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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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DOD seizes more control over warfighting

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Week by week, the Pentagon is quietly seizing more control over warfighting decisions, sending hundreds more troops to war with little public debate and seeking greater authority to battle extremists across the Middle East and Africa.

This week it was Somalia, where President Donald Trump gave the U.S. military more authority to conduct offensive airstrikes on militants. Next week it could be Yemen, where military leaders want to provide more help for the United Arab Emirates' battle against Iranian-backed rebels. Key decisions on Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan are looming.

The changes in Trump's first two months in office underscore his willingness to let the Pentagon manage its own day-to-day combat. Under the Obama administration, military leaders

chafed about micromanagement that included commanders' needing approval for routine tactical decisions about targets and personnel moves.

But delegating more authority to the Pentagon carries its own military and political risks. Casualties may be the biggest.

The deepening involvement in counterinsurgency battles increases the chances of U.S. troops dying. Such tragedies could raise the ire of the American public and could create political trouble with Congress at a time when the Trump administration is trying to finish off Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and to broaden efforts against similarly inspired groups.

Similarly, allowing lower-level commanders to make more timely airstrike decisions in densely populated areas like the streets of Mosul, Iraq, can result in more civilian deaths. The U.S. military already is

investigating several bombings in Mosul in mid-March that witnesses say killed at least 100 people. And it is considering new tactics and precautions amid evidence suggesting extremists are smuggling civilians into buildings and then baiting the U.S.-led coalition into attacking.

Top military leaders say they need to be able to act more quickly. And they've been staunchly supported by Trump, who has promised to pursue Islamic extremists more aggressively and echoed the view of Pentagon leaders that the Obama administration's tight control over military operations limited effectiveness.

Explaining his request for more leeway in Somalia against al-Shabab, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, head of U.S. Africa Command, told Congress this month that more flexibility and "timeliness" in decision-making

process was necessary.

The Defense Department quietly has doubled the number of U.S. forces in Syria. It has moved military advisers closer to front lines in Iraq. It has made the case publicly for more troops in Afghanistan.

The White House is tentatively scheduled this coming week to discuss providing intelligence and other assistance to U.A.E. as it fights Houthi rebels in Yemen, according to officials who demanded anonymity.

Some changes are happening with little fanfare. While there is limited American appetite for large-scale deployments in Iraq and Syria, additions are coming incrementally, in the hundreds of forces, not the thousands.

On Friday, the Pentagon said officially there are 5,262 U.S. troops in Iraq as officials privately acknowledge at least a couple thousand more there.

Defying Congress, Navy promotes SEAL ex-leader

The Washington Post

In defiance of Congress, the Navy has granted a retroactive promotion, back pay and a bigger pension to an admiral whom lawmakers forced to retire last year after multiple investigations found he had retaliated against whistleblowers, records show.

Brian Losey, a former commander of the Navy SEALs, rose in rank to become a two-star rear admiral in January after the Navy conducted a secretive and rapid review of his case during the final days of the Obama administration, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post under the Freedom of Information Act.

Losey's promotion came two months after he retired from the military under duress, the casualty of a clash between Navy leaders who wanted to reward the combat-hardened SEAL commander and a bipartisan group of senators who demanded his ouster.

The promotion capped a long-running

controversy over Losey's record as a commander of the SEALs and other elite special operations forces during a highly decorated 33-year military career.

Three separate investigations by the Defense Department's inspector general found Losey had wrongly fired, demoted or punished subordinates during a hunt for a whistleblower under his command.

Losey denied wrongdoing. Navy leaders dismissed the findings after conducting their own review and decided in October 2015 to promote him anyway. But members of Congress pressured Navy Secretary Ray Mabus to block Losey's advancement.

Mabus resisted at first as many other admirals pushed him to stand behind Losey. After the Senate upped the ante by freezing the nomination of the Navy's second-ranking civilian leader, the service announced in March 2016 that Mabus would reluctantly deny Losey's promotion, effectively ending his military career.

The documents obtained by The Post, however, show that Mabus later reopened the case. On Jan. 12, Mabus signed a memo boosting Losey's rank from one-star to two-star admiral.

Losey, 56, will stay retired, but the documents show that his promotion will benefit him financially for the rest of his life.

His higher rank entitles him to a bigger annual military pension. It will swell to about \$142,000 this year, an increase of \$16,700, according to Defense Department figures.

He also will receive a one-time check for about \$70,000 in back pay because the Navy dated his promotion retroactively to the date when he first became eligible for a second star.

Mabus' decision was based on a recommendation from the Board for Correction of Naval Records, a quasijudicial panel that fields requests from veterans to review potential errors in their personnel files.

More airstrikes in Somalia could put civilians at risk

Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — President Donald Trump's approval of greater U.S. military authority to pursue extremists in Somalia will put civilians further at risk, experts say, especially as drought displaces thousands in areas that now will be considered a war zone.

Trump has approved a Pentagon request to allow more aggressive airstrikes in Somalia against extremist group al-Shabab. U.S. special operations forces can move closer to the fight and call in offensive airstrikes more quickly while increasing assistance to the Somali National Army.

Some in Somalia, where accessing independent information is challenging, could see this as a chance to spread

misinformation, said Laetitia Bader, a Somalia researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Somalia's government has declared the growing drought a national disaster, with the United Nations saying roughly half of the country's 12 million people are at risk. A cholera outbreak is also spreading. More than a quarter-million people have been displaced in recent months, the U.N. refugee agency says, as families try to reach points where aid agencies are distributing food.

