

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## General: MOAB decision made on ground

By E.B. BOYD  
AND ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL  
*Start and Stripes*

KABUL, Afghanistan — The recommendation to drop the largest non-nuclear bomb ever deployed in combat on a militant stronghold in eastern Afghanistan came from decision makers on the ground, not Washington, the top U.S. military commander in the country said Friday.

Gen. John Nicholson said the strike in which a 21,600-pound GBU-43B, or massive ordnance air blast bomb, was dropped on caves and tunnels used by the militants was part of a larger initiative to clear Afghanistan of the Islamic State fighters this year.

“Since early March, we’ve been conducting offensive operations into southern Nangarhar,” Nicholson said, referring to the eastern province where hundreds of Islamic State-Khorasan Province fighters have

been holed up. “However, this was the first time we encountered an extensive obstacle to our progress.”

Nicholson said militants had taken over a network of tunnels and caves in Nangarhar province. They used the base to attack Afghan and U.S. forces involved in Operation Hamza, a multimonth effort to defeat the group.

The militants also surrounded the caves with “a belt of IEDs,” or improvised explosive devices, Nicholson said, making it difficult to overtake the stronghold. A Special Forces soldier was killed on April 8 as part of an offensive operation there.

Afghan Defense Ministry officials said the bomb, a 30-foot-long munition with 11 tons of explosives, annihilated the encampment. It killed 36 fighters and destroyed a large number of weapons.

Questions have been raised as to whether the operation might have been directed from Wash-

ington as a show of force, especially as it comes on the heels of the decision to bomb a Syrian airfield a week ago.

Nicholson’s comments seemed to indicate that was not the case.

“It was the right time to use it tactically against the right target on the battlefield,” Nicholson said. “It’s enabled us to resume our offensive operations in the south.”

The bomb has a milewide blast radius, and U.S. officials said care had been taken to avoid civilian casualties. The militants’ camp is in a remote area away from civilian centers.

A U.S. spokesman in Kabul said a damage assessment was taking place, but the military did not have any information on civilian casualties, and Afghan officials said none were killed. Initial reports on social media indicated some civilians may have been killed, but local officials said they did not know of any deaths.

Afghanistan’s chief executive,

Abdullah Abdullah, praised the strike. “Joint nature of the operation shows our common resolve to eliminate #ISIS and terror safe havens from our country,” he said on Twitter.

But some prominent Afghan leaders criticized the operation. Former President Hamid Karzai, the coalition’s primary partner from 2001 to 2014, accused the U.S. of using his country as a “testing ground” for new weapons.

Some analysts questioned the need to use a bomb of such destructive power given the group’s lack of momentum.

“The threat posed by ISIS in Afghanistan just doesn’t seem that large that you would unleash whatever you had against them,” said Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

The Air Force estimates each MOAB costs about \$170,000 to build, according to The Associated Press. It hasn’t said how much it cost to develop the bomb or how many of them exist.

## North Korea says it’s ready for war if US wants one

*Associated Press*

PYONGYANG, North Korea — President Donald Trump’s tweets are adding fuel to a “vicious cycle” of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea’s vice foreign minister told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview Friday. The official added that if the U.S. shows any sign of “reckless” military aggression, Pyongyang is ready to launch a pre-emptive strike of its own.

Vice Minister Han Song Ryol said Pyongyang has determined the Trump administration is “more vicious and more aggressive” than that of Barack Obama. He added that North

Korea will keep building up its nuclear arsenal in “quality and quantity” and said Pyongyang is ready to go to war if that’s what Trump wants.

Tensions between Pyongyang and Washington go back to President Harry Truman and the 1950-53 Korean War, which ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty. But the heat has been rising rapidly since Trump took office in January.

This year’s joint war games between the U.S. and South Korean militaries are the biggest so far — the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier has been diverted back to the waters off Korea after heading for Australia, and

U.S. satellite imagery suggests the North could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time.

Pyongyang recently tested a ballistic missile and claims it is close to perfecting an intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear warhead that could attack the U.S. mainland.

Many experts believe that at its current pace of testing, North Korea could reach that potentially game-changing milestone within a few years — under Trump’s watch as president. Despite reports that Washington is considering military action if the North goes ahead with another nuclear test, Han did not

rule out the possibility of a test in the near future.

“That is something that our headquarters decides,” he said in Pyongyang, which is now gearing up for a major holiday — and possibly a big military parade — on Saturday. “At a time and at a place where the headquarters deems necessary, it will take place.”

The North conducted two such tests last year alone. The first was of what it claims to have been a hydrogen bomb, and the second was its most powerful ever. Expectations are high the North may put its newest missiles on display during Saturday’s parade.

## Russia, Iran, Syria issue warning to US

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia, Syria and Iran strongly warned the United States Friday against launching new strikes on Syria and called for an international probe into last week's chemical attack there.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who hosted his Iranian and Syrian counterparts at a trilateral meeting in Moscow, denounced last week's U.S. attack on Syria as a "flagrant violation" of international law and warned that any further such action would entail "grave consequences not only for regional but global security."

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem said the meeting sent a "strong message" to Washington. Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif emphasized that the participants warned that any unilateral action by the U.S. is unacceptable.

The U.S. has blamed the Syrian government for launching a deadly chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun that killed over 80 people on April 4, and responded by striking a Syrian air base. Russia has alleged that the victims were killed by toxic agents released from a rebel chemical arsenal and warned against putting the blame on Damascus until an independent inquiry has been conducted.

