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US, North Korea show off forces

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — A U.S. guided-missile submarine made a port call in South Korea and the allied nations conducted maritime exercises Tuesday, while North Korea reportedly conducted a large artillery drill as tensions mounted on the divided peninsula.

The top U.S. commander in South Korea, meanwhile, warned the North that his troops were prepared for a fight.

“We’re ready, and we are committed to the [South Korea]-U.S. alliance,” Gen. Vincent Brooks said in brief remarks to reporters after a ceremony at the Army’s Yongsan Garrison in Seoul.

The nuclear-powered USS Michigan — one of the world’s largest submarines — sailed into the southeastern port city of Busan. It was the latest show of force by President Donald Trump’s administration amid fears that the North will conduct another nuclear or missile test as it celebrated a series of important holidays this month.

The latest, the 85th anniversary of the founding of North Korea’s army, appeared to pass without such a test. But both sides showed off their military might as diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States met in Tokyo to discuss the growing threat from the communist state.

North Korea marked the day by staging an exercise involving some 300 or 400 long-range artillery pieces that have the range to target the South Korean capital, Seoul, or adjacent areas, the Yonhap news agency reported, citing an unidentified government source.

“Signs are detected that North Korea’s military is conducting a large-scale drill around the

Briefing plan perplexes

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The White House announced Monday it would host an unusual private briefing on North Korea for the entire U.S. Senate, prompting questions from lawmakers over whether the Trump administration intends to use the event as a photo opportunity ahead of his 100-day mark.

Press secretary Sean Spicer told reporters that the lawmakers would be briefed Wednesday by several senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. He emphasized that the meeting plan had been conveyed by Senate leadership and that the White House was serving “as the location.”

The location at the White House perplexed lawmakers, who have grown accustomed to such briefings taking place in a secure location on Capitol Hill, where there is more room.

Past administrations have often held briefings for smaller groups of about two dozen or fewer lawmakers in the White House Situation Room. But they have traditionally sent high-level aides to Capitol Hill to hold discussions with larger groups in secure, underground locations.

A senior Trump administration official said the meeting with senators will take place in the auditorium at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, which houses most of the National Security Council.

eastern port city of Wonsan on the anniversary,” the source told Yonhap.

South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense said it could not immediately confirm the report but was monitoring the North’s military movements in the area and “firmly maintaining readiness.”

North Koreans also laid flowers and paid respects at giant statues of former leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, the current leader’s grandfather and father, respectively, according to The Associated Press.

Navy ships also held simultaneous bilateral maritime exercises with South Korea and Japan, the 7th Fleet said.

The USS Wayne E. Meyer, a guided-missile destroyer that

weighs more than 18,000 tons when submerged, was routine and part of a regularly scheduled deployment to the Western Pacific.

The submarine is equipped to carry as many as 154 Tomahawk missiles and more than 60 special operations forces. Its homeport is Bremerton, Wash., but it is forward-deployed from Guam.

North Korea, which is known for its exaggerated and belligerent rhetoric, strongly objects to the deployment of such strategic assets to the divided peninsula. It has threatened to sink the USS Carl Vinson.

A senior North Korean military official blamed the U.S. and its allies for the spike in tensions, saying his country also is ready to use pre-emptive strikes and other measures.

“The conditions for an outbreak of nuclear war are being made on the Korean Peninsula due to the frantic war games of the U.S. imperialists and their followers,” Gen. Pak Yong Sik said at a ceremony held on the eve of the army’s foundation day.

“If enemies dare to try a military adventure ... our revolutionary power will wipe out the strongholds of aggression by using powerful nuclear attacks,” he added.

While insisting that all options, including military action, are on the table in dealing with North Korea, Trump’s moves so far have not been markedly different from the previous administration’s reliance on economic punishment and diplomatic pressure.

On Monday, Trump called on the U.N. Security Council to impose tougher sanctions against the North, saying the status quo is unacceptable and it’s “a problem that we have to finally solve.”

Navy says plans for Gulf of Alaska exercise to proceed

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Navy announced Monday that it will move ahead with plans for an annual large-scale exercise in the Gulf of Alaska involving a carrier strike group.

The Navy's decision, based on three possible scenarios in an environmental impact study, is a scaled-back version of its preferred choice, which would have given the green light to two carrier group exercises annually.

