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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

DOD: Base that launched gas attack struck

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. warships launched dozens of cruise missiles early Friday against the Syrian air base believed to have been used to launch chemical attacks that killed scores of civilians this week.

On Friday, senior U.S. military officials explained why it was necessary to launch the massive cruise missile strike against Syria's Shayrat Air Base. They raised the possibility that Russia might have had a role in the chemical attacks, by not stopping Syria's chemical weapons program or by trying to help Syria cover it up after the chemical attack. U.S. officials said they would investigate the possible connection.

Fifty-nine Tomahawk cruise missiles were launched at 8:40 p.m. EST Thursday by U.S. guided missile destroyers USS Ross and USS Porter, which are based in Rota, Spain. The ships had been pre-positioned in the Mediterranean Sea to respond to Tuesday's chemical strikes. The strike was among the military options presented to President Donald Trump, according to officials who briefed reporters at the Pentagon on the condition they not be named.

On Friday, U.S. officials provided images of damage at Shayrat, including the destruction of 20 Syrian aircraft, ammunition storage sites, a surface-to-air missile defense system and fuel and ammo depots.

Talal Barazi, the governor of surrounding Homs province, told an Arab TV station that a fire raged for two hours on the base.

The strikes resulted in deaths, Barazi told The Associated Press. The Syrian military said at least seven people were killed and several were wounded.

Russian officials Friday condemned the strike as "illegitimate" and suggested it would only increase the violence in Syria, according to the BBC. News agencies also reported that the strike had ended Russia's cooperation with the U.S. on a phone call they have maintained to ensure the many coalition and Russian fighter jets over Syria's skies do not collide or miscalculate each other's intentions.

U.S. officials discounted that Friday, saying the phone line was still operating and had been used that day.

However, the Russian state-owned news

service Interfax reported Friday that Russia had summoned the U.S. military attache in Moscow and announced that the line would stop operating at midnight Saturday.

The escalation over Syria was spurred by a horrific chemical attack Tuesday in the Syrian village of Khan Sheikhoun, which is in rebel-held western Syria.

The senior military officials released footage of impact on an empty village road that they said bore the hallmarks of a dropped chemical munition. They said the imagery countered Syrian President Bashar Assad's argument that a bomb had hit a rebel chemical facility.

'U.S. planners took extraordinary precaution ... to minimize risk to Russian and Syrian personnel.'

Capt. Jeff Davis
Pentagon spokesman

With certainty and citing U.S. intelligence, military officials said that was not the case.

The officials said they had evidence of a small drone watching a village hospital shortly after the attack, where many of the civilians suffering chemical burns had gone. Five hours later, the drone

returned "and the hospital was struck." The hospital attack raised questions about whether Syria acted alone.

"We think we have a good picture of who supported" Syrian forces in the chemical strike, the military officials said. "Obviously at a minimum, the Russians failed to rein in the Syrian regime activity ... we know the Russians have chemical expertise in country. We cannot talk about, openly, any complicity between the Russians and the Syrian regime in the case, but we're carefully assessing any information that would implicate the Russians knew or assisted with this Syrian capability."

The launch was the second major military operation ordered by Trump since he took office in January. He gave the order to carry out the strikes at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, after two days of consulting with his top military chiefs and the National Security Council.

"Tonight I ordered a targeted military

strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched," Trump told the nation late Thursday. "It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons."

The USS Porter launched the first salvo of missiles about 3 a.m. local time, military officials said, in order to reduce potential civilian casualties.

"U.S. planners took extraordinary precaution ... to minimize risk to Russian and Syrian personnel," said Pentagon spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis. "We took extraordinary precautions to not target the area where the Russians are."

Davis said it was not clear whether there were chemical weapons at Shayrat but the base had been used to store them in previous years.

Trump said "there can be no dispute" that Assad's forces were behind the attack.

"Syrian dictator Bashar Assad launched a horrible chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians using a deadly nerve agent," Trump said. "Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many — even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack."

The Syrian government has denied involvement. Syrian state TV called the U.S. attack Thursday "an aggression," according to The Associated Press.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis traveled to Florida to brief Trump on options.

Trump ordered the strikes Thursday from his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla., where he was meeting with China's President Xi Jinping. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis traveled to Florida to brief Trump on options.

Trump largely had ignored Assad's actions in Syria, where Trump said his focus was on destroying Islamic State. On Wednesday, he called the chemical attack a "heinous action" that "cannot be tolerated."

On Thursday, he told reporters traveling with him on Air Force One that the U.S. would take action.

"I think what Assad did is terrible," Trump said. "I think what happened in Syria is one of the truly egregious crimes. ... He's there, and I guess he's running things, so something should happen."