Moscow vetoed a Western draft U.N. resolution Wednesday, saying it failed to mention the need to inspect the area of the attack.

Lavrov on Friday accused the U.S. and its allies of what he described as attempts to stymie an international probe into the attack. He expressed strong skepticism about a preliminary investigation conducted by the U.N. chemical weapons watchdog, saying that its experts have failed to visit the site, and it has remained unclear to Russia where the samples have been taken and how they have been analyzed.

# Marine pleads guilty to lying about sexual misconduct case

The Washington Post

The Marine's wrists and ankles were shackled Thursday night as two officers escorted him down a long hallway toward the car that would take him to his cell.

Maj. Mark Thompson had finally admitted he'd been lying for years about a sexual misconduct case.

Earlier that day, Thompson faced a military judge in a courtroom at Marine Corps Base Quantico and pleaded guilty to charges of making a false statement and of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. For his crimes, Thompson was expelled from the Corps he'd served for two decades and sentenced to 90 days confinement.

Thompson fought for years to prove he was innocent of a crime — having sex with two young women while they were students at the Naval Academy — that he knew he had committed.

He stood by as a friend and

fellow Marine, Maj. Michael Pretus, lied for him at his first trial. And he lied under oath to an administrative board deciding whether he should be boot-camp from the Marine Corps.

But after all of that — after being convicted of sexual misconduct and still managing to save his career and a generous pension — it still wasn't enough. Thompson brought his story to The Washington Post in late 2014, a decision that would ultimately lead him to the courtroom this week.

Thompson's punitive discharge will be suspended, allowing him to collect retirement benefits if he meets the terms of the agreement. But his retirement will be reviewed by the secretary of the Navy.

What led Thompson to Thursday's plea hearing began in 2011, when he had sex with two female midshipmen, including Stadler. She testified she and Thompson had been in an ongoing relationship. The

other woman told the court she'd been raped.

At his court-martial in 2013, a jury acquitted him of the sexual assault charge but found him guilty of five lesser offenses, including conduct unbecoming an officer, indecent conduct and fraternization.

The next year, he faced an administrative board that would decide his fate in the service and testified on his own behalf. Thompson insisted to the three officers overseeing the case that he was innocent.

The board members declared in a 2-to-1 vote he had committed no crimes whatsoever, and all three agreed that he should remain a Marine.

Thompson asked a friend to approach the Post on his behalf. In interviews, he insisted he had done nothing wrong.

The discovery of Stadler's missing cellphone changed everything. It contained texts with Thompson that proved he'd deceived the Marine board.

## 101st Airborne teaches Somalis logistics

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

About 40 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division have been dispatched to Somalia as efforts intensify to improve the capabilities of local forces entrenched in a multiyear battle with Islamic militants.

The Fort Campbell, Ky.-based troops will focus on bolstering the Somali army's logistics capabilities rather than conducting combat arms training, U.S. Africa Command said.

The April 2 deployment, planned months ago, comes as the White House granted expanded authority to AFRICOM to carry out strikes against the extremist group al-Shabab.

The soldiers join a small con-

tingent of special operations forces who have maintained a steady presence in Somalia, where they have trained and advised government forces and African Union troops aiding the war-torn country in fighting the al-Qaida-aligned al-Shabab. Some of those U.S. forces have operated near the front lines in a mission that has taken on greater risk for teams in the field.

The addition of 101st Airborne soldiers to the training mission is another sign of the Pentagon's expanding effort in Somalia. The troops' arrival marks a rare deployment of regular Army troops to Somalia since 18 U.S. soldiers were killed in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, commonly known as the

Black Hawk Down incident.

In the years after Black Hawk Down, the U.S. largely walked away from Somalia, which disintegrated into a failed state. In the past couple of years, however, the U.S. has seen signs of hope in a fragile central government that is struggling to take root.

While the U.S. military has long maintained a small, quiet presence in Somalia, with training efforts going back to about 2007, those efforts have begun to creep out of the shadows. In 2014, the military publicly acknowledged an ongoing effort to train Somali forces and lethal airstrikes that were once highly secretive started to be accompanied by news releases after the fact.

# A case of 'upside down' USAF economics

By JOHN M. DONNELLY  
*CQ-Roll Call*

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has grounded a big portion of its newly refurbished, multibillion-dollar fleet of C-5 Galaxy transport planes just to avoid spending the relatively small amount of money it costs to fly them.

In order to save \$60 million in annual operating costs, the Air Force has since fiscal 2015 placed eight of its top-of-the-line C-5s in "backup aircraft inventory" status, even though they are needed to ferry troops and gear around the world, said Gen. Carlton Everhart, the four-star chief of Air Mobility Command.

The gargantuan planes, among the largest on the planet, "sit on the ramp" at two Air Force bases, one in California and the other in Delaware, Everhart said in an interview. Periodically, their engines are run or they're moved around, he said. But the eight planes in the backup inventory have not flown for nearly three years — even though they collectively cost more than \$2 billion.

When the eight planes that have been grounded merely to save money are combined with four more that are kept in reserve for emergencies under standard procedures, that means nearly a quarter of the latest C-5 aircraft, the M models, are out of service.

Everhart said it was a "budget decision" to ground the eight extra planes, and he hopes the funding will be restored soon to bring them back into the active fleet.