The Navy already participates in the biennial Northern Edge joint-force drills in the Alaskan gulf, last held in 2015 and scheduled to begin again in May.

Under the new annual exercise, the Navy will use sonar for up to 21 consecutive days between April and October in training that will include anti-

submarine warfare drills.

The Navy's study concluded that none of the training scenarios considered "results in significant impacts to the environment."

The Navy will take measures to limit its impact, particularly for marine mammals, and will comply with both the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act, according to a service statement.

Some in the Alaskan fishing industry and local tribal members have opposed the Navy's continued use of the waters south of Anchorage.

In May 2015, the coastal town of Cordova, near the site of the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989, passed a resolution opposing the Navy's training exercises.

The city council contended that the Navy did not have enough scientific information

to demonstrate that the training didn't negatively affect salmon, whales and birds, among other wildlife.

The Navy disputed that in the study's Record of Decision issued Monday.

While "knowledge of the ocean is limited," the Navy said, all "indications from the best available science and from decades of joint training exercises in the [Gulf of Alaska] are that impact from the proposed continuation of Navy training ... will result in no meaningful or lasting changes to any marine species, their habitat, or other resources in the area," the Navy said.

Environmental groups have sued the Navy and the National Marine Fisheries Service numerous times in the past few years over the use of sonar during training.

8th Army headquarters taking step toward move

By KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — After years of delays, the 8th Army headquarters started the clock on completing its move to a base south of the South Korean capital by mid-July.

The timeline was announced Tuesday at a ceremony announcing plans to move the bronze statue of Lt. Gen. Walton Walker, a Korean War hero.

The statue, which stands in front of the 8th Army's headquarters at Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, shows Walker pointing toward North Korea.

Current 8th Army Commander Lt. Gen. Thomas Vandal addressed concerns that the planned relocation of the bulk of U.S. forces in Korea to an expanded Camp Humphreys near the city of Pyeongtaek may affect readiness against the growing nuclear and missile threat from Pyongyang.

"Despite the statue moving, make no mistake about it: Our alliance and the *katchi kapsida* ('we go together') spirit remains ironclad and strong," he said during the ceremony.

The statue won't actually be moved until next week. It will be unveiled at the official July 13 opening ceremony of the 8th Army's new headquarters at Camp Humphreys, Vandal said.

He also suggested the overall shift south won't be completed until 2021.

The \$10.7 billion expansion of Camp Humphreys — which eventually will replace Yongsan as the main U.S. military base in South Korea — has been frequently postponed since Washington and Seoul agreed in 2004 to move U.S. forces south.

Not all U.S. military forces are moving. The commander of U.S. Forces Korea is expected to maintain a presence at Yongsan, and the 210th Field Artillery Brigade will remain near the border until South Korea develops similar capabilities.

USAF: Mechanical failures led to Guam B-52 fire

By ALEX HORTON
Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO — A B-52H Stratofortress was destroyed in Guam last year in a fire shortly after an aborted takeoff due to mechanical failures and the possibility that bird strikes might have damaged the engines of the aircraft as it sped down the runway, an Air Force investigation has concluded.

One of the seven crewmembers sustained minor injuries in the incident, which began when the engines experienced thrust failure as the plane took off during a routine training mission at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, an Accident Investigation Board from the Air Force Global Strike Command concluded last week.

The investigators concluded pilot error did not contribute to the incident on May 19, 2016, which resulted in a fire and

complete destruction of the aircraft, worth \$112 million.

In a summary of the incident, the report stated the pilot of the aircraft from the 69th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron, 5th Bomb Wing, assigned to Andersen, observed birds at wing level seconds after the pilot announced the plane was committed to takeoff procedures.

The co-pilot then felt "a couple thuds" on the right side of the aircraft as three of the four engines began "spooling back," or slowing down, according to the report.

A spike in oil pressure indicated likely failure in the fourth engine as the plane yawed to the right, which pointed to loss of thrust, the report stated.

The pilot began aborted takeoff procedures by shutting off outboard engines and applying brakes as the co-pilot deployed a drag chute to slow the aircraft

as it quickly approached the end of the runway.

The plane's chute failed to fully inflate, and the aircraft's landing gear and right-wing tip gear were sheared off before it came to a stop 300 feet past the runway, the report stated. Then the plane caught fire as the crew escaped through a hatch.

