-winning 2013-14 campaign.

Canucks 4, Sharks 2: Jannik Hansen scored the tiebreaking goal with 5:03 remaining and visiting Vancouver snapped a nine-game losing streak by beating San Jose.

Daniel Sedin and Bo Horvat scored in the first period and the Canucks rebounded after blowing another late lead to avoid matching the longest losing streak in franchise history.

Islanders 4, Blue Jackets 3: John Tavares scored twice and Anders Lee got a power-play goal 5:23 into the third period to lift host New York over Columbus.

Thomas Hickey also scored for New York, which improved to 42-25-9. The Islanders have won three straight to get to 93 points and have solidified their grip on the first Eastern Conference wild-card berth.

Canadiens 3, Lightning 0: Rookie Mike Condon made 26 saves for his first NHL shutout and visiting Montreal beat Tampa Bay.

Tampa Bay started play tied with Florida for first place in the Atlantic Division at 93 points each.

Senators 3, Wild 2: Cody Ceci got a goal with 3:57 left that deflected off two opposing players to help visiting Ottawa beat Minnesota.

Ceci's ninth goal of the season bounced off Erik Haula and goaltender Devan Dubnyk's skate.

Sabres 4, Maple Leafs 1: Cal O'Reilly and Johan Larsson each scored twice and Buffalo extended its home dominance over Toronto.

Buffalo built a 3-0 lead and Larsson capped Buffalo's seventh straight home win over Toronto by scoring into an empty net in a meeting of two Atlantic Division rivals who have already been eliminated from playoff contention.