"It's not the most perfect system," he said of the Pentagon budgeting process.

Virginia Republican Rep. Rob Wittman, chairman of the House Armed Services panel that oversees transport aircraft, said this week that the C-5 policy is the product of budget constraints that should be lifted.

"The American people should get the most out of the hard-earned tax dollars that went into modernizing these aircraft," Wittman said.

Representatives of taxpayer groups agree that grounding the best cargo planes money can buy makes no sense as long

as they are needed, but some analysts believe the Air Force can shift money from less important programs to cover the cost of operating the C-5Ms.

"The Air Force has the economics upside down here," said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, in a statement. "If they can truly get by on 75 percent of the fleet, why did the taxpayer spend billions of dollars on excess capacity? We're all for cutting costs, but do it in a smart way, starting with reducing the F-35 buy, or better yet, buy more F-16s instead to bridge the technological gap to more capable UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles). Or close some of that excess base capacity."

Mark Thompson, an analyst with the Straus Military Reform Project at the Project on Government Oversight's Center for Defense Information, said in an email that the Pentagon often turns to its operations accounts to save money.

The operations budget "lacks the constituency that upgrading the C-5 has — both inside the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill," Thompson said. "So, given that

choice, it's not surprising that the Air Force would improve the airplanes only to let them sit on the tarmac. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish."

Each mammoth C-5 is capable of carrying enormous sums of cargo — for example, two tanks or six attack helicopters. Refurbished recently with more powerful engines and enhanced cockpit computers, the C-5Ms are the only U.S. transport planes that can make a nonstop transcontinental flight, officials say.

"The C-5M assures American presence on the ground within hours, not days," said Col. Christopher Karns, a spokesman for Air Mobility Command.

But the C-5 fleet is half the size it was just a half dozen years ago. There are 56 today, compared to 112 prior to fiscal 2011. And what is left in the C-5 fleet has been shrunk further because of the groundings.

Of the 56 C-5s in the inventory today, 52 are the upgraded C-5Ms, while the other four are aging C-5As that will soon be retired.

## NAS Meridian to test wells

*Associated Press*

MERIDIAN, Miss. — U.S. Navy officials say they plan to test the water in three private wells near Naval Air Station Meridian in Mississippi for possible contaminants.

The Meridian Star reported that the Navy is asking some nearby residents to test their water as part of its policy.

Navy Capt. Scott Bunnay, Navy Air Station Meridian's commanding officer, said the water will be tested for PFOS, or polyfluoroalkyl substances, a component in foam used to fight petroleum fires. The newspaper said the substances could be present in the soil or groundwater.

## Sailor gets 30 years for making child porn

*Associated Press*

NORFOLK, Va. — A U.S. Navy sailor has been sentenced to 30 years in prison for recording sex acts between himself and minor girls.

Virginia prosecutors said Thursday that a federal judge

sentenced Jordan Lee Adams, 26, in civilian court in Norfolk, Va.

Adams pleaded guilty in January to one count of production of child pornography. Court documents said he had sex with at least four girls between 2009 and 2013.

Much of the case focused on Adams' acts with a girl in Wayne County, N.C., where Adams grew up.

Court records say Adams distributed some of the photos. He also posted them to social media popular with child pornographers.

## Recruiter accused of lewd texting with teen

*Associated Press*

WEST JORDAN, Utah — A Utah National Guard recruiter accused of exchanging lewd text messages with a teenager has been indicted.

The indictment charges South Jordan resident Kyle Ivory, 26, with sexual exploita-

tion of a minor and enticing a minor.

The Salt Lake Tribune reported that the 17-year-old girl and Ivory met when he tried to recruit her into the Army National Guard. Authorities allege they exchanged the texts between June and November, and the teenager at one point

sent nude pictures of herself to Ivory.

Ivory's initial court appearance is scheduled for May 17.

Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Steven Fairbourn told the Deseret News that Ivory is a part-time soldier. He was dismissed as a full-time recruiter at schools a few months back.

# Pompeo vows to stifle WikiLeaks

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — CIA Director Mike Pompeo on Thursday called WikiLeaks a hostile intelligence service and said the group would soon face decisive U.S. action to stifle its disclosures of leaked material.

"It ends now," Pompeo said in his first public remarks after 10 weeks on the job, indicating President Donald Trump will take undefined but forceful action.

Pompeo lashed out aggressively against Julian Assange, the Australian founder of WikiLeaks — who has been holed up in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London for nearly five years — calling him a narcissist and "a fraud, a coward hiding behind a screen."

The broadside against Assange and WikiLeaks marked a sharp about-face toward Assange, whom Trump once applauded for publishing emails stolen from 2016 Democratic

presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's campaign. The CIA, hurt by a recent WikiLeaks disclosure of purported stolen spying tools, is elevating WikiLeaks into a high-profile target.

WikiLeaks, a loose collective of hackers and activists backed by moneyed donors who support its cause of radical transparency to unmask the powerful, emerged a little over a decade ago. With a series of high-profile disclosures of leaked documents, the group once had significant support among the Western journalistic community.

Its major disclosures include hundreds of thousands of classified military files from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2010 and reams of highly classified State Department cables later that same year, opening a door on U.S. diplomatic activity all over the world.

It was WikiLeaks' role in the 2016 election campaign, in which it released pilfered

emails from the Democratic National Committee and later from the personal email account of the Clinton campaign chairman, John Podesta, that hardened establishment views of the group as intent on molding U.S. policies.

