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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US drops huge bomb on ISIS in Afghanistan

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States dropped the largest conventional bomb ever deployed in combat Thursday to destroy a series of Islamic State caves in eastern Afghanistan, the Pentagon said Thursday.

An Air Force MC-130 dropped a massive ordnance air blast bomb, known as “the mother of all bombs,” in Nangarhar province, said Adam Stump, a Defense Department spokesman. The bomb weighs 21,600 pounds and is among the largest in the world.

The bomb hit a mountainous area along the Afghani-

stan-Pakistan border, where sustained firefights with ISIS militants have taken place. ISIS is estimated to have between 600 and 800 fighters in the area, Stump said. The bomb was selected to clear out ISIS fighters and buildings in a way that minimized risk to U.S.-led coalition forces.

ISIS in Afghanistan, officially known as Islamic State-Khorasan, had been fortifying its position with roadside bombs, bunkers and caves, said Army Gen. John W. Nicholson, commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan.

“This is the right munition to reduce these obstacles,” Nicholson said.

Trump gives support to NATO, says ‘it’s no longer obsolete’

The Washington Post

President Donald Trump on Wednesday gave his support to NATO, reaffirming the United States’ commitment to the alliance and saying he no longer considers it “obsolete,” a reversal from his rhetoric during the campaign and his first weeks in office.

On a day when Trump dramatically changed his stance on several policy positions, his statement about NATO stood out given his criticism of the military alliance. For more than a year, Trump has said NATO is outdated and costing the U.S. too much money, suggesting replacing it with an alternative organization focused on counterterrorism and repeatedly using the word “obsolete.” As recently as January, Trump stood by that position, telling the Times of London and Germany’s Bild that NATO is “ob-

solete because it wasn’t taking care of terror” and that critics of his comments have “started saying Trump is right.”

During a joint press conference Wednesday with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Trump said his comments led the alliance to make changes that satisfied his concerns.

“I complained about that a long time ago, and they made a change — and now they do fight terrorism,” Trump said. “I said it was obsolete. It’s no longer obsolete.”

It’s unclear what changes the president was referencing. NATO did add a new assistant secretary general position focused on intelligence and security in July 2016, although experts say the change does not mark a major shift for the organization and point out that NATO has long addressed concerns of terrorism.

Coalition strike kills 18 allies in Syria

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A U.S.-led coalition airstrike earlier this week accidentally killed 18 allied fighters battling Islamic State in northern Syria, U.S. Central Command said Thursday.

Coalition aircraft were given the wrong coordinates by partner forces, the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, for a strike intended to target ISIS militants south of Tabqa, a town on Lake Assad about 30 miles west of Raqqa, Central Command said.

The strike, launched Tuesday, hit Syrian Democratic Forces instead. Several nations have lent their air power to the U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS. It was not clear Thursday which air force was behind the strike.

In a daily summary of airstrikes, Central Command initially reported the strikes hit “three Islamic State tactical units, destroyed two fighting positions, two vehicles and a heavy weapons system.”

Tabqa is located near a strategic dam that Syrian Democratic Forces are fighting to retake from ISIS. Last month, U.S. helicopters inserted U.S. advisers, Syrian Arab and Kurdish forces to help clear the area of ISIS fighters.

The Syrian Democratic Forces also announced the launch of a fourth phase of its campaign to capture Raqqa, a Euphrates River city that is home to 300,000 people and the de facto capital for ISIS in Syria.

Controlling the Tabqa dam is part of the strategy of coalition and Syrian forces to isolate Raqqa before they begin a

major assault to recapture the city from the terrorist group.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, with U.S.-led air and ground support, have surrounded Tabqa. They said they are also working to clear ISIS militants out of Jalab Valley, north of Raqqa. Their closest position to Raqqa is less than 5 miles northeast of the city. But the countryside south of Raqqa is still under ISIS control. It is unclear how many stages are planned for the campaign.

Army Col. Joseph Scrocca, a spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, said U.S. forces will investigate the misdirected airstrike. He said forces on the ground “will do an assessment on the circumstances surrounding the incident to determine what went wrong and how to prevent this from happening again in the future.”

“The coalition’s deepest condolences go out to the members of the SDF and their families,” according to a Central Command news release. “The coalition is in close contact with our [Syrian Democratic Forces] partners who have expressed a strong desire to remain focused on the fight against ISIS despite this tragic incident.”

The Syrian Democratic Forces-linked Hawar News Agency reported the group was holding funerals for 17 of its fighters in the border town of Tal al-Abyad, though it did not link them to the strike. An activist-run group, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, said three days of mourning have been declared for the town. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 25 Syrian Democratic Forces fighters were killed in the last two days of battle.

Images: N. Korea near sixth nuke test

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — New satellite images show that North Korea is “primed and ready” for a sixth nuclear test, a think tank said, amid escalating tensions as President Donald Trump has said he won’t rule out military action against the communist state.

Commercial satellite imagery from Wednesday showed new activity, including vehicles and people walking around or in formation at the North’s main nuclear testing site in the northeastern mountains, said the 38 North website that monitors North Korean activities.

About 11 tarp-covered pallets of equipment or supplies, a

formation of personnel and several people walking about also were spotted in the main administrative area’s courtyard, according to the site, which is run by the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University. The post was titled “North Korea’s Punggye-ri nuclear test site: primed and ready.”