Tomahawk ideal for Syria strike mission

The Washington Post

The U.S. Navy launched more than 50 Tomahawk missiles early Friday at military targets in Syria in response to a chemical-weapons attack this week on civilians, relying on a mainstay weapon when the Pentagon wants to attack from a safe distance.

ANALYSIS The missile has been a critical part of U.S. warfare since the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and commonly carries a 1,000-pound warhead. It last was used by the Pentagon in October, when the military launched Tomahawks from the Red Sea at three coastal radar sites in Yemen after Houthi rebels there fired missiles at several U.S. ships over several days.

Before that, the U.S. used them in September 2014 as the country expanded its air war against militants from Iraq into Syria. The Pentagon said at the time that it launched 47 Tomahawks from two ships — the USS Philippine Sea in the Persian

Gulf and the USS Arleigh Burke in the Red Sea — and hit sites used by what it called the Khorasan Group, an Islamist cell said to be linked to al-Qaida.

The strikes, announced late Thursday in Washington, were launched from two Navy ships in the Mediterranean Sea, a defense official said on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the operation.

One of the largest advantages to using the Tomahawk is that it does not require a pilot to be anywhere near a potential target. They can be launched from Navy destroyers up to 1,000 miles away, a tactical consideration when facing enemy air defenses. Assad's military operates modest S-200 surface-to-air missile systems but is backed by Russian forces, which have more advanced S-300 and S-400 missiles. Those systems have better radar and fly faster than older surface-to-air missiles.

Chris Harmer, a defense analyst and former naval officer now with the Institute for the Study of War, said that the U.S. military

can jam some of the Russian radar through the use of the EA-18G Growler jet and other means. But the Russians likely can withstand some of that jamming, especially the most advanced S-400 systems.

"We have the advantage, but it doesn't mean it renders the Russian air defense irrelevant," Harmer said.

Tomahawks have less explosive yield than larger bombs carried by manned U.S. aircraft, but to bomb Syrian planes on the ground, that does not matter, Harmer said. Planes, he said, are the "softest of soft targets" and do not require the largest U.S. munitions to destroy or incapacitate them.

There also is a specific variant of the Tomahawk that can carry cluster munitions that separate over a target, causing fragmentation and incendiary damage that could destroy vehicles, supply depots and aircraft on a flight line. The missiles would not cause as much damage to a runway as a larger Air Force bomb launched from a bomber or a fighter.

Trump's attack spurs questions on US policy in Syria

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — The cruise missiles that crashed down before dawn on a Syrian air base sent a clear message to President Bashar Assad: The use of chemical weapons will be met with U.S. force.

ANALYSIS The outcome is less clear: Assad's grip on power is as firm as ever and he has lost little of his ability to carry out more chemical attacks.

President Donald Trump said the goal of the military action was deterrence. Officials said strikes targeted the Shayrat air base to prevent it from being used to launch attacks like the one this week that killed more than 80 people and provided sickening images of individuals suffering from exposure to a sarin-like nerve gas. The base's airstrips, hangars, control tower and ammunition areas were struck.

The U.S. is not at war with Syria — at least not yet. The intervention was extremely limited, giving Assad's military the ability to end it there by changing its behavior and allowing for Washington to incrementally expand its military action if required.

But the surprise barrage of missiles raises questions about where U.S. Syria policy is headed after Trump's rapid reversal of positions in recent days. Just last week, his administration stressed that removing

Assad from power was no longer a priority and that America's focus was entirely on defeating an Islamic State insurgency in the north of the country. But on Thursday night Trump appeared to endorse a new, open-ended commitment to respond to any use by Assad of weapons of mass destruction.

"It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons," Trump said.

Such declarations carry risks. No U.S. officials declared the threat of more chemical weapons eliminated. If Assad isn't deterred, more attacks would mean more scenes of people foaming at the mouth in agony and bodies lying in heaps. The U.S. may have little option but to up the ante militarily.

Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said the U.S. was still assessing the result of the 59 Tomahawks it fired, expressing hope that Assad's government learned a lesson. He said it was ultimately "the regime's choice" if more U.S. military action would be needed.

That raises the potential for Assad to suck the U.S. deeper into the Arab country's brutal, 6-year-old civil war. The conflict has killed hundreds of thousands of people, has contributed to the worst refugee crisis since World War II, and shows

no end in sight. Assad's forces are locked in battle with a bitter, if weakening, opposition camp. Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. spent most of the war trying to stay out of the fray.

Engaging the Syrian government as an enemy means Damascus can respond in kind. That creates added danger for U.S. forces on the ground in northern Syria waging a separate war against the Islamic State group, and American aircraft targeting extremist groups from Syria's skies. Up to now, despite public complaints, Syria's government and its allies — Russia and Iran — essentially have given the U.S. and its coalition partners a free pass to conduct their counterterrorism mission.