"It is time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is — a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia," Pompeo said.

Precisely what actions the Trump administration could take against Assange and WikiLeaks is not clear.

Pompeo cited a Jan. 6 joint report by the CIA, the National Security Agency and the FBI that accuses a Russian military intelligence unit known as GRU of using WikiLeaks "to release data of U.S. victims that the GRU had obtained through cyber operations against the Democratic National Committee."

WikiLeaks also collaborated with RT, the Russian state-operated network, Pompeo said.

# No more plans for pot clubs in Colo.

Associated Press

DENVER — Colorado lawmakers on Thursday backed off plans to become the first U.S. state to regulate marijuana clubs, saying approval of Amsterdam-style pot clubs could invite a federal crackdown.

It was perhaps the starkest display yet of uncertainty on how to regulate pot under President Donald Trump in states where the drug is legal. Alaska marijuana regulators recently delayed planned rules for on-site pot consumption at dispensaries.

Colorado's measure, which would have allowed users to bring their own pot to clubs, initially had substantial bipartisan support. But lawmakers ultimately sided with Gov. John Hickenlooper, who has warned that bold changes may anger federal drug enforcers.

"Given the uncertainty in Washington, this is not the time to be ... trying to carve off new turf and expand markets and make dramatic statements about marijuana," Hickenlooper told The Denver Post last month.

Colorado and Alaska have cited federal uncertainty about whether clubs would anger federal drug enforcers. U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has criticized the 28 states, in addition to the District of Columbia, that do not enforce federal law banning marijuana.

But with no details yet from the Trump administration about how a crackdown would look, states are skittish about making national headlines that could be interpreted as thumbing their noses at federal drug law.

The Colorado pot club measure was amended to remove club regulations, with the remaining bits of the proposal relatively minor. It could face yet more changes before a final vote.

# Insurers say ACA fixes don't go far enough

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — "Obamacare" is proving more of a challenge than the Trump administration bargained for.

With the "repeal and replace" effort at an impasse on Capitol Hill, the administration released Thursday a set of fixes to stabilize the Affordable Care Act's shaky insurance markets for next year. But the insurance industry said the changes don't go far enough.

While calling the administration action a step in the right direction, the industry is looking for a guarantee that the government will also keep paying billions in "cost-sharing" subsidies that help consumers with high deductibles. President Donald Trump says he hasn't made up his mind on that.

Republicans contend that the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, is beyond repair, but their "repeal and replace" slogan hasn't been easy to put into practice, or politically popular. So the administration is trying to keep

the existing system going temporarily as it pursues a total remake.

Many of the changes follow recommendations from insurers, who wanted the government to address shortcomings with HealthCare.gov markets.

But the White House remained mum on the biggest concern. Insurers, doctors, hospitals and the business community have asked Trump to preserve ACA cost-sharing subsidies that pare down high deductibles and co-payments for consumers with modest incomes.

"There is still too much instability and uncertainty in this market," Marilyn Tavenner, president of America's Health Insurance Plans and the industry's top lobbyist, said in a statement. "Health plans and the consumers they serve need to know that funding for cost-sharing reduction subsidies will continue uninterrupted."

Estimated at \$7 billion this year, the subsidies are under a legal cloud. Without the pay-

ments, experts say, the marketplaces that provide private insurance for about 12 million people will be overwhelmed by premium increases and insurer departures.

In a Wall Street Journal interview this week, Trump raised the possibility of shutting off the money if Democrats won't bargain on health care. But he also said he hasn't made up his mind, and he doesn't want people to get hurt.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi called that an "appalling threat." Democrats are now demanding that the issue be addressed in a must-pass spending bill due at the end of the month.

The changes include a shortened sign-up window of 45 days, starting with coverage for 2018, about half as long as the current open enrollment season; and curbs on "special enrollment periods" that allow consumers to sign up outside the normal open enrollment window.

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Boy, 8, drives dad's van to McDonald's

**OH** EAST PALESTINE — A craving for a McDonald's cheeseburger apparently prompted an 8-year-old Ohio boy to take his 4-year-old sister for a ride in his dad's van, which he learned to drive on the internet.

East Palestine police Officer Jacob Koehler told WJW-TV in Cleveland the father went to bed Sunday, and the mother fell asleep on the couch with the kids.

Koehler said the boy drove about a mile to the restaurant, through intersections and over railroad tracks, without mishap. Witnesses said the boy appeared to obey traffic laws.

According to Koehler, the boy told him he learned to drive by watching YouTube videos.

No charges have been filed.

## Offspring replaces 600-year-old tree

**NJ** BERNARDS — A New Jersey church has planted an offspring of a now-dead white oak that was believed to be the oldest in the U.S.

NJ.com reported that the younger tree was moved Tuesday to the grounds of Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church to replace its so-called father tree. The old tree, declared dead last summer after it failed to sprout foliage, is scheduled to be chopped down soon.

The new tree was originally planted in 2001 at a nearby college. The younger tree has been planted a short walk from its father.

The ancient tree was present for many episodes of American history. George Washington picnicked under it. French troops allied with American revolutionaries marched past the tree en route to the Battle

of Yorktown.

Jon Klippel, a church board member, told NJ.com they are unsure what they will do with the wood from the tree after it is chopped down. A lot will depend on its condition, he said.