Many U.S. and South Korean officials have predicted that the North may conduct its sixth nuclear test or another missile launch in connection with the 105th birthday of the communist state’s late founding father, Kim Il Sung, on Saturday.

South Korea’s military has detected “no unusual activity so far,” said Col. Roh Jaecheon, a spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Military

officials have said in the past that North Korea is ready for another nuclear test if ordered by leader Kim Jong Un.

North Korea frequently stages weapons tests in connection with high-profile anniversaries such as the birth of the country’s founder, who also is the current leader’s grandfather. The North also will mark the anniversary of its army’s creation on April 25.

Pyongyang also has warned it is prepared to retaliate if provoked after Trump diverted the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its accompanying ships back to waters off the divided peninsula. The show of force was aimed at deterring another provocation from the North, but analysts noted it could have

the opposite effect.

Trump has not spelled out his plans for a new North Korea policy but has issued a series of statements saying he will consider unilateral action and “all options” remain on the table, including military action.

Trump also has called on Chinese President Xi Jinping to do more to rein in its communist protégé and warned the U.S. is prepared to act alone if necessary.

Xi told Trump in a telephone call Wednesday — less than a week after the leaders met in their first summit — that the North Korea issue should be solved through peaceful means, according to China’s state news agency Xinhua.

Rocket parts linked to China

The Washington Post

When North Korea launched its Kwangmyongsong-4 satellite into space last February, officials heralded the event as a birthday gift for dead leader Kim Jong Il. But the day also brought an unexpected prize for the country’s adversaries: priceless intelligence in the form of rocket parts that fell into the Yellow Sea.

Entire sections of booster rocket were snagged by South Korea’s navy and scrutinized by international weapons experts for clues about the state of North Korea’s missile program. Along with motor parts and wiring, investigators discerned a pattern. Many key components were foreign-made, acquired from businesses based in China.

The trove “demonstrates the continuing critical importance of high-end, foreign-sourced components” in building the missiles North Korea uses to threaten its neighbors, a U.N. expert team concluded in a report released last month. When U.N. officials contacted the implicated Chinese firms to ask

about the parts, the report said, they received only silence.

China’s complex relationship with North Korea was a key topic during last week’s U.S. visit by President Xi Jinping, as Trump administration officials urged Chinese counterparts to apply more pressure on Pyongyang to halt its work on nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems. Yet, despite China’s public efforts to rein in North Korea’s provocative behavior, Chinese companies continue to act as enablers, supplying the isolated communist regime with technology and hardware that allow its missiles to take flight, according to current and former U.S. and U.N. officials and independent weapons experts.

The private assistance has included sensitive software and other items specifically banned for export to North Korea under U.N. sanctions, the officials and experts said.

China has officially denied that such illegal exports exist, but investigations show restricted products were shipped privately to North Korea as recently as 18 months ago.

Russia open to restarting air safety calls with US

BY TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Russia’s top foreign minister said Wednesday that his country will consider reopening a phone line with the United States used to avoid aircraft collisions over Syria only if the U.S. agrees to stop attacking Syrian government targets.

One day after U.S. cruise missiles destroyed Syrian jets, fuel and radars at the Sharyat air base, Russia withdrew from the so-called “deconfliction line,” which is a military-to-military daily phone call used since late 2015 to communicate the locations of U.S. and Russian air and ground forces in Syria.

The United States said it attacked the airfield based on information it attained that the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad launched a Su-22 fighter jet on April 4 from that base armed with sarin gas. The jet dropped sarin on the western Syrian village of Khan Sheikhoun, killing at least 70

civilians.

In the days since the attacks, U.S.-Russian relations have worsened and the tension was acknowledged Wednesday by top diplomats of both countries, who met in Moscow to try and work through differences on a number of major foreign policy issues, including Ukraine and North Korea.

At Wednesday’s meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Lavrov confirmed the phone line had been suspended. But he also said Russian President Vladimir Putin was open to re-establishing it.

He named two conditions. One was the United States reaffirm it is committed to attacking the Nusra Front, an al-Qaida-affiliated terrorist group that is also fighting to remove Assad from power. The second condition was that the United States conduct no additional strikes on government targets.

Marine Corps' first female tank officer ready for duty

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps' first female armor officer will soon report to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, where she will become the first woman to lead a Marine tank platoon.

On Wednesday, 2nd Lt. Lillian R. Polatchek graduated from the Army-led Basic Armor Officer Leaders Course at Fort Benning, Ga., said Marine Capt. Joshua Pena, a spokesman for Marine Training and Education Command. Polatchek was the top graduate in the class of 67 soldiers and Marines.

Polatchek downplayed her history-making graduation in a video released Wednesday by the Marine Corps. "Ultimately, I am sort of just looking at it as another Marine graduating from this course," she said.

Soldiers and Marines must complete the 19-week course to become armor officers. Polatchek's graduating class had only five Marines, but each graduated in the top 20 percent of the class, including the top three students, according to a Marine Corps statement.

Polatchek credited her previous training in Marine Officer Candidate School and

the Basic School, where newly commissioned Marine officers are taught leadership skills, for preparing her to do well in armor school. "We as a group [of Marines] did a really great job and that reflects on the class rankings," she said. "So it shows the success of all of our training up to this point and then how we worked well together as a group thanks to our instructors here."