The failed deployment of the chute and "exceeding brake energy limits" were significant factors that contributed to the incident, according to the report.

Bird strikes on aircraft, often called bird ingestion when they fly into engines, are a significant safety hazard, and airmen at installations carefully monitor migration patterns to anticipate and minimize incidents. The report stated the threat of bird strikes was considered low at Andersen at the time of the incident.

Afghan official: Taliban kill 8 policemen at checkpoints

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban overran three security checkpoints Monday in Afghanistan's northern Takhar province, killing eight policemen and cutting off a key road and two of the region's districts, an Afghan official said Tuesday.

According to Sunatullah Timor, the provincial spokesman, the attack in the district of Darqad triggered an hourslong firefight and also left three police officers wounded. Eight of the attackers also were killed in the gunbattle, he added.

The insurgents succeeded in cutting off the districts of Darqad and Khuja Bhawedin, Timor said, but the government has sent in reinforcements and launched a counterattack.

The attack coincided with Monday's visit to Kabul by U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to assess what has become America's longest war as the Trump administration weighs sending in more U.S. troops to help the Afghans fight the insurgency.

From Kabul, Mattis offered a grim assessment for Afghan forces fighting the Taliban, saying that "2017 is going to be another tough year." Mattis also accused Russia of providing weapons to the Taliban for use against American-backed forces in Afghanistan — a charge Moscow denies.

Mattis' visit followed a Taliban raid on an Afghan base last week that, according to some estimates, killed more than 130 soldiers and military personnel at a base in the country's north. Mattis met with President Ashraf Ghani and other senior government officials just hours after the nation's defense minister and army chief resigned over the massacre.

Also Monday, a suicide bomber driving a minivan struck a checkpoint in eastern Khost province, killing at least four Afghan security guards.

The guards were providing security for a U.S. military base called Camp Chapman near the city of Khost, Ghyrat said.

Iraqi General: Militants out of big Mosul neighborhood

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi troops on Tuesday drove out Islamic State militants from the largest neighborhood in the western half of the city of Mosul, a senior military commander said, a major development in the monthslong fight to recapture the country's second-largest city.

U.S.-backed Iraqi forces declared eastern Mosul "fully liberated" in January after officially launching the operation to retake the city in October.

In February, the troops started a new push to clear Mosul's western side of ISIS militants, but weeks later their push stalled, mainly due to stiff resistance by the Sunni militant group.

On Tuesday, special forces Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi told The Associated Press that the sprawling al-Tanek neighborhood was now "fully liberated and under full control" of the security forces. Al-Saadi did not provide more details.

To the east of al-Tanek, Iraqi forces have been facing tough resistance from ISIS in Mosul's Old City, an area that stretches along the Tigris River, which divides Mosul into its eastern and western halves. The Old City's narrow alleys and densely populated areas have made it hard for troops to move forward.

Also Tuesday, the government-sanctioned paramilitary troops, made up mainly of Shiite militiamen, launched a

new push to retake the town of Hatra to the south of Mosul. The force's spokesman, Ahmed al-Asadi, said the operation is being conducted from three directions with aerial support from the Iraqi Air Force. Al-Asadi did not elaborate.

Hatra is home to a UNESCO World Heritage site of the same name that was destroyed by ISIS as part of the militant's efforts to demolish archaeological sites in and around Mosul.

The extremists consider the priceless archaeological treasures — some dating back as far as 3,000 B.C. — as idolatry but have at the same time smuggled and sold many looted artifacts to fund their war.

Turkey targets Kurdish areas in Iraq, Syria

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish warplanes carried out airstrikes on Tuesday against suspected Kurdish rebel positions in northern Iraq and in northeastern Syria, the military said, in a bid to prevent militants from smuggling fighters and weapons into Turkey.

The attack killed at least 18 U.S.-allied Syrian Kurdish troops, according to a monitoring group, as well as five members of the Iraqi Kurdish militia known as the peshmerga, and it drew swift condemnation from Baghdad.

Syrian Kurdish forces said the strikes hit a media center, a local radio station, a communication headquarters and some military posts, killing an undetermined number of fighters in Syria's northeastern Hassakeh province. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the Syrian civil war, also reported the strikes on the media and military targets on Mount

Karachok.