## Motorcycle rider beheaded in accident

**CA** SAN BERNARDINO — A motorcycle rider was decapitated in a freak accident in San Bernardino, Calif.

Authorities said Fabian Zepeda, 27, was killed Tuesday morning when he drove into a wire stretched across a road from a snapped utility pole.

Police told the Riverside Press-Enterprise that minutes earlier, a driver lost control of a Ford Taurus, which hit a mailbox and ran across a lawn. Coroner's officials said the car then hit a wooden telephone pole that snapped in half, and a tension wire fell across Macy Street. Zepeda drove into it and was beheaded.

Police said the driver didn't appear to be intoxicated and wasn't immediately arrested pending further investigation.

## Astronaut thrilled with bonus time in space

**FL** CAPE CANAVERAL — The world's most experienced spacewoman said she's thrilled to get an extra three months off the planet.

The commander of the International Space Station, Peggy Whitson, told The Associated Press on Thursday that five months into her mission, she's not bored. She misses cooking, though, and a diverse menu.

Earlier this month, NASA announced Whitson, 57, will stay up until September, stretching her mission to nearly 10 months. NASA is taking advantage of an empty seat in a Russian Soyuz

capsule for her return.

Whitson, the oldest woman to fly in space, is on the verge of setting a U.S. record for most accumulated time in space. This is her third space station stint.

## Music festival coming to dozens of US cities

**NY** NEW YORK — More than 50 U.S. cities will be hosting Make Music Day, a free one-day outdoor festival celebrating music and music-making.

The annual event is June 21.

Highlights of Make Music Day in the U.S. will include Sousa Paloozas in Chicago; Cleveland; Madison, Wis.; Minneapolis-St. Paul; New York; and San Jose, Calif.

There will also be more than 150 Mass Appeals across the country gathering musicians to play together in single-instrument groups.

Street Studios in Atlanta; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Minneapolis-St. Paul; New York; and Philadelphia will give passers-by a chance to collaborate in producing original music.

The festival began in France in 1982 and has since spread to 750 cities across 120 countries.

## Company plans to grow skin for humans

**VA** SMITHFIELD — The world's largest pork producer is entering the business of trying to grow skin and organs for humans.

Virginia's Smithfield Foods said in a press release Wednesday that its new division is called Smithfield Bioscience.

The company already sells its byproducts to firms that produce medicine and supplements.

Smithfield's new division is also among a group of organi-

zations that's figuring out ways to replace tissue for injured soldiers. The public-private initiative is partly funded by the Department of Defense.

Smithfield Bioscience also works with Harvard and Columbia universities on the research and development of immunology therapies.

## United overbooked — by one scorpion

**TX** HOUSTON — Attention, United Airlines passengers: Don't forget to lather up with Off.

A couple returning from vacation in Mexico apparently brought on an unexpected passenger: a scorpion. It turned out to be another stinging moment in a tough week for the airline, according to a report by CNBC.

During a flight from Houston to Calgary, the creature dropped from the overhead bin, landing in the man's hair, according to news reports. When he shook it out onto his tray table and picked it up, it stung him.

The scorpion was disposed of in the toilet. And other than suffering what "felt like a wasp sting," the man was OK.

## Firefighters rescue cat, owner from tree

**KS** TOPEKA — Firefighters rescued a cat from a Topeka tree along with its owner.

Topeka Fire Department Shift Commander Todd Williams said the woman and her cat were about 16 feet up in a large tree when they were plucked out Wednesday. The Topeka Capital-Journal reported that the owner had climbed the tree trying to get to her cat.

From wire reports

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# NBA MVP candidates meet in 1st round

Associated Press

Russell Westbrook against James Harden is a sensational start to the NBA postseason.

Golden State against Cleveland no longer looks like the certain finish.

The playoffs open this weekend, highlighted by a must-see matchup in the first round between record-setting guards who are former teammates and now leading MVP candidates.

They swapped spectacular highlights during the regular season: Westbrook averaging a triple-double in carrying Oklahoma City after Kevin Durant's departure; Harden leading the league in assists for a high-octane Houston offense that shattered the NBA record for three-pointers.

"As great of a season as LeBron (James) and Kawhi (Leon-

ard) have had, the two main guys on the card, the main draw, have been James Harden and Russell Westbrook," Hall of Famer and TNT analyst Reggie Miller said. "And to have both of those guys go at one another in the first round — former teammates, great friends, the two leading scorers in the Association — from our side ... this is a dream matchup to sit and have a chance to watch."

Now one of them will be gone by May.

Super stats give way to tremendous teams in the playoffs, and the Warriors look the part after going 67-15 in their first season with Durant, now healthy after a late-season injury.

The question mark is the Cavaliers, the defending champions who were just 10-14 after

February, yielding the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference to Boston while James sat out the final two games during their late-season slide.

The Warriors and Cavs were overwhelming favorites to meet again after splitting the last two NBA Finals, though Cleveland's struggles have thrown that into doubt — outside of Cleveland, anyway.

"I'm not going into the playoffs thinking that," coach Tyrone Lue said. "I'm going into it thinking we can win."

The answers start arriving Saturday, when the two-month chase for 16 wins begins.

The Cavaliers open against No. 7 Indiana, while No. 3 Toronto hosts No. 6 Milwaukee. In the West, it's seventh-seeded Memphis at No. 2 San Antonio, and the No. 4 Clippers against

the No. 5 Utah Jazz.