Polatchek is a native of New York and a 2012 graduate of Connecticut College, according to the Marines statement. She joined the Marines in 2015 and attended officer candidate school. After completing the Basic School she elected to attempt armor school.

She is the third female Marine officer to complete training to serve in a traditionally all-male, front-line combat position. The Pentagon opened all military jobs previously closed to women in April 2016.

Two female Marines completed artillery officer training in May of last year and are both serving with the 11th Marines at Camp Pendleton in California, Pena said. Two female Marine officers this month will begin the Marine's Infantry Officer Course in an attempt to become the first women to serve as infantry officers, Pena said. More

than 30 female Marine officers had washed out from the course previously.

There are no other women, either officers or enlisted, awaiting Marines' armor training, Pena said. No enlisted women are serving in an armor position, he said. Four enlisted female Marines have completed infantry training and are serving in infantry units at Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton.

Pena said additional enlisted female Marines are expected to complete infantry training and join combat units in the near future.

It was not immediately clear Thursday when Polatchek would check in to her new unit, the Marine's 2nd Tank Battalion, or when she would take command of a tank platoon, spokesmen for Marine headquarters and the II Marine Expeditionary Force said.

Polatchek said she was looking forward to leading Marines.

"A tank platoon has 16 Marines, and that small leadership-size really gives you, as a platoon commander, the ability to directly work with the Marines you're leading," she said.

"I'm excited to take everything we've learned [in armor training] and get a chance to go out to the fleet and apply it."

Destroyers arrive in Hawaii

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR-HICKAM, Hawaii — A surface action group of Navy destroyers has arrived in Hawaii ahead of a deployment to the Asia-Pacific region.

Deployment of the USS Sterett and USS Dewey from their San Diego homeport will expand U.S. Pacific Command's options as it monitors North Korea's nuclear weapons program development and China's military actions in the region.

Standing aboard Sterett's deck, Pacific Fleet commander Adm. Scott Swift told sailors that readiness was on the minds of "so many of us," following the Navy's April 6 Tomahawk missile strike on a Syrian airfield and the USS Carl Vinson strike group's deployment in response to ongoing weapons tests by North Korea.

Calling the Navy the world's "911 force," Swift said that rapid responses sent a message to America's allies, while demonstrating resolve to those who challenge international norms and rules with "coercive activities" and "bullying."

"It's about setting the standard and setting an example of expectations," Swift said.

The deployment marks the second year of a program that allows the 3rd Fleet's ships to remain under its command, even after they cross the International Date Line. Previously, the Japan-headquartered 7th Fleet gained command of ships in the Western Pacific.

During transit to Hawaii, the two ships completed training and certification exercises designed to prepare it for operations in the Western Pacific, which include patrols and maritime security operations with regional navies.

Airman held in stabbing of servicemember

Stars and Stripes

AVIANO AIR BASE, Italy — A U.S. airman is in custody after allegedly stabbing a fellow servicemember in a base dormitory early Tuesday morning, Italian media reported.

Italian news agency ANSA identified the alleged attacker as Cameron Ashley Owens, 19, from Georgia, who is with the 31st Operations Support Squadron.

It did not identify the victim except to say she was a 21-year-

old woman. No sources were cited, as is customary in Italian media reports.

Capt. Thomas Barger, chief of public affairs for the 31st Fighter Wing, confirmed Thursday that a servicemember was stabbed in her dorm room on base about 3:45 a.m. Tuesday. He said other servicemembers helped her and she was later taken to the hospital in Pordenone with non-life-threatening injuries.

According to the ANSA report, Owens is accused of stabbing the sleeping victim in the

throat, face and arms with a kitchen knife. Her screams awoke others.

The website Il Friuli.it said the suspect fled the scene after the stabbing and was identified by Carabinieri officers who reviewed video surveillance footage. He was later arrested.

Barger declined to release the identity of the victim or suspected attacker or to provide more information about the attack. He said the suspect is now in U.S. custody.

Jordan: Green Berets' killer to be tried

The Washington Post

After months of publicly defending the actions of a Jordanian guard who opened fire last November on a convoy of U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, killing three, Jordanian government officials have admitted that the shooter did not follow the military's protocol and will face prosecution.

Dana Daoud, a Jordanian Embassy spokeswoman, told *The Washington Post* that M'aarek Abu Tayeh — a member of the

Jordanian king's elite Hashemite force — will be "tried in a military court," but she declined to comment on the nature of the charges against him or when a trial might occur.

"The incident is being investigated as a crime, as such it is clear from a review of the latest available evidence that M'aarek Abu Tayeh was not following Jordanian rules of engagement," Daoud said. "The formal investigation will make that final determination with certainty."

The sudden reversal raises

new questions about what led Abu Tayeh to attack a U.S. convoy in broad daylight at a checkpoint at King Faisal Air Base on Nov. 4.

Jordanian officials have called the incident a "tragic misunderstanding" that started after Abu Tayeh heard a loud noise that led him to believe the base was being attacked. After viewing surveillance video of the incident, the slain soldiers' family members have started employing a different phrase: "coldblooded murder."

The incident occurred in a country friendly to the United States, hundreds of miles from the nearest war zone. The Green Berets were working for a CIA program to train moderate Syrian fighters when they were killed.