And if Trump is now willing to protect Syrians from chemical attacks, will he feel compelled to shield others from what has been Assad's more pervasive slaughter? Perversely, the U.S. strikes also risk emboldening Assad to use even greater brutality if he senses Washington's intrusion as a threat to his rule.

"One strike against one air base may be enough to deter him from using sarin gas again, but it will not deter his effort to target civilians, target hospitals," said Jennifer Cafarella, a Mideast expert at the Institute for the Study of War.

1st Marines punished in wake of scandal

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps has punished two California-based Marines for derogatory remarks they posted on social media about a female Marine and service leadership, and law enforcement agents have uncovered at least 56 people suspected of involvement in a nude-photo-sharing scandal, military officials said Friday.

Each of the punished Marines was reduced one rank Wednesday in a nonjudicial sentence that included 45 days of extra punitive duties for their remarks posted on the Facebook page “United States Grunt Corps,” said Lt. Col. Warren Cook, commander of 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton, the unit to which the Marines are assigned. It marks the first time active-duty Marines have faced discipline for inappropriate actions on social media and comes in the wake of the photo-sharing scandal uncovered in February.

Cook said the two Marines he punished failed to maintain

“the good order and discipline of the unit.”

The Marine Corps declined to identify the two Marines by name. One was a junior enlisted Marine and the other was a noncommissioned officer, a Marine official said on the condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service’s director said Friday that the service had identified 15 active-duty servicemembers who appear to be involved in felony-level criminal activity related to sharing nude photos on the Internet without the consent of the subjects of the photos. Fourteen of the suspects are Marines, and one is a sailor, Andrew Traver, the NCIS director, told reporters at the Pentagon.

The NCIS has also identified 12 civilians who could face felony charges for their involvement. Traver said the investigation is ongoing, and more suspects could be identified.

The initial investigation centered on a private Facebook group of some 30,000 active-duty and veteran Marines and Navy hospital corpsmen called “Marines United,” in which,

officials said, a secret drive was circulated containing potentially hundreds of explicit photos of female Marines and derogatory comments about them.

Only 27 individuals have been identified as potentially committing felonies. The NCIS has turned over a list of 29 additional names to the Marine Corps of suspects whose actions might not be felonious but could be grounds for misdemeanor-level criminal action or nonjudicial punishment, Traver said.

Marine Gen. Glenn Walters, the Corps’ assistant commandant, said the service distributed material this week to commanders detailing the wide range of nonjudicial punishment Marines involved in the scandal could face. Nonjudicial punishment has the potential to end a servicemembers’ military career.

In recent weeks, the Marine Corps has issued several servicewide changes it hopes will help address underlying cultural issues that might have emboldened some Marines to act inappropriately online.

The service updated its social media policy last month to include language indicating Marines actions online could be punished criminally.

Walters said Friday that the Marine Corps is now including social media guidance during boot camp. The Marine Corps is also looking to increase the amount of time male and female recruits spend together at those depots. It is the only military service that separates the genders during boot camp.

Walters said those options are some of about 150 potential changes that a task force organized to study the Corps’ culture has already identified as ways to address the cultural issues that led to the scandal.

“Online harassment of female Marines is symptomatic of a larger issue the task force is directly addressing,” he said. “We are trying to change the culture of the Marine Corps, and hopefully when we change the culture of the Marine Corps then the behaviors that beget it maybe will correct themselves.

“That’s our goal — to build men and women of character who serve in the ranks.”

Hijacked truck crashes into Swedish store

Associated Press

STOCKHOLM — A hijacked beer truck crashed into an upscale department store in central Stockholm on Friday, killing at least two people, according to Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, who called the crash a terror attack.

Live TV footage showed smoke coming out of the Ahlens department store on the city’s pedestrian street Drottninggatan, which the truck smashed into about 3 p.m.

Authorities evacuated the city’s nearby Central Station, which links regional trains with the Swedish capital’s subway system. All trains to and from the main station were halted, and two large shopping malls in the capital were shut down.

Broadcaster SVT said at least five people were killed in the attack while Swedish radio reported three dead, but police could not immediately confirm either report. The country’s intelligence agency said a large number of people were wounded.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, and police at a news conference said no one had been arrested so far, contradicting earlier Swedish media reports that one person was in custody.

Swedish beer maker Spendrups said one of its trucks had been hijacked earlier Friday.

Mats Loving of the national police’s operational unit said police presence across the Scandinavian country had been stepped up. The TT news agency reported that checkpoints were set up on the Oresund Bridge to Denmark.

Sweden’s security agency boss, Anders Thornberg, said the SAPO agency was working with police on the case and had no indications earlier that an attack was imminent.

Swedish government spokeswoman Tina Israelsson said the “government is following developments and is in close contact with officials who are responsible

for dealing with the situation.”

Swedish King Carl XVI Gustaf cut short a visit to Brazil and sent the royal family’s condolences to the families of the victims and those who were wounded.