According to the Observatory, the airstrikes killed 18 members of the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG. The Observatory had earlier said only three were killed. Kurdish officials were not immediately available for comment.

Ankara said members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, are finding sanctuaries in neighboring Iraq and Syria among those countries' own Kurdish minorities.

A Turkish military statement said the predawn strikes hit targets on Sinjar Mountain in northern Iraq and also in a mountainous region in Syria. It said the operations were conducted to prevent infiltration of Kurdish rebels, weapons, ammunition and explosives from those areas into Turkey.

A Turkish security official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with Turkish government protocol, said the airstrikes are believed to have

killed about 200 PKK militants, including some senior commanders. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

Iraq's Foreign Ministry denounced the strikes as a "violation against Iraq's sovereignty" and called on the international community to put an end to such "interferences" by Turkey.

"Any operation that is carried out by the Turkish government without any coordination with the Iraqi government is totally rejected," the Foreign Ministry's spokesman, Ahmad Jamal, told The Associated Press.

He warned against a Turkish military operation in northern Iraq, saying it won't "bring a solution but will instead complicate the issue and destabilize northern Iraq."

Although Turkey regularly carries out airstrikes against PKK targets in northern Iraq, this was the first time it has struck the Sinjar region. Turkey has long claimed that the area was becoming a hotbed for PKK rebels.

Congress progresses toward budget deal, health care bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bipartisan bargainers are making progress toward a budget deal to prevent a partial federal shutdown this weekend, a major hurdle overcome when President Donald Trump signaled he would put off his demand that the measure include money to build his border wall with Mexico.

Republicans are also vetting proposed changes to their beleaguered health care bill that they hope will attract enough votes to finally push it through the House.

Both efforts come with Congress back from a two-week break just days before Trump's 100th day in office, an unofficial measuring stick of a new president's effectiveness. With little to show in legislative victories so far, the Trump administration would love to claim achievements on Capitol Hill by that day — this Saturday.

The same day, federal agencies would have to close unless

lawmakers pass a \$1 trillion spending bill financing them or legislation keeping them open temporarily while talks continue. Republicans hope to avoid the ignominy of a government shutdown while their party controls Congress and the White House.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Monday that administration negotiators including Trump's budget chief, Mick Mulvaney, "feel very confident" that a shutdown won't occur.

Democrats, whose votes are needed to pass the budget measure, had a less charitable version of negotiations. In a conference call with reporters aimed at criticizing Trump's first 100 days as ineffective, party leaders said the biggest shutdown threat was from Trump's demand that the spending bill include funds for the barricade along the Mexican border.

That threat appeared to be easing Monday evening when

Trump told reporters from conservative media that he would be willing to return to the funding issue in September. Two people in the room described his comments to The Associated Press.

Trump tweeted Tuesday, "Don't let the fake media tell you that I have changed my position on the WALL. It will get built and help stop drugs, human trafficking etc."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., approved of Trump's apparent shift. "The president's comments this evening are welcome news given the bipartisan opposition to the wall, and the obstacle it has been to the continuing bipartisan negotiations in the appropriations committees," she said in a statement late Monday.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said, "It's good for the country that President Trump is taking the wall off the table in these negotiations."

Navy Federal to cover direct deposits for its members

Business Wire

VIENNA, Va. — Navy Federal Credit Union has announced plans for supporting its members should Congress be unable to come to an agreement on a continuing resolution and the government shuts down as of midnight Saturday.

Beginning April 26, eligible members can opt in to a special program and receive coverage of their direct deposit of net pay should the government shut down.

"Covering pay for the people protecting our country is simply the right thing to do," said Tynika Wilson, senior vice president of debit card and fund services at Navy Federal Credit Union. "They have important work to do. We're happy to make their paycheck one less thing they have to worry about."

Wilson stressed that eligible members can take action before the possible shutdown by registering for the program starting Wednesday by accessing Navy Federal online or by calling 888-842-6328 or visiting a branch.

Tough court on immigration is model for Trump's plans

Associated Press

DEL RIO, Texas — One by one, the Mexican men stood in the jury box, shackles rattling as they fidgeted slightly and pleaded guilty to crossing the U.S. border illegally.