A military investigation contradicted Jordanian claims, concluding that investigators could find no evidence of a loud noise before Abu Tayeh opened fire.

Daoud said Abu Tayeh remains in Jordanian custody.

Report rips DC VA medical center

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A government watchdog found the Department of Veterans Affairs medical center in the nation's capital was putting veterans at "unnecessary risk" by failing to sterilize storage areas and running out of various medical equipment, according to a report released Wednesday.

Quickly after the report came out, VA officials relieved the Washington hospital's medical director and named an interim director. They named Charles Faselis to the position Wednesday. By Thursday, the appointment changed, and retired Army Col. Lawrence Connell was announced as the temporary medical director.

Faselis has been chief of staff at the Washington VA since April last year. Connell is a senior adviser at the agency.

"After further consideration, it was determined that naming an acting director from outside the facility would allow leadership to concentrate on addressing the many challenges identified in the [Office of Inspector General] report, without compromising the ongoing internal review," read a statement Thursday from VA officials.

The VA did not name the demoted medical director in its

announcement, but the medical center's website lists Brian Hawkins as holding the position since 2011.

VA Inspector General Michael Missal released the findings, though the investigation began only late last month and is ongoing — a move that is unusual for the office. It states that 18 of 25 sterile storage areas for medical supplies were dirty, and more than \$150 million in equipment is unaccounted for.

Senior leadership at the VA's veterans health administration has known of the issues "for some time" but took no effective action, the report states. Before VA Secretary David Shulkin was appointed in February, he led the veterans health administration as undersecretary.

During visits as recent as last week, inspectors found the hospital had run out of oxygen tubing, bone cement for prosthetics and devices placed on patients to prevent blood clots during surgery, among other things. When the medical center ran out of bloodlines for dialysis patients, it had to borrow them from a private hospital.

The issues have persisted since at least 2014, the report states. Since January of that year, the hospital recorded 194 patient safety reports related to the unavailability of supplies.

Homeland Security looks to assemble deportation force

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is quickly identifying ways to assemble the nationwide deportation force that President Donald Trump promised on the campaign trail as he railed against the dangers posed by illegal immigration.

An internal Homeland Security Department assessment obtained by *The Washington Post* shows the agency has already found 33,000 more detention beds to house immigrants living in the country illegally, opened discussions with dozens of local police forces that could be empowered with enforcement authority and identified where construction of Trump's border wall could begin.

The agency also is considering ways to speed up the hiring of hundreds of new Customs and Border Patrol officers.

But those plans could be held up by the prohibitive costs outlined in the report and resistance in Congress, where lawmakers are balking at approving billions in spending on the wall and additional border security measures.

Administration officials said the plans are preliminary, but

the assessment offers a glimpse of the department's behind-the-scenes planning to carry out the two executive orders Trump signed in January to boost deportations and strengthen border enforcement.

Immigrant-rights advocates called the plans an unnecessary waste of money and resources that are aimed at scaring the nation's 11 million immigrants living in the U.S. illegally, many of whom have lived in the country for more than a decade.

Although Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly has said the DHS is not pursuing mass deportations, Trump's executive orders broadly expanded the pool of immigrants who are deemed a priority for removal.

Congressional Democrats, who have opposed Trump's immigration agenda, have expressed skepticism Congress would agree to approve funding for many of the expensive initiatives.

Republican leaders have proposed delaying a decision on Trump's initial request of \$1.5 billion for the wall and an additional \$2.6 billion for more border security until after a new spending bill is approved this month.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police say man stole purse during first date

AZ PHOENIX — Police said a Phoenix man was arrested for allegedly stealing a woman's purse during a first date.

They said David Harlow, 38, met the woman on an online dating site and the two talked for several weeks before meeting in person at a Phoenix resort.

During the date, the unidentified woman went to the restroom and asked Harlow to watch her belongings. When she got back, Harlow and her purse were reportedly gone.

Police said Harlow allegedly took the victim's credit card to a casino and tried to withdraw money from several banks. He was booked into jail on suspicion of felony theft, theft of a credit card and taking the identity of another person.

Mascot Husky has role in marriage proposal

CT HARTFORD — The Siberian Husky that serves as the mascot for the University of Connecticut has helped two alumni make a love connection.

Jonathan served as wingman Monday when Daniel Bronko, 23, surprised his girlfriend, Holly Korona, 27, on a trip back to campus with a wedding proposal. The pair had met in 2013 while studying elementary education and working at the UConn recreation center.

Bronko brought Korona back to campus Monday on the pretense of visiting his younger brother, Jordan, who is a senior at UConn. He took Korona to a favorite spot by Mirror Lake on campus, then dropped to one knee when the dog showed up with the engagement ring attached to his collar.

She said yes and received a kiss from Bronko and a lick on the face from Jonathan.

Treasurer won't cash 'sexual favors' check

MT HAVRE — A Montana resident who wrote "sexual favors" in the memo line on a check to pay his property taxes is complaining that the check hasn't been cashed.

Scott Dion, of Havre, says he sent the check for \$745.77 to the local treasurer last November.

Dion told the Billings Gazette that tax checks he sent in the past with similar memo line notes have been cashed.

Dion's lawyer sent a letter to Hill County Treasurer Sandy Brown, saying that not cashing Dion's check amounts to official misconduct and the treasurer should be prosecuted.