On Sunday, the Warriors open against Portland, before the third-seeded Rockets and No. 6 Thunder play the other Game 1 in the West. The East openers are Boston against Chicago, and No. 4 Washington against fifth-seeded Atlanta.

Just five years ago, Westbrook, Harden and Durant were young guns on an Oklahoma City team that lost to Miami in the NBA Finals. All three may have been worthy MVP winners this season had Durant not hurt his knee in late February.

He's back now, with perhaps his best chance yet to win something better than a second MVP award: a first championship.

"Playing against the best players in the world, at the biggest stage, that's the goal for every player," Durant said.

## Foreign-born players bring international interest

Associated Press

Milwaukee star Giannis Antetokounmpo returns to the playoffs in Toronto on Saturday afternoon. Except in Greece, where it'll already be very early Sunday morning.

They won't mind staying up late in Athens to watch.

Same goes for plenty of other places around the world at this time of year. All eight of the NBA first-round playoff series that start this weekend have international players involved, meaning the game's global reach will be on full display once again.

And as NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said at the All-Star break, the league expects the international players to keep coming.

"I grew up in Athens not having much," Antetokounmpo said earlier this season. "And being in the situation and to keep pushing, keep pushing, it's a great feeling because all the hard work I did in my life, it paid off."

Now the playoff stage again awaits Antetokounmpo, and plenty of other international players. By the NBA's count, there's 54 — including some

with dual citizenship like Cleveland's Kyrie Irving — from 28 different countries set to appear in these playoffs.

Here's some of the top international storylines for the postseason:

**Vamos, Gasol:** We know a Spanish big man is headed to the second round.

San Antonio's Pau Gasol and Memphis' Marc Gasol were on opposite sides in the 2015 All-Star Game, have gone head-to-head a slew of regular-season times — and now the brothers will face off in the playoffs for the first time.

The Spurs and Grizzlies are a first-round series in the Western Conference.

Once they actually take the floor, the Gasols will become the sixth set of brothers to meet in the postseason, joining the Mikans (George and Ed, 1949, 1950 and 1953), the Kings (Bernard and Albert, 1983), the Persons (Chuck and Wesley, 1996), the Grants (Horace and Harvey, 1999), and the Wrights (Dorell and Delon, 2016).

**Six Spurs:** San Antonio has six international players on its roster this season.

That's down a few from re-

cent years.

The Spurs had nine international players when they won their most recent NBA title in 2014. Some remain, like Manu Ginobili, Patty Mills and Tony Parker. Davis Bertans, Joel Anthony and Pau Gasol are now in the silver and black as well.

While the six Spurs are a lot, it's not the most in these playoffs. Utah and Toronto each have seven international players on their playoff rosters.

**Finals representation:** If an international player appears in this year's NBA Finals — almost guaranteed to happen — it would be the 24th consecutive year that at least one player who doesn't hail from the United States got in the title series.

There's seven active players in these playoffs with at least one All-Star appearance that the NBA defines as being international: Antetokounmpo, Marc and Pau Gasol, Ginobili, Al Horford, Irving and Parker.

**Viva la France:** Utah's Rudy Gobert and San Antonio's Parker are two of the six French-born players in this postseason, and they'll be asked to carry big roles.

Parker enters these playoffs

115 shy of 4,000 postseason points in his career. He'd be the second international player to reach that milestone — after only his longtime and now former San Antonio teammate Tim Duncan (5,172).

Parker is also the NBA's all-time international playoff assist leader. And he's third in playoff steals by an international player, behind No. 2 Hakeem Olajuwon — and yet another Spur, No. 1 Ginobili.

Gobert, a Defensive Player of the Year candidate for the Jazz, is making his playoff debut.

**There are others, too:** Not all the best international players are in the playoffs.

Among players born outside the U.S., five of the top eight scorers this season didn't reach the postseason. Cleveland's Irving was first, Milwaukee's Antetokounmpo was third and Memphis' Marc Gasol was sixth on that list — but No. 2 Andrew Wiggins of Minnesota, No. 4 Goran Dragic of Miami, No. 5 Joel Embiid of Philadelphia, No. 7 Danilo Gallinari of Denver and No. 8 Kristaps Porzingis of New York will all be watching from home.

# Capitals rally from 2 down, win in OT

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Heavily favored to beat the young and inexperienced Toronto Maple Leafs, the Stanley Cup-contending Washington Capitals weren't supposed to be the team that flubbed and floundered at the start of the playoffs.

Playing some of their worst hockey of the season, the Capitals fell behind by two goals early but came back to force overtime. Tom Wilson scored 5:15 into the extra period for a 3-2 victory in Game 1 on Thursday night.

"It's hard to say what was up there," captain Alex Ovechkin said. "Maybe we was a little bit nervous, maybe kind of feel the pressure a little bit. But when they score, all the bench said, 'Just calm down and let's play our way.' Coming back in after first there was no panic, obviously still lots of minutes to play. ... We just grinded it out

and win in overtime."

Playoff star and 2014 Conn Smythe Trophy winner Justin Williams scored twice in regulation and Braden Holtby stopped 35 of the 37 shots he faced to give Wilson the opportunity to be the hero. The fourth-line winger who grew up a Maple Leafs fan in Toronto beat Frederik Andersen to the far side for his first NHL playoff goal.