They had come for better jobs, many to earn more money to help raise their children, their defense lawyer told a federal magistrate in a quiet west Texas courtroom about 3 miles north of the Mexican border. The magistrate, Collis White, warned that a guilty plea would mean jail time and they couldn't return to the United States legally for years. Speaking in Spanish, each of the 15 men said they understood and took their chances. They faced up to six months in jail, but most were sentenced to just a few days.

The men had the misfortune of landing in America's toughest courthouse when it comes to dealing with people who cross the border illegally. In other jurisdictions, authorities skip the criminal charges and simply order deportations. But for the last decade, just about everyone arrested near Del Rio gets prosecuted.

That tough approach is a model President Donald Trump hopes to replicate as part of his sweeping plans to stop illegal immigration, the cornerstone of his campaign. He wants to prosecute many more people caught crossing the border illegally.

Doing so wouldn't be cheap. Immigration cases already account for more than half of federal prosecutions. Trump

is seeking hundreds of million dollars more. It's unclear if Congress will give him the money. Civil libertarians object to the prosecutions, saying arrestees are rushed through the system without having a chance to exercise their rights.

And a previous attempt to expand the Del Rio approach had mixed results. Prosecutions spiked at the end of the George W. Bush administration and during the first few years of the Obama administration but later declined. Part of the decline is likely because of the drop in arrests at the border. But limited resources played a role too.

Still, Trump administration officials have made clear they plan to press ahead. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Homeland Security Secretary

John Kelly made the point as they've been touring the border in recent weeks, saying that those who enter the U.S. illegally will be arrested, prosecuted and deported. Earlier this month, the Justice Department released a memo calling on prosecutors to appoint border security coordinators in every judicial district.

In White's Del Rio courtroom each case of someone charged with crossing the border illegally was handled in under a minute. Only one was sentenced to more than a few days — a man who had been deported in 2013 was sentenced to 120 days in prison.

Each man was warned not to come back to the U.S. without the government's permission.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Teen finds dead man while mowing grass

OH DAYTON — Police in Ohio said a 14-year-old girl was mowing the grass at her grandfather's apartment building when she stumbled upon a man dead of an apparent overdose.

The Dayton Daily News reported the girl found the body Saturday morning. It was in bushes near the rear of the Dayton apartment building managed by her grandfather.

Medics arrived and pronounced the man dead. He was identified as Cody Robert Couch, 25.

Doritos gives teens helicopter rides to prom

KS NEWTON — Four Kansas teenagers arrived at their prom in Doritos helicopters thanks to the cheesy way Shaedon Wedel asked his date to the dance.

The Kansas City (Mo.) Star reported Wedel asked his friend Carson Wittman's 15-year-old sister, Carlie, to the prom in Newton because she dreamed of being Cinderella. Carlie Wittman has down syndrome.

Wedel asked Wittman to the dance with a customized Doritos T-shirt, and tweets about it caught the company's attention. So Doritos provided two red helicopters for the dance, and a Wisconsin couple sent Carlie Wittman a princess-style gown. Carson Wittman and his date also got to fly to the dance.

Woman gets impounded car back 5 years later

IL CHICAGO — A Chicago woman whose car has been locked up since the day five years ago when she loaned it to a friend who was arrested in it is finally back behind the

wheel.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported that Symone Smith was reunited last week with her dusty 2010 Nissan Sentra in an impound lot on Chicago's South Side. Five years ago, a friend of hers was pulled over by police, who found a bag of suspected cocaine. Smith denies any involvement with the drugs but prosecutors put a hold on the vehicle.

Last month a judge allowed Smith to get it back — after she paid more than \$3,200 in city fines.

Man who fell into pile of burning leaves dies

MN MINNEAPOLIS — Authorities said a man from the southern Minnesota town of Sleepy Eye who fell into a pile of burning leaves and debris died.

The Hennepin County medical examiner's office said Saturday that Richard Emil Martinka, 73, died of complications from his burns at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis.

The accident happened April 11. The Brown County Sheriff's Office said Martinka was burning the debris when his wheelchair tipped over.

Vintage Wiernmobile donated to museum

WI MADISON — The vintage Wiernmobile, made popular by Oscar Mayer in the 1970s and reborn in the bologna maker's recent marketing campaigns, has been donated to the Wisconsin Historical Society.

The Wisconsin State Journal reported that the Madison Oscar Mayer factory is scheduled to close this summer.