Aid agencies cannot distribute in areas under the control of al-Shabab, which dominates remote towns and villages across the south and central parts of the country. The extremist group has promoted its own drought relief efforts, but they are seen as attempts

to keep civilians from leaving areas under their control.

With its frequent suicide bombings and assaults on hotels and military targets, al-Shabab has proved more resilient than the U.S. expected, security experts say. And now a new threat has emerged, with fighters pledging alliance to Islamic State in the semi-autonomous northern part of the country.

About 50 U.S. commandos currently rotate in and out of Somalia to advise and assist local troops. The commandos have accompanied Somali forces in several raids against al-Shabab in which dozens of extremists were killed, according to Somali intelligence officials, who insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

Trump not trying to push Assad out

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration declared Friday it wasn't pursuing a strategy to push Syrian President Bashar Assad out of power, making clear its focus is on defeating Islamic State.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer said the U.S. approach was being driven by a new "reality" and Assad's future had to be decided by the Syrian people. Similar statements were made by U.S. Cabinet members in Ankara, London and at the United Nations.

Assad's grip on Syria has been at the heart of a six-year war that has killed as many as a half-million people, helped spawn a global migration crisis and led to the emergence of ISIS as a worldwide terror threat. All mediation efforts have failed. And with the help of Russia and Iran, Assad has crushed much of the armed opposition.

While the statements of Trump's policy, by themselves, break little from where President Barack Obama left U.S. policy upon exiting office, they differ sharply from Obama's earlier demands for Assad to leave power. Five months into Syria's civil war, Obama gave a high-profile speech saying "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

Those calls ebbed after a Russian-backed military intervention on Assad's behalf in September 2015 and a series of devastating setbacks for Syria's Western-backed and Arab-backed opposition forces.

Spicer said avenues that might have existed for Obama to drive Assad from power had since been closed off. "There is not the opposition that existed last time and the opportunities that existed," he said.

DOD weapons costs curbed by Obama reforms

Bloomberg

Pentagon acquisition reforms imposed by the Obama administration and Congress helped rein in costs of major weapons, although the savings are leveling off, congressional auditors found.

"Our assessment shows that the progress DOD has made since 2010" to reduce cost growth in its portfolio "has now flattened out," Comptroller General Gene Dodaro said in the Government Accountability Office's 15th annual report on major weapons systems. The combined estimated cost of the 78 programs in the latest study is \$1.46 trillion, or \$9.4 billion more than their original estimates.

The GAO report may help the Defense Department and the Trump administration defend against the perception of runaway spending on new weapons, even as they try to sell the public on plans to increase military funding by \$54 billion in fiscal 2018.

Still, the annual report singled out "significant cost increases in a few large shipbuilding programs" as a major contributor to cost increases; Trump wants to increase the Navy fleet to 355 ships from about 275 today.

Cost overruns remain "one of the enduring" sources of "anger and discontent in this commit-

tee and among the American taxpayers," Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, R-Ariz., told Heather Wilson, Trump's nominee for Air Force secretary, during her confirmation hearing on Thursday.

"I have to tell you we haven't gotten a lot of cooperation from the Department of Defense," said McCain, who singled out soaring costs from 2002 to 2010 on Lockheed Martin Corp.'s F-35 fighter jet, the Pentagon's costliest weapons system.

The GAO praised recent progress on the F-35, saying its total projected acquisition cost declined by \$7.6 billion during the past year "with no changes to its planned procurement quantities" of 2,443 aircraft. It added that "much of these savings were generated by changes in estimating assumptions for savings in future lots."

While Trump criticized F-35 costs as "out of control" in late 2016, he claimed credit for the \$728 million in savings on an \$8.2 billion contract for the latest batch.

The GAO said the Pentagon has increased its "buying power" by \$11 billion, "which resulted from some programs finding procurement efficiencies that more than offset inefficiencies in other programs." In the past year, projected costs for the 19 newest of the 78 programs reviewed were reduced by a combined \$3.4 billion.

Taliban threaten push on Afghan capitals

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — When the Taliban officially kick off their new fighting season within weeks, they'll pick up where they left off last year: threatening several provincial capitals and stretching Afghan forces to their limit.

"There will be an increase in attacks in those provinces that are on the verge of collapse," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Stars and Stripes. While in the past, the group had single units covering several provinces, Mujahid said, "This year, we have a unit for every province in the country."

The ability to control the capitals of Afghanistan's 34 provinces appears to be the barometer that U.S. and NATO forces use to measure success in the Afghan conflict. Occupying a capital has been a top priority of the Taliban, and some fear this could be the year they finally succeed.

Those fears were heightened in March, when the insurgents captured Helmand province's strategically important district of Sangin. The takeover occurred despite a U.S. bombing campaign and the support of

American special operations troops.

"The Taliban took over everything," said Bashir Ahmad Shakir, a member of Helmand's provincial council. "This will create threats to more districts in Helmand in the weeks and months ahead."

NATO and Afghan military officials said Afghan forces had "repositioned the district center" in Sangin and still have a presence there. But residents say the Taliban are in control and will use the town as a springboard to launch attacks on Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital about 80 kilometers to the southwest, as the days get warmer.