County Attorney Jessica Cole-Hodgkinson declined to comment on Dion's situation specifically but said the treasurer can't cash a check if it isn't clear what the funds should be applied to.

Judge says no permit needed for state hunt

ID BOISE — A federal judge has ruled that organizers of a wolf- and coyote-shooting contest in east-central Idaho don't need a permit from the U.S. Forest Service.

U.S. District Court Judge Ronald Bush said Idaho for Wildlife's Predator Hunting Contest is not a commercial event because it doesn't charge participation fees and under Forest Service regulations doesn't need a special use permit.

Bush says that because a permit isn't needed, the Forest Service isn't violating environmental laws or its own policies in allowing the event as envi-

ronmental groups contended in a lawsuit.

Dog opens doors to escape from hospital

VA STAFFORD — A dog who escaped from a Virginia animal hospital after opening several doors has been found and reunited with his owner.

Travis Campbell told news outlets that his family was boarding their 10-year-old Great Pyrenees named General at the Aquia-Garrisonville Animal Hospital in Stafford while they vacationed in Virginia Beach when the dog left the clinic early Monday.

Surveillance video shows the 124-pound dog unlatching the door to his kennel and opening a second door before wandering down a hallway. Footage then shows General using his mouth to open another door. The dog was seen in an office area before opening yet another door leading to a parking lot behind the building and walking out.

Campbell said General was eventually found at a home nearby.

5-foot python found in room by hotel worker

MA WORCESTER — A worker at a Massachusetts hotel got a slithery surprise while cleaning a room — a 5-foot ball python left in a drawer.

The Telegram & Gazette reported that staff at the Marriott Residence Inn in Worcester found the snake last week and called animal control. Animal control took the snake to a pet supply store.

General manager Rod Dzivasen said the snake appeared to be in good health.

Officials don't think the snake was in the room for long. Po-

lice said the person renting the room and believed to be the snake's owner had checked out the prior day.

Teen tweets in bid to earn chicken nuggets

NV RENO — A teen's Twitter stunt to win a year of free chicken nuggets from Wendy's might become the platform's most retweeted post of all time.

Carter Wilkinson asked the fast food chain on Twitter last week how many retweets it would take for him to get free nuggets for a year. Wendy's replied, "18 million." The 16-year-old from Nevada took up the challenge, writing: "Consider it done."

Wilkinson's screenshot of the exchange has since been retweeted nearly 2.5 million times and is getting closer to the all-time retweet mark of nearly 3.3 million, held by Ellen DeGeneres' viral tweet from the 2014 Oscars.

Video shows robber on bike dropping money

PA YORK — Police have released video of a man suspected of robbing a Pennsylvania credit union that shows him dropping some of the money while bicycling away from the crime scene.

Springettsbury Township police said the man robbed the Members First Credit Union on April 6. The video is from a security camera on a business on a nearby street, about 10 minutes after the robbery.

The video clip posted on the police department's Facebook page shows the suspect riding down the sidewalk and dropping cash before he stops, gets off the bike, and returns to scoop up the loot.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Bulls, Pacers secure spots

Associated Press

Dwyane Wade is going back to the playoffs. The Miami Heat aren't going with him.

The field for the NBA postseason is set, with Wade and the Chicago Bulls claiming one of the last two available spots on the final night of the regular season. The other went to the Indiana Pacers, who downed the Atlanta Hawks.

The Bulls and Pacers winning eliminated the Heat, who finished 41-41 after beating Washington. Miami was 11-30 in the first half of the season, then 30-11 in the second half of the season.

And Wade, in his first season with the Bulls, is going to the playoffs for the 12th time.

"Now the fun begins," Bulls coach Fred Hoi-berg said.

So now the matchups are set.

Boston wrapped up the No. 1 seed with a win over Milwaukee. The Celtics are the sixth different franchise to grab the No. 1 seed in the East in the past six seasons — Chicago did in 2012, followed by Miami, Indiana, Atlanta, Cleveland and now Boston.

The Celtics will meet the Bulls in Round 1.

Defending NBA champion Cleveland gets Indiana in the East first round, and they'll play the first game of the postseason Saturday afternoon. Cavaliers star LeBron James has played in 51 first-round games in his career — and his teams in Cleveland and Miami are 44-7 in those contests.

Only two of the eight first-round matchups were undecided going into Wednesday.

In the Western Conference, No. 1 Golden State will open against No. 8 Portland, No. 2 San Antonio faces No. 7 Memphis, No. 3 Houston gets No. 6 Oklahoma City and the Los Angeles Clippers and Utah Jazz will meet in the last quarterfinal.

Home-court for the Clippers-Jazz series was the last remaining unknown part of the playoff schedule — and it went to the Clippers, who pulled away in the second half to beat Sacramento and lock up No. 4.

In the East, two series were determined before the final night. No. 3 Toronto will play No. 6 Milwaukee, and No. 4 Washington will meet No. 5 Atlanta.

Heat win, still miss playoffs

Associated Press

MIAMI — Goran Dragic's eyes were red long after the final buzzer. Willie Reed sat at his locker, overcome by emotion. Some players shed tears. Others yelled in frustration.

The Miami Heat won.

The season ended anyway.

The NBA's turnaround story of the season ended without a trip to the playoffs. The Heat beat the Washington Wizards 110-102 on Wednesday night, but finished No. 9 in the Eastern Conference after Chicago and Indiana won to grab the last two remaining postseason spots.