The iconic Wiernmobile was made in Madison in 1969. The vehicle has not been in use

since 1987 and will be restored before moving to the new state archive preservation facility later this year.

There are 13 different Wiernmobile models. The 1969 Wiernmobile will become just the second to be displayed at a museum. A 1952 model can be seen at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich.

Man dies after riding Thunder Mountain

FL ORLANDO — A 54-year-old man died after riding Disney's Big Thunder Mountain Railroad roller coaster in February.

The man had a pre-existing condition and collapsed and died at a hospital after riding the roller coaster. The Orlando Sentinel said the man's death was listed in a quarterly report on all ride-related injuries and illnesses that is given to the state by all of the major theme parks in Florida. The victim was not identified.

When reached late Friday afternoon, Disney confirmed the death but reiterated that the man had a pre-existing condition.

Vermillion flycatcher spotted in northeast

ME BREMEN — The National Audubon Society said a web camera has captured the first confirmed sighting in Maine of a colorful species of bird typically seen in the southwestern part of the country.

Audubon and Explore.org use a web camera on Hog Island to monitor nesting ospreys. Audubon posted on its website Monday that the camera picked up a vermilion flycatcher, which it called "an incredible rarity."

Audubon said the bird is far off its normal course. Vermilion flycatchers usually stick to

the Southwestern states in the U.S.

Audubon said vermilion flycatchers are known for wandering off course, as records show them venturing as far away as Washington state and Quebec.

Legislature passes bodily fluid assault bill

ND BISMARCK — The North Dakota Legislature passed a bill that would extend criminal penalties for anyone who attacks health care and emergency workers with a bodily fluid.

It's already a crime in North Dakota for an inmate or someone in police custody to strike a peace or correctional officer with bodily fluids. The measure now makes it a crime to assault health care and emergency workers.

Violators could face up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Birthing giraffe is a cash cow for zoo

NY HARPURSVILLE — April the giraffe has become a cash cow for a tiny zoo in rural upstate New York, thanks to a livestream of her pregnancy and birth that enthralled viewers around the world.

Owners of the Animal Adventure Park won't say exactly how much they pulled in from all the April-related ventures, but marketing experts who specialize in viral internet campaigns conservatively estimate the haul in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Park owner Jordan Patch said the proceeds will be divided among park improvements, a contribution to the Giraffe Conservation Foundation and a fund to help local children with unexpected medical expenses.

From wire reports

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Pens-Caps rivalry highlights 2nd round

Associated Press

It is the playoff format everyone loves to hate, but say this for the NHL's divisional setup: It is serving up a tasty feast of rivalries in the second round.

For the second consecutive year, Sidney Crosby and the Pittsburgh Penguins will face Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals after they hadn't met in the playoffs since 2009. Washington and Pittsburgh were the league's top two teams in the regular season and are the two top Stanley Cup contenders left playing in the final eight. They get underway on Thursday night instead of in early June.

"We're ready," Capitals forward Marcus Johansson said of facing the defending Cup champions who knocked them out a year ago. "We can't wait to get going. We've worked hard for it. We've worked all year and all summer to get back into this position, and now we're here."

The Edmonton Oilers have waited 11 years to get back to the postseason and they now face the Pacific Division rival Ducks, with Game 1 set for

Wednesday in Anaheim. In the other West semifinal, the St. Louis Blues have home-ice advantage against the Nashville Predators after those teams pulled off first-round upsets.

St. Louis general manager Doug Armstrong expects it to be a far more physical series than anyone expects. That could also be the case for the Ottawa Senators against the New York Rangers, too, with two teams that don't lack for big guys and a thirst for tension.

"When the NHL decided to go with division playoffs ... you do get divisional hatred really quick, and that is exciting," Armstrong said. "This is the benefit of having divisional playoffs is that you play teams right off the bat that you have a history with and you play them consistently in rounds 1 and 2. There are downsides to it, but this is the upside."

Here are some things to watch in the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs:

New blood

Pittsburgh and Anaheim are the only teams left that have won the Cup in the salary-cap

era that began in 2005-06. Washington has been around but is trying to make the Eastern Conference final for the first time in the Ovechkin era in perhaps its best chance at a title, while New York is aiming to get back to the Cup Final for the first time since losing to Los Angeles in 2014.