The Taliban are now said to occupy more than half of Helmand, which produces most of Afghanistan's opium crop and provides the insurgents' with their largest revenue source.

Loss of territory in the province contributed to a 15 percent nationwide loss of government-held land in 2016, a year that saw nearly 6,800 members of Afghanistan's security forces killed in action. International forces, nevertheless, have repeatedly described the 2016 campaign as successful because insurgents failed to overrun a provincial capital.

Despite the recent events in Sangin and claims of growing Taliban strength, Navy Capt. Bill Salvin, a spokesman for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the international coalition does not believe the insurgents will be any more successful in 2017 than they were last year.

"Our assessment is that they're not getting stronger," he said. "And the goal of our campaign this year will be to reduce the amount of the population that is under Taliban control and reduce the areas that are contested." He added: "But we think the fighting season is going to be very much like it was in 2016 — a very challenging, very difficult fight."

Some observers believe increasing assistance from Russia and Iran could add to the difficulty. The two countries have been accused of providing military support to the Taliban, a claim both have dismissed as propaganda.

"I think it is fair to assume they may be providing some sort of support to (the Taliban), in terms of weapons or other things that may be there," Gen. Joseph Votel, the head of U.S. Central Command, told members of the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday

when asked about Russian involvement in Afghanistan.

Russia has been open about expanding diplomatic contacts with the Taliban, saying the group should be considered a bulwark against the local branch of the Islamic State group, but it has denied supplying weapons. In February, America's top commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, said Moscow's overtures were "overtly lending legitimacy to the Taliban to undermine NATO efforts."

"The game is becoming extremely bleak and dirty in Afghanistan," said Ali Mohammad Ali, a former senior Afghan intelligence officer, who told Stars and Stripes that there was evidence to suggest Moscow had provided weapons to the Taliban.

"The Taliban are definitely gaining momentum from both political and military support from Russia, Iran and other countries," he said.

But Ali added that despite this backing, the insurgents are still unable to fight Afghan forces conventionally. As long as the U.S. was willing to provide combat support to Afghan troops, he said, the Taliban would be unable to hold a provincial capital against superior coalition firepower.

As Afghan War drags on, Russian interest revived

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As America's effort to end 16 years of war in Afghanistan yields little progress, Russia is resurrecting its own interest in the "graveyard of empires." The jockeying includes engaging the Taliban and leading a new diplomatic effort to tackle Afghanistan's future, with or without U.S. support.

Uncertain of Moscow's intentions, the Trump administration will stay away when Russia hosts regional powers China, India, Iran and Pakistan, and several Central Asian countries, for another set of Afghan talks next month. Afghanistan's government is attending, but the U.S. declined an invitation,

saying it wasn't consulted ahead of time. No one has invited the Taliban.

For Russia, dogged by memories of the Soviet Union's disastrous 1980s occupation of Afghanistan, it's a surprising turn at the head of the country's proverbial peace table. And it coincides with the Kremlin's campaign to wield greater international authority at the U.S.' expense elsewhere, including intervening in Syria's war and pushing for a settlement on President Bashar Assad's and its own terms. Moscow even has sought to broker new Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, challenging Washington's grip on the Mideast peace process.

For the United States, the new Russian foray into Afghanistan

may represent another worrying consequence of a perceived American retrenchment. The perception has intensified overseas as President Donald Trump formulates new policy. Since taking office, he has scarcely mentioned Afghanistan, the U.S. military's largest deployment in a war zone.

"Russia sees a gap and is trying to fill it," said Jonah Blank, a South Asia expert at the RAND Corp. "It's looking around for opportunities, for any place where it can expand its own influence and freedom to pursue its own interests, and undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships."

Although Washington is sitting out the upcoming Moscow conference, officials said the State Department still wants to

work with Russia and others to encourage Afghan peace talks. But it is trying to get Russia and others to increase pressure on the Taliban, said officials who weren't authorized to speak publicly on the diplomacy and requested anonymity.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will discuss the matter in Russia's capital next month.

But several senior U.S. military officials have voiced suspicions.

"There's a lot that we don't know about what Russia is doing," Army Gen. Joseph Votel, who leads U.S. forces in the Middle East, told a congressional panel this week.

"I don't consider their outreach and linkage to the Taliban to be helpful," Votel said.

Aides rush to testify on Russia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Their reputations at risk, a coterie of President Donald Trump's associates caught up in the swirling debate about Trump and Russia are turning to a similar if unusual playbook: volunteering to testify to Congress before even being asked.

They are eager to come forward despite not having been compelled by subpoena to appear before the two committees investigating Russian meddling in the U.S. election and potential Trump campaign collusion. But testifying on such matters is an exercise most people would typically avoid, especially if there's a chance they're being scrutinized in a parallel FBI investigation.

So what gives?

"There's only one way: Tell it early, tell it all, tell it yourself," said Lanny Davis, who was special counsel to President Bill Clinton during his impeachment hearings.

Davis, who frequently advises political figures on crisis management, said it's wise for those whose names have emerged publicly as part of

the investigations to seek proactively to clear their names. After all, Washington has seen more than its share of once-powerful people who failed to learn the lesson that the cover-up often is worse than the original sin.

"These questions are going to ultimately get answered," Davis said. "You ought to answer them yourself."

Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner told the Senate intelligence panel this week he'd gladly answer questions about his meetings with the Russian ambassador and others. Paul Manafort, the former Trump campaign chairman who features prominently in the Russia scandal, made a similar offer to the House committee investigating. So did former Trump adviser Carter Page and associate Roger Stone.

Those aides haven't publicly asked for any protections from prosecution to testimony. But former national security adviser Michael Flynn is in talks with congressional committees to receive immunity in exchange for being questioned, according to his lawyer. On Fri-

day, the top Democrats on the House intelligence panel said it was too early to consider an immunity deal for Flynn.

In case a formal letter wasn't flashy enough, Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska took out quarter-page ads in *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* to publicize his willingness to "take part in any hearings conducted in the US Congress on this subject in order to defend my reputation and name."

That move followed an Associated Press report that Manafort in 2005 had written Deripaska, an aluminum magnate close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, proposing he do work for Deripaska that would "benefit the Putin government."

The rush to volunteer to testify even extended to a convicted Ponzi schemer whose name had not previously been associated with the Russia investigations. Steven Hoffenberg, a Trump supporter and onetime *New York Post* owner, phoned the AP unsolicited to announce he'd volunteered to testify to offer "evidence that is very serious."

New England gets foot of snow on April Fools' Day

Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Vt. — People across northern New England woke up to a foot of heavy wet snow in parts of the region Saturday and expected more throughout the day.

The storm caused power outages and numerous highway accidents. About 11,600 electricity customers across Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine were in the dark by late morning.

A winter storm warning was in effect for much of the region through the afternoon.

"This is Mother Nature's idea of an April Fools' joke," said meteorologist Eric Schwibs of the National Weather Service in Gray, Maine.

But he said that while it's disheartening to see snow so late in the season, it's not unusual. Winter had already brought more snow than normal to northern New England. Portland, Maine, recorded 84.4 inches of snow, 2 feet above normal for the city; Concord, N.H., had 73.8 inches, about 15 inches above normal.

Saturday, snow-related crashes were reported on the Maine Turnpike and, in New Hampshire, a loaded tractor-trailer rolled over on Interstate 95 in Hampton, blocking three lanes. The 34-year-old driver, a resident of Chelsea, Mass., was taken to a hospital with injuries that were not life-threatening.

In Vermont, the state's largest electric utility, Green Mountain Power, had more than 21,000 customers back on line after they had lost power overnight. About 5,000 remained without service.

Kristin Carlson, a vice president for the utility, urged caution.

"People should stay away from down lines, as they may be live and dangerous, and be aware that downed trees could have power lines tangled in them and may also be unsafe," she said.

Witness: Driver admits to texting while driving

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A witness said the driver of a pickup truck that collided with a church minibus in rural Texas, killing 13 people, acknowledged he had been texting while driving — highlighting the dangers of sending messages on smartphones while behind the wheel.

Texas Department of Public Safety Sgt. Conrad Hein wouldn't comment Friday on whether texting might have played a role in the Wednesday collision on a two-lane road about 75 miles west of San Antonio, near the town of Concan. But officials have said the truck driver appeared to have crossed the center line.

Jennifer Morrison, the investigator in charge of the

team from the National Transportation Safety Board, would only say that distracted driving will be among the issues investigated.

The witness, Jody Kuchler, 55, a self-employed welder, told *The Associated Press* he and his girlfriend were driving back to their home in the nearby town of Leakey when he came across a truck that was driving erratically across the road.

"He kept going off the road and into oncoming traffic and he just kept doing that," said Kuchler, who first shared the account of what happened with the *San Antonio Express-News*.

Kuchler, who followed the truck for at least 15 minutes, said he called the sheriff's offices for both Uvalde and Real

counties and told them "they needed to get him off the road before he hit somebody."

Kuchler said he witnessed the crash and afterward, he checked on both the bus and the truck, and was able to speak with the driver of the truck, who the Department of Public Safety has identified as Jack Dillon Young, 20, of Leakey.

"He said, 'I'm sorry; I'm sorry. I was texting.' I said, 'Son, do you know what you just did?' He said, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry,'" Kuchler recalled.

Texas is unusual in that it has no statewide ban on texting while driving. Dozens of cities across the state prohibit the practice, but local ordinances may not have applied in the rural area where Wednesday's crash occurred.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Firefighter escapes injury after helmet shot

MO FERGUSON — A firefighter escaped serious injury in Ferguson when a bullet passed through his helmet as he helped battle a blaze in the St. Louis suburb.

Ferguson police are investigating the shooting, which occurred at about 7:30 p.m. Thursday. There was no word Friday on any arrests or charges.

Riverview Fire Protection District Chief Keith Goldstein said crews had just extinguished an electrical fire at an apartment complex when a bullet went through the helmet of one of his firefighters.

Goldstein said the bullet grazed the top of the head of the firefighter, who was evaluated at a hospital as a precaution.

Owl on the mend after flying into truck

NH EPPING — An owl is lucky to be alive after flying into a truck and getting stuck between the cab and the cargo hold.

The male barred owl is on the mend at a rehabilitation center in Epping, N.H., and could be released back into the wild soon. It doesn't appear to have any broken bones but did suffer head trauma in the collision last month in Massachusetts and is having trouble seeing out of its right eye.

Jane Kelly, owner of On the Wing, where the owl is recovering, said most of the birds of prey that she treats have been hit by automobiles. In this case, Kelly initially didn't think the owl would survive. But Truck-er, as the bird is called, has recovered to the point where he is feeding himself.