Williams said to Wilson afterward, "It feels good, doesn't it?" The Presidents' Trophy-winning Capitals could exhale because they survived a serious scare from the Maple Leafs in their playoff opener.

Despite having nine players making their playoff debuts, Toronto showed no fear of Washington, as rookie Mitch Marner scored 1:35 in and Jake Gardiner made it 2-0 at the 9:44 mark. Andersen made 41 saves but lost track of the puck in front of him on Williams'

second goal and should have stopped Wilson's shot.

"I thought Freddie was really good, and then he'd probably like to have that back," coach Mike Babcock said. "But he gave us an opportunity, so I don't think you can argue with that."

Williams gave the Capitals the opportunity to bounce back from their rough start with the fourth two-goal game of his playoff career. Defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk, who led all players with nine shots on net, said the team rallied around Williams — the veteran who reassured everyone at intermission.

**Predators 1, Blackhawks 0:** Pekka Rinne made 29 saves after Viktor Arvidsson scored in the first period as visiting Nashville beat Chicago in Game 1 of their series.

Rinne's second career post-season shutout sent Nashville to just its second playoff win

in Chicago in seven tries. The Predators did not have a 1-0 victory during the regular season.

Corey Crawford had 19 saves for Chicago.

**Ducks 3, Flames 2:** Jakob Silfverberg scored the tiebreaking power-play goal late in the second period while captain Ryan Getzlaf had a goal and an assist to lead host Anaheim in the series opener.

Rickard Rakell scored the tying goal after Calgary made a horrendous line change in the second period while John Gibson made 30 saves for the Ducks.

Sean Monahan and Sam Bennett scored and Brian Elliott stopped 38 shots for the wild-card Flames. Calgary is winless in Anaheim since 2006, when the Flames won a playoff game in a series won by the Ducks.

# Popular Steelers chairman Rooney dies at age 84

Associated Press

Dan Rooney, the powerful and popular Pittsburgh Steelers chairman whose name is attached to the NFL's landmark initiative in minority hiring, died Thursday. He was 84.

The team announced his death but details were not immediately available.

Rooney took over operation of the team in the 1960s from his father, Art, who founded the franchise. From there, Dan Rooney oversaw NFL championships for a team that had never even played in a league title game.

Over the decades he became one of the most powerful and innovative forces within the game, developing the Rooney Rule under which NFL teams are required to interview minority candidates for coaching and front-office positions. He was a key figure in labor negotiations and league expansion.

In 2000, Rooney was induct-

ed into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, joining his father. Dan Rooney's son, Art II, has been the Steelers president since 2003, with Dan Rooney becoming chairman.

"My job is to do what's best for the organization and to make that decision regardless of what the consequences are to me personally," Dan Rooney once said. "I take my position very seriously. What I want is an organization that can be together, one where everybody in the place has the same goal, and that is to win."

And win the Steelers did. With superb drafts that led to the building of the Steel Curtain defense and a potent offense, Pittsburgh eventually saw nine mainstays from the 1970s dynasty, plus coach Chuck Noll, make the Hall of Fame.

Under Rooney, two stadiums were built in Pittsburgh, securing their place in a small market where they are sporting kings. Rooney's ability to reach

across status, class, race and gender made him beloved in a city that identifies itself with its teams with a passion few others can match.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell called Rooney "one of the finest men in the history of our game," adding Rooney's "dedication to the game, to the players and the coaches, to his beloved Pittsburgh, and to Steelers fans everywhere was unparalleled."

Perhaps Rooney's most lasting contribution to the NFL — and to sports in general — came with the Rooney Rule.

Then-Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and league lawyers recognized the need for a hiring policy that was fair and transparent; the NFL had many critics over the lack of minorities in high-profile jobs, particularly as head coaches.

Rooney brought new employment requirements to his fellow owners and got the measure passed.

Born July 20, 1932, in Pittsburgh, Rooney was a high school quarterback, then attended Duquesne, receiving a degree in accounting. The family business was his calling, and he soon became involved in every area of the Steelers.

The team hired coach Chuck Noll in 1969 and he promptly went 1-13. But the Rooneys didn't panic, and Pittsburgh drafted quarterback Terry Bradshaw with the top overall pick in 1970.

Add in the likes of Joe Greene, Jack Ham, Jack Lambert, Franco Harris, Mel Blount, John Stallworth, Lynn Swann, L.C. Greenwood and Mike Webster — all draftees. Soon, the Steelers were dominating pro football.

Pittsburgh has had a mere three head coaches since '69. Noll won four Super Bowls. Bill Cowher won one and Mike Tomlin has won one. Rooney spearheaded the team's commitment to continuity and stability.

# Mets win in 16 innings, stretch streak

Associated Press

MIAMI — The New York Mets' winning streak grew a lot longer Thursday.

Travis d'Arnaud led off the 16th inning with a home run, giving him a career-high four hits, and the Mets beat the Miami Marlins 9-8 for their fifth consecutive victory.

D'Arnaud also had a bases-loaded triple in the second inning, and teammate Yoenis Cespedes had his second multihomer game in three nights. The game was the longest in the five-year history of Marlins Park, took more than 5½ hours and ended well past midnight.

Mets starter Robert Gsellman allowed a career-high eight runs in 4⅔ innings, but seven relievers combined to throw 10⅓ scoreless innings.