The truck crash appeared to be the latest attack in Europe using a vehicle.

Last month, in an attack claimed by the Islamic State, a man drove into a crowd on London’s Westminster Bridge, killing three people and injuring many others before stabbing a policeman to death. He was shot dead by police. A fourth person, a woman thrown into the Thames by the force of the car attack, died Thursday.

Islamic State also claimed responsibility for a truck attack that killed 86 people in Nice, France, in July during a Bastille Day festival last year and another truck attack that killed 12 people at a Christmas market in Berlin.

Condolences poured into Sweden on Friday from top European Union officials and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Wildlife officials find mountain lion kitten

CA LOS ANGELES — Wildlife officials have found a new mountain lion kitten in the Santa Monica Mountains near Los Angeles.

Researchers with the National Park Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife said Tuesday that the female kitten, dubbed P-54, was born sometime in January. The Los Angeles Daily News reported the kitten's mother is a GPS-tagged mountain lion called P-23.

Researchers and a veterinarian went to the mountains in February and located P-54 while the mother was away from the den. The kitten was sedated, fitted with an ear tag and outfitted with a tracking device.

Drunken-driving suspect caught in fitting T-shirt

PA NEWVILLE — Police in Pennsylvania say they arrested a man wearing a Drunk Lives Matter shirt for drunken driving.

Police said Elwood Gutshall III's blood-alcohol content was about two and a half times the state's legal limit for drivers when he was pulled over early on March 19 in Newville. Gutshall, 44, was wearing a green St. Patrick's Day shirt with the saying on it.

School pays \$100K for 'drunk goggles' injury

UT KAYSVILLE — A Utah school district agreed to pay \$100,000 to the family of a teenage girl who was injured while wearing so-called "drunk goggles" in a 2014 exercise.

The Standard-Examiner reported that the Davis School

District agreed to put over \$61,000 into a trust account for Kylie Nielsen, of Kaysville, who was injured in class, to settle a personal injury lawsuit. The district will pay another \$13,000 for medical expenses and \$25,000 for legal fees.

Kylie was 13 in 2014 when she suffered a leg injury during an alcohol impairment simulation exercise in health class. According to court documents, former teacher Rick Smith encouraged students to play tag while wearing goggles designed to simulate drunkenness, an activity that caused Kylie to break her ankle in multiple places.

Smith no longer works for the school district.

Debut of triangle matzo for Passover pizza

NJ NEWARK — It's not your bubbe's matzo.

The largest producer of kosher food in North America, based in New Jersey, is breaking tradition in its 129-year history by unveiling its first triangular matzo.

Manischewitz said the shape is part of its Matzo Pizza Kit.

CEO David Sugarman said matzo pizza is a Passover staple for Jewish families because they are not permitted to eat foods made with yeast or leavening.

The company needed a special die to make the new shape from the traditional rectangle. The company said breakage meant it had to replace a cooling conveyor with a new process. Employees now grab the matzo by hand and place it into cartons to cool.

Lawsuit deal may mean free buttered treats

MA BOSTON — A proposed settlement

between a Massachusetts man and Dunkin' Donuts shops could mean free buttered baked goods for hundreds of customers and a huge payout for his lawyer.

Jan Polanik sued a cluster of franchises of the Canton, Mass.-based doughnut chain, saying he received margarine when he requested real butter.

The Boston Globe reported that the settlement filed in Suffolk Superior Court could mean \$500 for Polanik, three free buttered baked goods for 1,400 other customers and \$90,000 for Polanik's attorney.

Shoplifter trapped after store closes calls 911

OH KENT — Ohio police said a suspected shoplifter called 911 for help after she hid in a fitting room at closing time and got locked inside a department store.

Brimfield Township police said surveillance video from the incident at a Kohl's store last month shows her taking clothing items, then realizing she's trapped in the store. Police said officers already were heading to the store when she called 911 because she set off alarms.

WJW-TV reported Joanne Havens, 35, told police she heard the store-closing announcements and simply didn't leave in time.

But officers say they found stolen items in her purse.

Havens pleaded not guilty to a misdemeanor theft charge.

No regrets for man who proposed with graffiti

OH SHEFFIELD LAKE — A man who spray-painted a marriage proposal on an Ohio shopping center has been fined for criminal mischief and sentenced to commu-

nity service but says he doesn't regret the unusual graffiti for his girlfriend.

After all, she said yes.

The Chronicle-Telegram in Elyria reported a magistrate in Sheffield Lake told Kyle Stump, 23, that the more traditional down-on-one-knee proposal might have been preferable.

Stump pleaded no contest in mayor's court in Sheffield Lake. He was ordered to pay over \$300 in restitution for cleaning the wall, and his community service might include painting fire hydrants.

The mayor said romantic gesture or not, it's still a crime with a penalty.