Man pleads guilty to killing 2 while high

OH COLUMBUS — A man accused of fatally shooting two people and wounding another near a central Ohio apartment complex has pleaded guilty to murder and felonious assault charges.

The Columbus Dispatch reported that Mario Hamilton, 29, said he was high on drugs and alcohol, and doesn't remember the April 10, 2016, shooting in Reynoldsburg, a Columbus suburb. Hamilton told a judge he realized he had to come to terms with his actions when he heard an expert testifying about the victims' blood being found on his coat.

He was given a mandatory life sentence with no chance of parole for more than 35 years.

Man who bit officer's ear pleads guilty

VA WAYNESBORO — A Virginia man who, according to prosecutors, was high on methamphetamine when he bit off part of a police officer's ear has pleaded guilty to felony charges.

News outlets reported that Robert Martin, 22, of Staunton, pleaded guilty Wednesday to malicious injury to a law enforcement officer and drug charges.

When a Waynesboro police officer smelled marijuana during a November traffic stop, assistant prosecutor Shannon Sherrill said, he called for backup and asked three men to get out of the car.

Martin fled, and Sherrill said Sgt. Christopher Hilliard used a stun gun, but it didn't subdue Martin since he was high on meth. As they struggled, she said, Martin bit the officer's ear.

Part of Hilliard's ear was later reattached.

School chucks chicken nuggets, cold cuts

NJ NEW BRUNSWICK — Meal time won't be the same for students at New Jersey's flagship state university.

Rutgers is chucking chicken nuggets and cold cuts as it changes menus to offer less processed food and more plants.

Chicken wings will be baked instead of fried. Turkey roasted and smoked by Rutgers chefs will join poached salmon and halal lamb. Hash browns will be replaced by Peruvian hash made with heirloom potatoes, spinach and roasted onions. And chicken sausage will replace pork sausage.

Dining Services Director Joe Charette said the changes were driven in part by students who are eating smarter and are concerned about where their food comes from.

Chilling message left on no-contact order

IA DUBUQUE — Authorities suspect a man broke into his ex-girlfriend's apartment and used a knife to stick a copy of a no-contact order on a wall of her Dubuque apartment.

Police said the gist of a message written on the order was: Who's going to stop me?

The Dubuque Telegraph Herald reported that police have arrested the suspect, Bodhi-Kristoffer McGowan, 24, on charges of burglary and violating a no-contact order the woman had sought against him.

Police said the woman reported that she returned Monday from a trip and found that her apartment had been ransacked. Officers said they found an ice cream container that had four knives stuck into it.

Stolen painting with hole recovered

PA PHILADELPHIA — A New Jersey family that lost a Norman Rockwell painting in a burglary over 40 years ago has gotten it back thanks to the FBI.

The Grant family knew the painting was theirs because it still had damage from where their father had struck it with a pool cue.

The 1919 painting depicts a boy sleeping on the ground with his dozing dog beside a hoe he should be using for chores.

The FBI said it ended up with an antiques dealer who thought it was a copy but could never sell it.

The Grants said their father paid \$50 for the painting after damaging it at a friend's house.

The painting is believed to be worth more than \$1 million.

Accused burglar makes sandwich during job

MO CAPE GIRARDEAU — Authorities in southeast Missouri said a burglar accused of pilfering guns, diamond rings and other items from a home also apparently raided the refrigerator.

The Southeast Missourian reported that investigators said Thomas Dudley, 57, fixed himself a sandwich during the March 18 break-in.

Dudley was charged Wednesday with eight counts of stealing a firearm and one count of first-degree burglary. All of the charges are felonies.

Cape Girardeau County sheriff's detective Cpl. Jamie Malugen said in a probable-cause statement filed with the criminal complaint that items reported stolen from the home were found in Dudley's car.

From wire reports

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Mississippi St. ends UConn's streak

Associated Press

DALLAS — When the final shot swished through the net and UConn's record streak was over, all Geno Auriemma could do was smile.

The Huskies' 111-game run came to a stunning end when Mississippi State pulled off perhaps the biggest upset in women's basketball history, winning 66-64 on Morgan Williams' overtime buzzer beater in the national semifinals Friday night.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Auriemma said. "It's something I've been talking about to the guys all year long. I've been talking about it all year. We're playing way above our years, way above our experience level and tonight it caught up to us when we needed to be more mature with what we're doing."

"We didn't have it. A big part of it was because of what they were doing," the coach said.

The Huskies hadn't lost in 865 days, with that defeat coming to Stanford in overtime on Nov. 17, 2014. Winning had be-

come routine, often by routs. But in an instant, their drive toward a fifth consecutive national championship had been blocked.

When William's jumper dropped, Auriemma broke into that wry smile. He turned to his bench, then went to congratulate the Bulldogs.

"We had an incredible run, but we came up against a much better team tonight," Auriemma said.

It took an incredible shot by Mississippi State's diminutive point guard to end the historic streak.

William hit a 15-footer to cap it, moments after a replay review awarded UConn two free throws for a flagrant 1 foul call that tied the game with 26.6 seconds left.

"I live for moments like this," William said. "UConn, they're an incredible team. For me to make that shot against them, it's unbelievable. I'm still in shock right now. I wanted to take the shot. I wanted to take the shot and I made it."