"I don't know if I've ever wanted something more for a team," an emotional Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "When any one of us wanted to get into team sports, it was to be around a team like this. ... The hardest thing for any of us to wrap our minds around is that we don't have practice tomorrow at 12. It just doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like the basketball gods shined down on us."

They went 11-30 in the first 41 games, second-worst in the league.

They went 30-11 in the final 41 games, second-best in the league.

They'll be going nowhere else. They finished at 41-41, their first time at .500 since starting 2-2. Dragic said it was the worst feeling he had after a game since his homeland of Slovenia lost while hosting the European championship quarterfinals in 2013.

That was for country. This was for a team that has been together for seven months.

"If we had made the playoffs, we would have been a really tough opponent for any team," Dragic said.

The Heat became the first team in NBA history to be 19 games under .500 and wind up winning 41 games. But the next result of note for Miami will come at the May 16 draft lottery.

Celtics wrap up No. 1 seed in East

Associated Press

BOSTON — Isaiah Thomas was able to watch from the bench while the Celtics finished off the Milwaukee Bucks in the regular-season finale.

The Boston star got a little bit of rest — and the No. 1 seed he wanted, too.

"It's very special. For me it is," Thomas said after scoring 13 points with eight assists in a 112-94 victory over the resting Bucks on Wednesday night. "I've never been a No. 1 seed. I'm excited now."

Gerald Green scored 18 points, 10 of them in a 25-2 fourth-quarter run that put the game away. A few minutes earlier, Cleveland lost its finale against Toronto to guarantee Boston home-court advantage through the Eastern Conference finals.

Raptors 98, Cavaliers 83: Jonas Valanciunas made his first career three-pointer and visiting Toronto closed the regular season with a win over Cleveland, which didn't play its "Big 3" All-Stars so they're playoff ready.

Bulls 112, Nets 73: Jimmy Butler scored 25 points, and

host Chicago beat depleted Brooklyn in the regular-season finale to clinch an Eastern Conference playoff spot.

Pacers 104, Hawks 86: Paul George finished with 32 points and 11 rebounds, Jeff Teague added 19 points and Indiana clinched a playoff spot, beating visiting Atlanta.

Knicks 114, 76ers 113: Carmelo Anthony scored 17 points after deciding to play in what could be his final game with New York, and the Knicks beat host Philadelphia.

Rockets 123, Timberwolves 118: James Harden had his 22nd triple-double with 27 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists to help Houston wrap up the regular season with a victory over visiting Minnesota.

The MVP contender became the first player in NBA history to finish the regular season with at least 2,000 points (2,356), 900 assists (907) and 600 rebounds (659).

Mavericks 100, Grizzlies 93: Nicolas Brussino and Devin Harris each scored 15 points and visiting Dallas snapped a five-game losing streak with a victory over Memphis.

Nuggets 111, Thunder

105: Russell Westbrook got an MVP endorsement from Oscar Robertson before the gamem but host Oklahoma City's star guard only played the first half of Wednesday's loss to Denver.

Magic 113, Pistons 109: Aaron Gordon had 32 points and 12 rebounds, Elfrid Payton scored 21 points and host Orlando overcame a late-run by Detroit to win its season-finale.

Jazz 101, Spurs 97: Gordon Hayward scored 14 and Utah held on for a win over visiting San Antonio.

Clippers 115, Kings 95: DeAndre Jordan had 18 points and 17 rebounds, and host Los Angeles defeated Sacramento to clinch the No. 4 seed in the West and home-court advantage in the playoffs.

Warriors 109, Lakers 94: Kevin Durant had 29 points, eight rebounds and five assists in his final playoff tuneup, and Golden State beat visiting Los Angeles in both teams' final regular-season game.

Pelicans 103, Trail Blazers 100: Jordan Crawford had 15 points and New Orleans snapped a five-game losing streak with a victory over playoff-bound host Portland.

Cards top Nats to avoid 3-game sweep

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Going up against the 2016 NL Cy Young winner and facing the prospect of stumbling to their worst start in 20 years, the St. Louis Cardinals played their best game of the young season.

Mike Leake outpitched Max Scherzer, Stephen Piscotty homered and had five RBIs, and the Cardinals beat the Washington Nationals 6-1 on Wednesday to avoid a three-game sweep.

After yielding 22 runs in the first two games of the series, St. Louis dodged its first 2-7 start since 1997.

“Leake did a tremendous job on the mound and we played good defense,” Piscotty said. “It was a good win, and we needed it.”

Leake (1-1) gave up four hits, struck out seven and walked none over seven shut-out innings. The right-hander

allowed hits to the first two batters, then picked off a runner before getting 19 straight outs. The streak ended when Daniel Murphy singled with two outs in the seventh.

By that time, St. Louis had taken a 3-0 lead against Scherzer, who yielded only one earned run. He did, however, throw three wild pitches — two in the third inning — after tossing only two all last year while going 20-7.

Scherzer (1-1) allowed three runs, four hits and two walks in six innings. He struck out 10, the 50th time in his career he reached double figures in strikeouts.

“At the end of the day, even when you get punched in the face, you still do some things well,” Scherzer said. “I was able to get a lot of swings and misses and was able to get my cut slider into lefties really well.