Fight against bird ban at campsites gets new push

RI PROVIDENCE — A yearslong fight over letting a cockatoo named Tootsie onto Rhode Island campgrounds might have finally reached a compromise.

A proposal to let cockatoos, parrots, parakeets and similar birds onto state-owned campgrounds was vetoed by then-Gov. Lincoln Chafee in 2012. A second attempt stalled in the legislature in 2015.

Now, state Rep. Evan Shanley said he's found a way to make it work after meeting with veterinary and environmental officials, and removing language that also would have allowed gerbils, turtles and goldfish. The House Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the bill Thursday.

Warwick resident Tom Wharton said his 23-year-old cockatoo is quiet and shouldn't be banned from campgrounds.

Shanley, a Warwick Democrat, took up Tootsie's cause this year. It was originally championed by his Republican predecessor.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Cavs ready for run after rough March

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Back from Boston, Kevin Love spent part of his day off talking to kids about fitness.

The topic was appropriate. The Cavaliers look in much better shape.

With four straight wins, including a 114-91 walkover against the Celtics to wrestle back control atop the Eastern Conference, the Cavs may be gelling just in time for the NBA playoffs and a run at a second straight title.

Less than a week after Cleveland lost three straight and five of seven, and just days after a heated exchange between LeBron James and Tristan Thompson that seemed to tear at the team's fabric and prompted questions about the champions' chemistry, all seems to be right with the closest thing the league has to a day-and-night time soap opera.

"We thrive under chaos," Love said Thursday. "We always do."

True, there's rarely a dull moment in Cleveland, where every game seems to take the importance of a season, and where the city's championship hoops team is anatomized daily like a frog being dissected in a high school science lab.

Now in his third season, Love has gotten used to the spotlight that comes with playing alongside James, but the All-Star forward acknowledged there have been long stretches this season where the Cavs haven't been as focused as needed.

The criticism, he said, has some merit.

They've been the coasting Cavs, guilty of taking teams lightly and taking time off.

"It seems like there are times during the season — and it could be true — where we just say, 'the regular season is no big deal,'" Love said, relaxing in a quiet room before he spoke with hundreds of school kids at an area Boys & Girls Club. "But I

think last night and in the third quarter (on Tuesday) against Orlando, our pace of play and defensively, how we were moving and how we were communicating was so much better."

The Cavaliers showed no mercy to the Celtics, demolishing the East's No. 2 team on its famed parquet floor from opening tip to final horn. It was easily one of Cleveland's most complete games this season, and while James insisted it wasn't meant to send an external message, Love felt the win resonated inside the Cavs' locker room.

"We weren't overly invested in that game last night thinking we had to win, that this is the biggest game," he said. "But we looked at it as a great challenge for us ... we wanted to play good basketball and we did that."

Love acknowledged the team has been plagued by a championship "hangover" that manifests itself in short losing streaks and a general nonchalance.

Groggy and aimless for months, the Cavs may have finally found the cure.

"I don't know when that hits throughout the season, but March wasn't pretty for us," he said, recalling a 7-10 month. "But at the end of the day, we're hoping to look back and say that was a lesson for us and that we can't let that happen again."

With four games left in the regular season, it's time for the Cavs to hit their stride. However, a season filled with injuries has a new one as Thompson, the team's only true center, is out with a sprained right thumb. Thompson will also miss Friday's home game against Atlanta, and could be held out a few more so he's as ready as possible for the postseason.

Love stepped up with Thompson out and grabbed 16 rebounds against the Celtics. If Love can keep up that production, it will go a long way towards helping the Cavs reach their third straight Finals, and perhaps another meeting with Golden State.

Celtics suffer 2nd consecutive loss

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Paul Millsap scored 26 points, Tim Hardaway Jr. added 23 and the Atlanta Hawks beat the Boston Celtics 123-116 on Thursday.

Isaiah Thomas scored 35 points, Jae Crowder had 24 and Marcus Smart 18 for the Celtics, who have dropped two games in a row after winning five of seven.

Rookie Taurean Prince finished with a career-high 20 points, and Dennis Schroder added 18 for Atlanta. The Hawks had lost nine of 11.

Boston fell 1½ games behind Cleveland for the East lead, but is still two games ahead of third-place Toronto. Fifth-place Atlanta, which led by 20 in the third, moved one game ahead of Milwaukee. The regular season ends next week.

Bulls 102, 76ers 90: Jimmy Butler had 19 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists and helped give visiting Chicago's playoff hopes a needed boost.

The Bulls, Miami and Indiana entered the night with 38-40 records and in a three-way tie for seventh in the Eastern Conference playoff race. Butler had his fourth career triple-double.