The Bulldogs (34-4) will play South Carolina for the national

championship Sunday night in a matchup of two SEC teams.

Mississippi State and UConn met in the Sweet 16 last season and the Huskies won by 60 points — the most-lopsided win in regional semifinals history. All season long the Bulldogs had that humiliating loss on their minds.

Now they've erased that defeat, beating UConn (36-1) on the grandest stage in one of the sport's greatest games.

"I don't have to play them 100 times. Only have to beat them once," Mississippi State coach Vic Schaefer said. "That is one heck of a basketball team, the greatest of all-time. But how proud am I of my kids?"

Mississippi State led 64-62 before a replay review gave Katie Lou Samuelson the two free throws that tied the game. After a UConn turnover, William held the ball at the top of the key before dribbling to her right and pulling up for the shot, with the ball in the air when the buzzer sounded.

The Bulldogs ran onto the court, piling up at center court while UConn players stood

stone-faced. Schaefer grabbed William in a bear hug, with former Mississippi State star Dak Prescott — the Dallas Cowboys quarterback — helping lead the cheers.

Prescott said he'd try to come back Sunday for the title game.

UConn rallied from a 16-point deficit, its biggest during its NCAA record streak, to take a 59-56 lead in the fourth quarter. The teams were tied at 60 when the Bulldogs had a chance to win it in regulation, but William's shot was blocked by Gabby Williams, sending the game into overtime.

"Maybe we're just not ready for this. Maybe we were ready for everything else, but maybe we're just not mature enough for this," Auriemma said. "Maybe all our young kids needed to experience this so that we can come back and really be ready for this."

Neither team scored much in OT with Teaira McCowan's layup with 1:12 left in the extra session breaking a 62-62 tie. It was the lone basket for Mississippi State in OT until William's game-winner.

South Carolina tops Stanford, advances to title game

Associated Press

DALLAS — South Carolina was able to speed up the tempo after halftime, A'ja Wilson managed a double-double even while almost constantly surrounded by defenders and Dawn Staley finally got a win against Tara VanDerveer.

With all that, the Gamecocks are going to their first national championship after beating Stanford 62-53 Friday night in the women's national semifinals. The Cardinal led early, but struggled after star Karlie Samuelson sprained her ankle.

"I can't even put into words the feeling that I have right now. This is a very special team," said Wilson, who had 13 points and 19 rebounds. "I feel like we've earned this spot that we're in now. We know that

we're not done. But just the feeling of just making history at your school is just something really special."

Alisha Gray scored 18 points for the Gamecocks (32-4), who lost in the semifinal of their only other Final Four appearance two years ago.

They will play Mississippi State in an all-SEC matchup for the national title after the Lady Bulldogs upset UConn 66-64 in overtime. That ended the four-time defending national champion Huskies' 111-game winning streak.

Down 29-20 at halftime, South Carolina went ahead to stay with 13 straight points in the third quarter.

"The second half, I thought we just imposed our will from a defensive standpoint, sped the game up, and got playing at a

pace which benefited our style of play," Staley said.

Stanford (32-6) took a big hit when Samuelson hurt her right ankle with about 4½ minutes before halftime, after the Cardinal had taken an eight-point lead with a 13-1 run.

"Karlie twisting her ankle really kind of gave us a tough time," VanDerveer said. "She's really been the glue to our team all year. She talks, she makes big shots. If someone told me before the game she won't score, I'd say we're in trouble. ... Psychologically and physically, it was a challenge."

Samuelson was injured when she was making a move toward the basket, and stepped on the foot of South Carolina guard Bianca Cuevas-Moore. Samuelson's right foot then slid onto the floor before twisting

awkwardly. The senior guard grabbed near her ankle with both hands after falling down.

Two teammates came off the bench to carry Samuelson off the floor. She returned for the first 73 seconds after halftime, and got back in several times after that without making much of an impact.

Staley vs. Tara: Staley played for VanDerveer on the U.S. women's team that won the 1996 Olympic gold medal. Staley had been 0-5 as a coach against her. "You'd think at some point the law of averages should play out," she said, smiling. Staley also made three consecutive Final Four appearances as a player for Virginia from 1990-92. Two of those included semifinal losses to VanDerveer and the Cardinal on the way to their two national titles (1990, 1992).

US shuts down Canada in opener

Associated Press

PLYMOUTH, Mich. — The U.S. women's hockey team, fueled and fired up by an opportunity to play in a tournament it was willing to sit out, started fast and strong against its rival in a highly charged and physical game.

Brianna Decker broke a scoreless tie late in the second period and Nicole Hensley stopped 18 shots, lifting the Americans over the Canadians 2-0 on Friday night in the world championship opener for both teams.

"Built-up energy," said Megan Keller, who played defense for the U.S. near her hometown in suburban Detroit. "We were all excited to get out here and get the first game rolling.

"It definitely puts into perspective how important these tournaments are and how much they mean to you and your teammates."

Keller and her teammates threatened to pull out of the tournament unless USA Hockey committed to paying the women more and treating them more like their male counterparts.

After getting about \$1,000 a month from the organization for six months around the Olympics in the past, members of the U.S. team can now make a living playing the sport. They will make \$3,000-\$4,000 a month, with the ability to earn over \$70,000 annually with contributions from the United States Olympic Committee. Players can make up to \$129,000 with the Olympics in 2018, and USA Hockey will also arrange for players to fly in business class and stay at nicer hotels as part of the deal finalized Tuesday.