“Other times, I pitched in-

effectively. This doesn't feel great, but I'm in a situation where I'm ready to go forward with my next start and pitch well.”

With Leake leading the way, the Cardinals rebounded from a three-game skid in which they were outscored 30-9.

“It's ideal,” Leake said of his performance. “It's what you ask for from a starting pitcher after you've been beat down for a couple games.”

Leake permitted only two runners past first base and reduced his ERA to 0.60.

“What a great day — seven shutout innings against this team,” manager Mike Matheny said.

After Leake was pulled, Adam Eaton hit an RBI single in the eighth inning and Washington put runners at the corners with two outs before Brett Cecil got Bryce Harper to line out to third.

Piscotty's drive in the ninth

ended any remaining suspense. He also had run-scoring singles in the first and fifth innings in tying his career high for RBIs.

St. Louis used a walk and a double by Piscotty to go up 1-0 in the first inning.

In the bottom half, Eaton doubled and took third on a single by Anthony Rendon. Not long after that, a replay requested by the Cardinals revealed that Leake picked off Rendon.

“That's a game changer,” Matheny said.

Nationals manager Dusty Baker agreed, noting, “We had him on the ropes and then the pickoff.”

Leake subsequently struck out Harper and retired Murphy on a comebacker.

St. Louis took advantage of an error by shortstop Wilmer Difo to score two unearned runs in the fifth.

Romine's grand slam helps Tigers rally past Twins

Associated Press

DETROIT — The moment he made contact, Andrew Romine could tell he had a chance at his first career grand slam.

“I could feel it. I hit it on the barrel,” the Detroit utilityman said. “It was a matter of whether it was going to stay fair. Once I realized that, there was a lot of adrenaline going on.”

Romine cleared the bases in the fourth inning, and the Tigers rallied from an early three-run deficit to beat the Minnesota Twins 5-3 on Wednesday. Detroit trailed 3-0 before scoring five runs in the fourth, with Romine delivering the key hit when his drive to right field easily cleared the wall to give the Tigers the lead.

Michael Fulmer (1-0) allowed three runs and four hits in six innings, walking one and striking out seven. Detroit's maligned bullpen pitched three hitless innings, with Alex Wilson working the final two for

his third career save and first this season.

With closer Francisco Rodriguez unavailable after pitching the previous two days, Wilson walked two in the ninth but retired Eduardo Escobar on a flyball to end it.

Kyle Gibson (0-1) allowed five runs and four hits in four innings.

White Sox 2, Indians 1: Derek Holland held Cleveland hitless until the sixth inning and late fill-in Matt Davidson had a two-run single for visiting Chicago.

Yankees 8, Rays 4: Jordan Montgomery showed power and poise in his major league debut after allowing Rickie Weeks' two-run homer in the first inning, and host New York rallied past sloppy Tampa Bay to get back to .500.

Padres 6, Rockies 0: Zach Lee and four relievers combined on a three-hitter, Ryan Schimpf homered as part of a four-run first inning and visiting San

Diego blanked Colorado.

Reds 9, Pirates 2: Reds rookie Amir Garrett threw another gem, taking a shutout into the seventh inning and leading Cincinnati over host Pittsburgh for a three-game sweep.

Mets 5, Phillies 4: Zack Wheeler earned his first win in 2½ years, Michael Conforto hit a solo homer and visiting New York held off Philadelphia to complete a three-game sweep.

Brewers 2, Blue Jays 0: Chase Anderson and two relievers combined on a four-hitter, Jonathan Villar homered and Milwaukee handed host Toronto its fifth straight loss.

Braves 5, Marlins 4: Ender Inciarte hit two home runs and Tyler Flowers had a go-ahead single in the ninth inning to help visiting Atlanta break a five-game losing streak by rallying past Miami.

Dodgers 2, Cubs 0: Brandon McCarthy pitched four-hit ball over six innings, Andrew Toles hit his first leadoff homer and

Los Angeles blanked host Chicago after its players received their championship rings.

Orioles 12, Red Sox 5: Trey Mancini hit two of visiting Baltimore's five home runs, all in the first three innings against Boston.

Athletics 8, Royals 3: Andrew Triggs pitched six shutout innings, Jed Lowrie drove in three runs and Oakland defeated host Kansas City.

Rangers 8, Angels 3: At Anaheim, Calif., Joey Gallo hit a go-ahead, two-run triple in the fifth, and Texas prevented a third straight late-inning comeback by Los Angeles.

Astros 10, Mariners 5: Jose Altuve hit three singles and drew two walks, helping Houston overcome an early five-run deficit against host Seattle.

Giants 6, Diamondbacks 2: Matt Cain allowed one run over five-plus innings for his first win since last August in San Francisco's victory over visiting Arizona.

Edmundson scores in OT to lift Blues

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Joel Edmundson slowly skated away from the slot after his overtime winner for St. Louis, as if the 23-year-old defenseman had done this several times before.

Keeping calm and staying steady were the keys to victory for Jake Allen and the Blues in weathering all that pressure from the Minnesota Wild.

Edmundson scored for St. Louis at 17:48 of the extra period, Allen made a career-high 51 saves and the Blues stole Game 1 of their first-round playoff series from the Wild with a 2-1 victory Wednesday night.

"Trying to play it cool, like I do it every day," said Edmundson, who has six goals in 153 NHL games, including the playoffs.