Rajon Rondo sat out with a sprained right wrist and Dwyane Wade missed another game with a fractured right elbow. Wade, who scrimmaged Wednesday for the first time since he was injured on March 15, could return as early as Saturday at Brooklyn. Wade, who averaged 18.6 points in his first season with his hometown team, had been ruled out for the season. Rondo was hurt Tuesday night in a loss to New York.

Timothe Luwawu-Cabarrot led the 76ers with 18 points.

Wizards 106, Knicks 103: Bradley Beal scored 25 points and made the tiebreaking threepointer with 49 seconds left as host Washington beat New York on Thursday night.

John Wall added 24 points and eight assists for the Wiz-

ards, who blew a 12-point lead in the fourth quarter but recovered to improve to 48-31, tying Toronto for third place in the Eastern Conference. Washington is trying for its first 50-win season since 1978-79.

Marcin Gortat was 7-for-7 from the field and scored 16 points for the Wizards. They have won seven straight at Madison Square Garden.

Carmelo Anthony scored 23 points for the Knicks, who are a loss away from their third consecutive 50-loss season.

Pacers 104, Bucks 89: Paul George had 23 points and 10 rebounds and Indiana beat visiting Milwaukee to keep its playoff hopes alive.

Point guard Jeff Teague added 15 points and seven assists for the Pacers, Thaddeus Young had 12 points, and Lance Stephenson nine in his third game back with Indiana.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 25 points, seven rebounds and six assists. He scored 16 points in the first half to help the Bucks keep pace, but Indiana kept him in check in the second half and pulled away.

Milwaukee has lost three straight after winning seven of previous eight.

Magic 115, Nets 107: Elfrid Payton had 22 points, 11 assists and five rebounds to lead host Orlando.

Aaron Gordon added 21 points, Jodie Meeks had 20, and Nikola Vucevic finished with 18 points and 12 rebounds. Jeremy Lin led Brooklyn with 32 points.

Trail Blazers 105, Timberwolves 98: Allen Crabbe had 25 points, including a career-high eight three-pointers, and host Portland snapped a two-game losing streak.

Damian Lillard added 22 points, nine rebounds and eight assists for Portland, which held onto the eighth and final playoff spot in the Western Conference ahead of the Denver Nuggets with three games to go.

Hoffman takes 4-shot lead in Masters

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Charley Hoffman and William McGirt were the first to take advantage of Dustin Johnson's absence at the Masters.

The odds are they won't be the last.

Hoffman had a 7-under 65 to dominate a wind-swept opening round. His four-shot lead over McGirt is the largest at Augusta National after the

opening round in 62 years.

But with conditions expected to improve through the weekend, there's a host of capable challengers looking to fill the void left by the withdrawal of Johnson, the world's No. 1 player and a heavy favorite at the season's first major.

Hoffman acknowledged he was simply trying to make pars in the tricky conditions — gusts approached 40 mph, flung hats off patrons' heads and sent egg-

salad sandwich wrappers blowing across greens and fairways — so he wouldn't shoot himself out of the event.

He did that, and then some.

Hoffman found himself in better spots than he hoped and "was able to convert those birdies and turn it into a fantastic round."

He had birdies on seven of his final 11 holes to surge past McGirt, whose gutsy 69 looked like it might rule the round.

"It's one of those things where I almost wanted to sign my card and go back to the first tee today," McGirt said.

Lee Westwood, perhaps the best player without a major, was next at 2-under.

The group at 1-under including three-time Masters champion Phil Mickelson, Olympic gold medalist Justin Rose and former PGA champion Jason Dufner.

Cubs top Cardinals after strange play turns into rally

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina and most everyone else at Busch Stadium laughed at the bizarre sight — a ball somehow stuck to his chest protector, in plain view of everybody except him.

But the St. Louis star didn't think it was so funny when asked if a foreign substance helped the thing cling.

"Did I put anything on my chest protector to stick?" Molina said. "That's a dumb question."

Whatever happened, it sure made for a strange situation at Busch Stadium. And it was the key play that sent the Chicago Cubs past St. Louis 6-4 Thursday.

The Cardinals led 4-2 in the seventh inning when things turned kooky.

Pinch hitter Matt Szczur led off by striking out on a pitch from Brett Cecil that skipped in the dirt. The ball bounced into Molina's protector and smack, it stayed there.

"I don't know if they've come out with Velcro on the protectors or it's just a fuzzy baseball," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "It was definitely Velcroed to his chest."

As Molina frantically looked for the ball, Szczur headed toward first base.

"I just took off running," Szczur said. "My first base coach told me it was stuck to his stomach. I thought, 'What?'"

By the time Molina looked down and discovered the ball,

it was too late, Szczur was safe. The Gold Glove catcher could only smile and fans in the sell-out crowd roared — really, who'd ever seen such a thing?

"I haven't seen that one before," Cardinals manager Mike Matheny said. "I have no idea what happened there."