"All of the commitment, the energy and the focus you saw off the ice over the few weeks is what you're going to see on the ice," Reagan Carey, general manager of the U.S. team, pre-

dicted before the puck dropped. "We're so excited to showcase that for everybody, especially the fans here."

Dave Ogreaan, executive director of USA Hockey, could enjoy the show because the landmark deal paved the way for a highly entertaining game in front of 3,152 fans.

"It's a terrific night," Ogreaan said after the second period. "We've got a wonderful crowd here, USA Hockey arena, and the game everyone came to see, the two best teams in the world, are playing at a very high level in an ultra-competitive game. And obviously, you could tell our players had a lot of bottled-up energy that they were ready to play with, especially in the first period."

The Americans controlled the play all night against their rivals. Gigi Marvin gave them a two-goal cushion early in the third, and their swarming defense shut out a high-powered offense.

"It was a wake-up call," Canadian forward Marie-Philip Poulin said. "We have to be ready when they drop the puck."

Shannon Szabados made some spectacular saves to keep the Canadians in the game and finished with 28 saves, but they couldn't get a puck past Hensley.

The two teams are heavy favorites to meet again April 7 in the gold medal game. If that doesn't happen, it would be stunning and unprecedented.

Since the first International Ice Hockey Federation women's world championship in 1990, the U.S. and Canada have not allowed another country to advance to the finals. The Americans beat the Canadians last year at the world championship, winning the eight-nation tournament for the third straight time over Canada and sixth time in seven opportunities.

Woods decides to sit out another Masters

Associated Press

Tiger Woods won't play in the Masters for the third time in the last four years, announcing Friday night on his website that rehabilitation on his back didn't allow him enough time to prepare.

"I did about everything I could to play, but my back rehabilitation didn't allow me the time to get tournament ready," Woods said on his website.

He still plans to be at Augusta National, but only for dinner with past Masters champions on Tuesday night, just like last year.

Augusta National checked on Woods' status Thursday before sending out its press conference schedule for Masters week. Woods did not know if he could play, so the club held onto his 1 p.m. Tuesday spot just in case.

Woods missed the Masters for the first time in 2014 because of the first of three surgeries on his back. He played in 2015 despite taking off two months with chipping problems, and he tied for 17th.

He missed the cut in the other three majors that year, had two more back surgeries and missed 15 months of competition to let it heal. But after an upbeat return in the Bahamas at his unofficial Hero World Challenge, Woods curiously signed up for four tournaments in a five-week stretch, including going to Dubai.

He missed the cut at Torrey Pines, a place where he has won eight times as a pro. And after a 77 in easy conditions at Dubai in early February, he withdrew the next day, citing back spasms. Woods also cited back spasms for withdrawing from his own tournament at Riviera — he even withdrew from a press conference at the Genesis Open, which supports his foundation — and from the Honda Classic.

Woods also missed the Arnold Palmer Invitational. And now the wait continues for Woods, once golf's dominant force, now its biggest mystery.

"I think injury has a lot to do with it, but the injury is not just his body, but his mind," Jack

Nicklaus said in an interview last month.

"Mentally, I think he's had a hard time with what's happened, because every time he turns around, he hurts himself," Nicklaus said. "And instead he's saying, 'When am I going to get over this?' ... He may physically be hurt. You guys don't know. I don't know. I really don't have an answer. I just know that the guy looks great, talks great, mentally he sounds sharp. So what's happening?"

Woods said there was no timetable for a return to competition.

"But I will continue my diligent effort to recover, and want to get back out there as soon as possible," he said.

In other golf news:

■ Norway's Suzann Pettersen finished her wind-delayed first round with a 4-under 68 and added a second-round 69 Friday at the ANA Inspiration in Rancho Mirage, Calif., taking a one-shot lead over six players after two shortened days at the LPGA Tour's first major of the year.

■ Sung Kang shot a 9-under 63 to take a six-shot lead in a record-breaking second round at the Houston Open on Friday in Humble, Texas.

After shooting a 65 on Thursday, Kang was at 16-under 128 through two rounds, setting the 36-hole tournament record of 129 by a stroke, set previously by Blaine McCallister in 1993 and Curtis Strange in 1980.

Federer beats Kyrgios to reach Miami final

KEY BISCAWAYNE, Fla. — Roger Federer's season of resurgence took another thrilling turn Friday night when he won a seesaw semifinal against Nick Kyrgios at the Miami Open, 7-6 (9), 6-7 (9), 7-6 (5).

Federer was unable to convert two match points in the second-set tiebreaker but finished off Kyrgios an hour later.

Federer advanced to Sunday's final against Rafael Nadal, 13 years after their first career encounter, also at Key Biscayne.

Cavaliers get back on winning track

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James scored 34 points, Kyrie Irving dropped 24 and the Cleveland Cavaliers ended a turbulent and troublesome March with an easy 122-105 win over the injury-weakened Philadelphia 76ers on Friday night.

It's been an alarming stretch for the NBA champions, who are running out of time to get tuned up for the postseason. But against the lowly Sixers, Cleveland regained some of its swagger before heading into April when the real fun begins.

Richaun Holmes and Timothe Luwawu-Cabarrot scored 19 apiece for Philadelphia, which only dressed nine play-

ers after shutting down Jahlil Okafor and Robert Covington for the remainder of the season with knee injuries.