Blues star Vladimir Tarasenko was quiet most of the night until he spun past Mikko Koivu, drove into a crowd and lost control. The puck threaded through the Wild defense like a well-timed pass to Edmundson, who knocked in the second postseason goal of his career.

"The Tarasenko guy, you can control him for the whole game, and then he gets the one chance," Wild coach Bruce Boudreau lamented.

Zach Parise tied the game with 22.7 seconds left in regulation for the Wild, who'd never had a goalie make that many saves against them in their 16-year history.

"We can't leave him like this to make unreal saves five to seven times a game," Tarasenko said. "We need to play better defense and play on the same page."

The Wild outshot the Blues 52-26 and held a 47-33 advantage on faceoffs.

"That's playoff hockey. Sometimes it's a strange game," said Wild goalie Devan Dubnyk, who made 24 saves.

Allen, the catalyst for the midseason turnaround by the Blues after Mike Yeo took over as coach, sure didn't lose his touch. Diving, reaching and sliding for pucks from start to finish, the 26-year-old was oh, so close to his first career postseason shutout. Parise spoiled it with his one-timer off a tic-

tac-toe feed from Koivu and Mikael Granlund with Dubnyk pulled for the final minute.

"I think we know that we have to be better," Yeo said. "That's the thing: We can't just rely on Jake to have a performance like that."

Sharks 3, Oilers 2 (OT): Melker Karlsson scored at 3:22 of overtime and visiting San Jose came back to beat Edmonton in Game 1 of their Western Conference series.

The Oilers jumped out to a 2-0 first-period lead only for the veteran Sharks to come back and tie the game with just over 15 minutes to play.

Milan Lucic and Oscar Klefbom scored for the Oilers.

Joel Ward and Paul Martin scored for San Jose.

Penguins 3, Blue Jackets 1: Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 31 shots in a surprise start in place of injured Matt Murray and host Pittsburgh opened its Stanley Cup title defense with a victory over Columbus.

Phil Kessel had a goal and an assist for Pittsburgh. Nick Bonino and Bryan Rust also scored, and Evgeni Malkin

assisted on Rust and Kessel's goals in his first game back after missing the final three weeks of the regular season because of an upper-body injury.

Matt Calvert scored for Columbus in the third period, and Sergei Bobrovsky made 26 saves.

Rangers 2, Canadiens 0: Tanner Glass scored in the first period and Henrik Lundqvist made 31 saves to help visiting New York beat Montreal in Game 1 of their first-round series.

Michael Grabner added an empty-net goal with 1:10 left.

Bruins 2, Senators 1: Brad Marchand broke a tie with 2:33 left and visiting Boston held on to beat Ottawa in Game 1 of their first-round series.

Marchand scored off the rebound of Patrice Bergeron's shot.

Frank Vatrano added a goal for Boston in his first NHL playoff game, and Tuukka Rask made 26 saves. Bobby Ryan scored for Ottawa, and Craig Anderson stopped 23 shots.

Lighter workload has Capitals primed for longer run

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — Tired of rolling over the NHL in the regular season and falling short in the playoffs, the Washington Capitals went to great lengths to make sure their best players won't be tired this time around.

Alex Ovechkin saw the lowest ice time of his career, Nicklas Backstrom the lowest since his rookie year and Braden Holtby played fewer minutes than he ever has as a starting goaltender in an 82-game season. Balancing out the minutes and workload was an organizational effort to gear up for the playoffs and give the stacked Capitals the best chance to finally lift the Stanley Cup.

"We tried different things," Ovechkin said Tuesday. "I think right now we're in better

shape than we were last year and mentally-wise, as well, because you can see we have four lines who can create and four lines who can be out there and get the job done, it doesn't matter which situation."

To prove the plan worked, the Capitals will have to get the job done against the Toronto Maple Leafs in the first round beginning Thursday and advance past the second round for the first time in the Ovechkin era. But two months before the Cup is handed out, there's already evidence that Washington is primed to win the first title in franchise history.

After averaging 21:18 in his first 11 NHL seasons, Ovechkin played 18:22 and ramped that up over the course of the year. His 1,506 total minutes were the fewest he's played in

an 82-game season and yet he played in all of them.

The Russian superstar had 14 points in his final 15 regular-season games and contributed with some big hits and plays that don't show up on the scoresheet.

"The biggest thing is that he looks fresh, he looks fast and he looks like Alex," coach Barry Trotz said. "When he sets the tone and he's saying, 'OK, I'm here and you're going to have to play against me all night,' the guy on the other side is going: 'Oh boy. He's engaged and he's going to be handful.' And when he's a handful, that's really good for the Washington Capitals."

What's really good for the Capitals is that Ovechkin has helped Backstrom and fellow linemate T.J. Oshie play better

along the way. At even-strength and on the power play, with the trade-deadline addition of Kevin Shattenkirk, the Capitals have the high-end skill to deserve being favored to come out of the Eastern Conference.

To do that they'll need the best from Holtby, the reigning Vezina Trophy winner with the best playoff numbers of any active goaltender who started 63 games this season, three fewer than last year and nine fewer than 2014-15. Holtby faced 112 fewer shots, and less wear and tear could be the difference if the Capitals make an extended run.

"Holts, I think his workload is much better," Trotz said. "We had the five-day break and just down the stretch with the number of games, strategically we got him up to where we wanted to."