Catchers sometimes put pine tar somewhere on their uniforms, often around the shin guards, to help give them a better grip.

Molina was certain about one thing.

"That play changed everything," he said. "If we get that first out, everything changes."

Once Szczur reached on what was scored as a wild pitch, the Cardinals lost their grip on this game.

After a walk, Kyle Schwarber hit a go-ahead, three-run homer. The Cubs added another run later in the inning against Cecil (0-1).

Schwarber, who injured his knee in an outfield collision in the third game last year and missed the rest of the regular season, enjoyed the big hit.

"We celebrated, I made it past the third game this year," Schwarber said. "I turned the horseshoe around. I turned it up so I could make it through."

The World Series champions won two in a row after losing to the Cards on opening night.

John Lackey (1-0) threw six solid innings against his former team and new Cubs closer Wade Davis got his second save.

Addison Russell drove in a pair of runs for Chicago.

St. Louis starter Lance Lynn went 5 1/3 innings in his first appearance since Oct. 2, 2015. The right-hander, who'd been out since having Tommy John surgery, gave up two runs and five hits.

Mets 6, Braves 2: Matt Harvey dominated with a fastball in the mid-90 mph range and uncommon efficiency in his return from major surgery, beating visiting Atlanta and giving New York hope his injury woes are behind him.

Dodgers 10, Padres 2: Yasiel Puig homered twice to help host Los Angeles rout San Diego.

Puig was 2-for-3 with two walks, two runs, four RBIs and a stolen base.

Twins 5, Royals 3: Jason Castro and Jorge Polanco hit consecutive RBI doubles in the seventh inning, and Minnesota dented visiting Kansas City's bullpen again to sweep the season-opening series.

Marlins 4, Nationals 3 (10): Justin Bour doubled in the go-ahead run with two outs in the 10th inning after visiting Miami erased two leads against a shaky Washington bullpen, and the Marlins earned their first win of the season.

Mariners 4, Astros 2: Jarrod Dyson hit a tiebreaking RBI single in the ninth inning and Jean Segura drove in a run later in the inning to lift Seattle over host Houston.

Blue Jays 5, Rays 2: Kendrys Morales hit his fourth career grand slam, Marcus Stroman pitched 6 1/3 effective innings and visiting Toronto beat Tampa Bay.

Diamondbacks 9, Giants 3: Jake Lamb hit a three-run homer and Arizona won a four-game series over San Francisco at Chase Field for the first time in nine years.

The Diamondbacks needed seven tries to win a home series in 2016 but are 3-1 for the first time since 2013 under first-year manager Torey Lovullo. And they did it against the Giants, who won nine of 10 in the desert last season.

Rockies 2, Brewers 1: Nolan Arenado and Mark Reynolds homered and Antonio Senzatela pitched five strong innings in his major league debut to help visiting Colorado beat Milwaukee.

White Sox 11, Tigers 2: Matt Davidson had his first career triple and first home run with host Chicago.

Athletics 5, Angels 1: Andrew Triggs pitched into the sixth inning for his second major league win, Ryon Healy homered to cap a four-run third and Oakland beat visiting Los Angeles for an opening four-game split.

Reds 7, Phillies 4: Relief pitcher Michael Lorenzen connected for a pinch-hit homer that put host Cincinnati ahead and the Reds overcame a rough major league debut by Rookie Davis to beat Philadelphia.

Minnesota Duluth, Denver win semifinals

Associated Press

CHICAGO—Alex Iafallo had just knocked in the go-ahead goal for Minnesota Duluth with 26.6 seconds remaining when the tension really mounted.

There was a scramble in front of the net and two potential tying shots hit the crossbar. Once the final buzzer sounded, the Bulldogs finally celebrated.

Iafallo tipped in Willie Raskob's shot to lift Minnesota Duluth to a 2-1 victory over Harvard in the Frozen Four semifinals Thursday night.

A rather slow game ended in spectacular fashion when Raskob took a pass from Joey Anderson and fired the puck toward the slot. Iafallo directed it between Merrick Madsen's pads to break the tie.

"It was a good pass by Joey," Iafallo said. "We kept it in there

at the blue line. And that was pretty much the key to the goal. And Raskob made a good play. We do it in practice all the time. So simple things like that, getting the puck to the net. Just had to shovel it in."

The Crimson nearly spoiled the celebration. A flurry in front of the net ended with Harvard's Luke Esposito hitting the crossbar with four seconds remaining.

That sent the Bulldogs (28-6-7) to their third championship game and their first since the 2011 team brought home the program's lone title.

"You see 26 seconds and you think your season comes down to this," Raskob said. "It was pretty crazy. They had two huge chances, hit that crossbar. The hockey gods for some reason were on our side today. I'm glad they were."