Celtics 117, Magic 116: Isaiah Thomas scored 35 points, Jae Crowder had 18 and host Boston rallied to beat Orlando and maintain a slim lead over Cleveland atop the Eastern Conference.

Warriors 107, Rockets 98: Stephen Curry scored 24 points, Klay Thompson had 20 and Golden State got key plays down the stretch to hold off visiting Houston.

Pelicans 117, Kings 89: DeMarcus Cousins had 37 points and 13 rebounds in his first game against his former team, and host New Orleans routed Sacramento.

Spurs 100, Thunder 95: Kawhi Leonard scored 27 points, and visiting San Antonio rallied from 21 points down in the third quarter to beat Oklahoma City.

The Thunder's Russell Westbrook had 32 points, 15 rebounds and 12 assists for his 39th triple-double.

Grizzlies 99, Mavericks 90: Mike Conley scored 28 points, Zach Randolph added 22 points and 12 rebounds, and host Memphis clinched a playoff spot with a victory over Dallas.

Hornets 122, Nuggets 114: Kemba Walker had 31 points, and then Marco Belinelli and Frank Kaminsky took over in the fourth quarter as host Charlotte preserved its slim playoff hopes with a win over Denver.

Raptors 111, Pacers 100: DeMar DeRozan scored 40 points and Toronto rolled to its seventh straight home win over Indiana.

Knicks 98, Heat 94: Kristaps Porzingis scored 22 points, Courtney Lee added 20 and visiting New York led nearly the entire way in beating Miami.

Bucks 108, Pistons 105 (OT): Khris Middleton hit a three-pointer with 40.7 seconds left in overtime, rookie Thon Maker scored a career-high 23 points and host Milwaukee beat Detroit.

Jazz 95, Wizards 88: Rudy Gobert had 16 points and 10 rebounds, Gordon Hayward scored 19 points and Utah beat visiting Washington.

Blackhawks win, close in on Central Division crown

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Corey Crawford and Artemi Panarin helped the battle-tested Chicago Blackhawks win a matchup against another of the NHL's top teams.

Crawford made 32 saves, Panarin had two goals and Chicago beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-1 on Friday night to reach the cusp of clinching the Central Division.

Panarin scored in the opening minute, then added an empty-netter with 44 seconds left for his 28th goal of the season. Marian Hossa also scored in the first period for Chicago, and Patrick Kane assisted on all three goals as Chicago extended its division lead to nine points over idle Minnesota.

The Wild have five games remaining and the Blackhawks have four.

Chicago, with 107 points, also leap-frogged over Columbus, with 106, and into second place overall in the league standings behind Washington in the Presidents' Trophy race.

"It was a good challenge against a team like that, one of the better teams in the league,"

Crawford said. "It was another solid game against a top team."

The Blackhawks and Crawford played a smart, tidy game to deny the Blue Jackets a chance to gain ground on Washington in the Metropolitan Division.

"Another good team we were facing tonight from the East, so it's nice to have that measuring stick, see where you stand against that conference," Kane said.

Penguins 4, Rangers 3 (SO): Sidney Crosby had a goal and an assist in regulation and then got the clinching tally in the shootout as visiting Pittsburgh snapped a four-game skid.

Jake Guentzel and Bryan Rust also scored for the Penguins, and Matt Murray stopped 30 shots for his 29th win of the season. Pittsburgh pulled one point behind Columbus for second place in the Metropolitan Division and home-ice advantage in their likely first-round playoff series.

Coyotes 6, Capitals 3: Christian Dvorak scored two unassisted goals and host Arizona chased goalie Braden Holtby early while snapping Washing-

ton's six-game winning streak.

Alexander Burmistrov also scored twice for the Coyotes, giving him three this season. He scored 13:12 into the game to make it 3-0 and prompted Capitals coach Barry Trotz to replace Holtby with Philipp Grubauer. Holtby returned to the net for the final two periods, but only stopped 18 shots in the game.

Avalanche 2, Blues 1 (SO): Nathan MacKinnon and Matt Duchene scored shootout goals, Calvin Pickard had 27 saves through overtime and two more in the shootout and host Colorado beat St. Louis.

Jake Allen had 31 saves and Ryan Reaves scored for the Blues, who clinched a playoff spot by earning a point.

Islanders 2, Devils 1: Anders Lee and Anthony Beauvillier scored to help host New York preserve its slim playoff chances.

Jaroslav Halak stopped 26 shots as the Islanders pulled four points behind Boston for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. New York won at home for the first time since beating the Devils here

on Feb. 19, going 0-4-1 at Barclays Center in between.

Kings 2, Canucks 0: Jarome Iginla scored his 625th career goal and Jonathan Quick made 35 saves for his 44th career shutout to lead visiting Los Angeles.

Tyler Toffoli also scored for the Kings, who are clinging to slim playoff hopes and now sit eight points behind Nashville for the second wild card in the Western Conference with five games remaining for each team.

Flames 5, Sharks 2: Matt Stajan got his first goal in 24 games during his team's three-goal second period, and host Calgary clinched a playoff berth.

Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan, Alex Chiasson and Sam Bennett also scored for Calgary, which won three out of the four meetings this season against San Jose. Brian Elliott finished with 36 saves as the Flames pulled one point behind the third-place Sharks in the Pacific Division with four games remaining for each team, including a matchup in the season finale at San Jose.