"You just have to dig into places you didn't know you could dig into," said Josh Smoker, who

went three innings. "Obviously this one took a little bit longer than we would have liked, but at the end of the night we came out with a win, so that's all you can ask for."

D'Arnaud's homer came on the 475th pitch of the night, and the first from Adam Conley (1-1), who had been scheduled to start Friday's game. Marlins relievers retired 13 consecutive batters before the homer.

"Pitching is pitching, and I was prepared to pitch," Conley said. "I didn't execute."

D'Arnaud said he had no trouble doing his home-run trot, even after catching for 16 innings.

"The emotions of the home run helped lift my legs a little bit," he said.

The Mets (7-3) lead the majors with 20 home runs, and lead the NL East standings.

"It's huge for us to start like this," d'Arnaud said. "It has

been fun. This clubhouse is awesome."

Miami's Marcell Ozuna hit a grand slam in the first inning, increasing his RBI total to 16, most in the majors. But after a flurry of early scoring, neither team had a runner in scoring position in extra innings until Miami's 15th.

Miguel Rojas led off with a single and advanced on a sacrifice but was stranded by Hansel Robles (2-0), who pitched two scoreless innings as both managers exhausted their benches and bullpens.

Robles took the mound for the fourth day in a row.

"When I started to realize there weren't a whole lot of pitchers left, I could have used a day off, but I felt good and decided to tell them I could do this," he said.

Mets starting pitcher Jacob deGrom pinch-hit with two out in the 15th and struck out. By

then, the crowd of 23,192 had dwindled to a few thousand.

Cespedes and Wilmer Flores hit back-to-back solo homers to start the third inning. Cespedes led off the fifth with another homer, his sixth of the season — most in the majors — and his fifth in 48 hours. He reached base five times.

Pinch-hitter Michael Conforto's two-out RBI double off Miami's David Phelps made the score 8-all in the eighth.

"A lot went on tonight," Marlins manager Don Mattingly said. "If we're able to close it out, we don't play all these extra innings."

Miami's Wei-Yin Chen couldn't hold a 4-0 lead, giving up three homers and six runs in three innings. Jose Urena followed Chen and allowed one run in three innings while the Marlins rallied from a 7-4 deficit.

## Cubs' Anderson beats former team in Wrigley debut

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Brett Anderson said he owes Albert Almora Jr. his paycheck from Thursday.

The center fielder said a high-five or a fist bump will do.

Anderson beat his former team with five solid innings, and Almora made two outstanding catches against the ivy as the Chicago Cubs blanked the Los Angeles Dodgers 4-0.

Anderson (1-0) won in his Wrigley Field debut for the Cubs. The lefty lowered his ERA to 0.84 through two starts with his new club.

Anderson, the only member of the Cubs without a World Series ring after Wednesday's celebration, allowed three hits but walked four. He stranded seven runners, helped by Almora's defense.

"Those are plays that you don't expect to be made behind you and he made two web gems," Anderson said. "You don't ever want to have to have those guys make those plays

behind you, but it was one of those days where it was a grind from pitch one."

Almora went high and hard into the ivy to rob Corey Seager, the second batter of the game, of extra bases.

Kyle Schwarber tried to match him in the third inning, but his bobbled catch of Kiki Hernandez's fly to deep left field was overturned after replay showed the ball hit the vines before he controlled it. The replay took 3 minutes, 55 seconds before it was reversed and Hernandez was awarded second base.

Almora later prevented Seager of another extra-base hit, stranding Hernandez with a running catch on the warning track with his back to home plate.

Earlier this season, Almora made a leaping catch at the wall in St. Louis at a key moment.

Anthony Rizzo and Addison Russell hit long solo home runs, their first of the season. Both

came off Hyun-Jin Ryu (0-2).

**Rockies 3, Giants 1:** At San Francisco, Trevor Story hit a two-run homer as five Colorado pitchers combined on a five-hitter.

**Twins 11, Tigers 5:** Max Kepler, Miguel Sano and Robbie Grossman homered for the visitors as Minnesota took advantage of an uncharacteristically wild outing by Jordan Zimmermann.

**Rangers 8, Angels 3:** Yu Darvish pitched seven scoreless innings and Carlos Gomez hit a leadoff homer in Texas' victory over host Los Angeles.

**Red Sox 4, Pirates 3:** Xander Bogaerts' RBI single capped a three-run rally in the eighth inning, lifting Boston past visiting Pittsburgh in a makeup game from a rainout in the opening series.

Boston ended up sweeping all three games of the series after taking the first two games of the season.

**Royals 3, Athletics 1:** Jason

Vargas carried a shutout into the eighth as host Kansas City finally generated some early offense to snap an eight-game losing streak against Oakland.

**Yankees 3, Rays 2:** Aaron Hicks homered twice, including a go-ahead, two-run drive in the seventh inning, as host New York moved above .500 for the first time this season.

**Orioles 2, Blue Jays 1:** Orioles closer Zach Britton escaped a nervy ninth inning as visiting Baltimore handed Toronto its sixth straight loss.

**White Sox 10, Indians 4:** Tim Anderson homered on the game's first pitch and Matt Davidson added a three-run shot in a five-run first inning as visiting Chicago beat slumping Cleveland.

**Brewers 5, Reds 1:** Ryan Braun and Eric Thames homered and Jimmy Nelson turned in his second straight strong start as Milwaukee snapped host Cincinnati's four-game winning streak.