Denver 6, Notre Dame 1:

At Chicago, Dylan Gambrell scored twice, Tariq Hammond had a goal and two assists, and the Pioneers routed the Fighting Irish to advance to the Frozen Four championship.

Top-seeded Denver dominated from the start, using a blend of speed, precision and power to overwhelm Notre Dame. Emil Romig and Henrik Borgstrom scored in the first period, and the Pioneers put it away with three more in a 4:11 span in the second.

Denver also made it to the national semifinals last year, falling 4-2 to eventual champion North Dakota in heartbreaking fashion. The Fighting Hawks advanced with two goals in the final 56.8 seconds, and the Pioneers have been on a mission ever since that loss in Florida last year.

Next up is Saturday night's final against conference rival Minnesota Duluth. The Pioneers (32-7-4) and Bulldogs split two games in Denver on consecutive nights in December.

Denver is going for its first title since 2005 and the eighth overall for one of college hockey's marquee programs.

Cam Morrison scored a power-play goal in the third for Notre Dame (23-12-5), which advanced to the school's third Frozen Four with surprising comeback wins against No. 1 seed Minnesota and second-seeded UMass Lowell. Cal Petersen finished with 36 saves.

Dennis Gilbert, a third-round pick by the Chicago Blackhawks in 2015, had a huge open-ice hit on Denver's Liam Finlay early in the second, but that was one of the biggest highlights for Notre Dame.

Senators edge Bruins in SO, wrap up playoff berth

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Ottawa Senators gave a big cheer in the visitors' dressing room to celebrate a return to the playoffs after sitting out last season.

Then they turned their attention to the weekend.

"We're going to keep pushing," coach Guy Boucher said on Thursday night after the 2-1 shootout victory over Boston gave them a spot in the post-season and a one-point lead over the Bruins in the Atlantic Division.

The Senators have two games left, against the Rangers and Islanders; Boston has one, against the NHL-leading Washington Capitals. Either team can finish as high as second in the division or as low as fourth, which would relegate it to a wild-card berth.

So can Toronto.

"That was also the message in the room," Boucher said. "Right now, it's great. But also we want more."

Kyle Turris scored the only goal in the shootout, Alexandre

Burrows scored in regulation, and Craig Anderson stopped 28 shots and three more in the shootout to help the Senators snap the Bruins' six-game winning streak.

Anderson stopped Drew Stafford, who scored Boston's only goal, and Ryan Spooner before straddling the goalpost to turn away David Pastrnak's attempt at the end.

Tuukka Rask stopped 25 shots for Boston, which went 0-4 against Ottawa this season. The Senators had never swept the Bruins in a season series.

"Our record of 0-4 doesn't really tell the real story, I think," Bruins forward David Krejci said. "So if it happens that we play them (in the playoffs), I feel confident in this team that we can get the job done."

Ottawa has 96 points to 95 for Boston after entering the night tied. The Senators have the head-to-head tiebreaker but not the most important one: regulation and overtime wins.

Penguins 7, Devils 4: Visiting Pittsburgh clinched home-ice advantage for its first-round

playoff series against the Columbus Blue Jackets with a victory over New Jersey.

Lightning 4, Maple Leafs 1: Brayden Point scored two goals and visiting Tampa Bay kept its slim playoff hopes alive by beating Toronto.

Islanders 3, Hurricanes 0: Jaroslav Halak stopped 29 shots in his second shutout of the season, and fast-starting New York beat host Carolina.

Ducks 4, Blackhawks 0: Corey Perry scored a power-play goal, John Gibson made 37 saves in his 12th career shutout and host Anaheim clinched home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs with a victory over Chicago.

Jets 5, Blue Jackets 4: Jacob Trouba scored twice and Eric Comrie had 35 saves in his NHL debut as visiting Winnipeg beat slumping Columbus.

Blues 6, Panthers 3: Jaden Schwartz had a goal and two assists to lead surging St. Louis over host Florida.

Wild 4, Avalanche 3: Nino Niederreiter tapped in the go-ahead goal early in the third

period, his team caught a break when a late goaltender interference call disallowed a goal and visiting Minnesota held off Colorado to tie franchise records for points and wins in a season.

Predators 7, Stars 3: Viktor Arvidsson had two goals and two assists, and visiting Nashville beat Dallas to remain one point out of third place in the Central Division.

Oilers 4, Sharks 2: Milan Lucic scored three goals in the third period and visiting Edmonton took a big step toward claiming home-ice advantage in the first round of the post-season by beating San Jose in a possible playoff preview.

Flames 4, Kings 1: Jon Gillies made 27 saves in his first career start, and Dennis Wideman, Freddie Hamilton and Alex Chiasson scored second-period goals as visiting Calgary defeated Los Angeles.

Coyotes 4, Canucks 3: Radim Vrbata scored two goals against his former team, and host Arizona moved out of last place in the Pacific Division with a win over Vancouver.