In the West, the Blues have another opportunity to break through after losing in seven games to the San Jose Sharks in the conference final a year ago. Like former coach Barry Trotz now with the Capitals, the Predators have never reached the conference final.

Oh, Canada

A year after no Canadian teams qualified for the playoffs, Ottawa and Edmonton give the Great White North two chances to end the nation's Cup drought that dates to the Montreal Canadiens' victory in 1993. The Senators and Oilers are underdogs in the second round, but there are reasons to believe they have a shot.

The Senators' methodical style of play can frustrate opponents and at times lull them

to sleep, and goaltender Craig Anderson has better numbers against the Rangers than any other opponent. The Oilers have league-leading scorer Connor McDavid, so enough said.

Injuries

Norris Trophy finalist Erik Karlsson of the Senators played the entire first round with two hairline fractures in his foot that are almost healed. Ottawa could continue to be without injured defenseman Mark Borowiecki and forward Tom Pyatt early against the Rangers, who are healthy.

The Penguins hope to have veteran winger Chris Kunitz back for Game 1 and maybe even Carl Hagelin at some point, while Capitals defenseman Karl Alzner remains day to day with an upper-body injury.

Defenseman Cam Fowler is on track to return for Anaheim while Edmonton could be dealing with the lingering effects of Oskar Klefbom's illness.

A sweep of the Blackhawks has the Predators healthy against the Blues, who just got Paul Stastny back from injury.

No Shattenkirk, no problem for bigger, better Blues

Associated Press

Knowing Kevin Shattenkirk wasn't in their long-term plans, the St. Louis Blues traded the talented defenseman and braced for the immediate blow to their playoff hopes.

That never happened. The Blues actually got better without him.

When the Blues dealt the pending free agent at the trade deadline, they seemed to be creating a giant void on their blue line and gift-wrapping the NHL-best Washington Capitals with their deepest defense in a decade. Yet St. Louis has thrived thanks to the elevated play of captain Alex Pietrangelo and second-year defenseman Colton Parayko while Shattenkirk plays a limited, specialized

role for Washington.

With Pietrangelo taking over top power-play duties, Parayko pitching in and 6-foot-4, 221-pound Robert Bortuzzo providing some bulk on the back end, the new-look Blues cruised into the second round with a 4-1 series win over Minnesota and haven't missed a beat without Shattenkirk.

"We're bigger, all six guys are big men, and now we have two players that play with a little more nasty than we had when we had five guys that played one way and sort of Joel Edmundson doing the majority of the physical work," general manager Doug Armstrong said. "Now we have two players that are bringing some of that physical play."

Saying so long to Shattenkirk

shifted the big-time minutes on the right side to Pietrangelo and Parayko. Ranked 26th among NHL defensemen in points and 11th in ice time before the Shattenkirk trade, Pietrangelo was second with 18 points and fourth at 26:35 a game after it.

Thrown into tougher situations than his first playoffs last season, Parayko has grown up fast without Shattenkirk around.

"It's good for me," the 23-year-old said as the Blues prepared to face the Nashville Predators. "I think that's the best way to do it, get in there and learn from experience."

Even the experienced Blues defensemen like Jay Bouwmeester and Carl Gunnarsson have thrived since the trade. Part of it is the structure of

Mike Yeo, who replaced Ken Hitchcock as coach in early February, but the defensive improvements have made up for the loss of Shattenkirk's offensive talent that will earn him a big contract somewhere July 1.

"Defensively I think we're sound as ever," Gunnarsson said. "Without Shatty I think we were lacking, especially the first couple games (of the playoffs), some offense. He was huge on the power play for us and that poise with the puck. Some guys stepped up."

In Washington, Shattenkirk is glad to be on a Stanley Cup contender readying for a second-round matchup against the defending-champion Pittsburgh Penguins.

He doesn't mind St. Louis enjoying success without him.

Earnhardt retiring at end of season

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Dale Earnhardt Jr. abruptly announced his retirement at the end of the season Tuesday, a decision that will cost NASCAR its most popular driver as the series scrambles to rebuild its fan base.

Colorful, candid and talented, Earnhardt has been plagued by concussions the last several years and he missed half of last season recovering from a head injury. He had delayed contract talks on an extension to drive the No. 88 Chevrolet, and the two-time Daytona 500 winner will call it quits when the season ends in November.

Hendrick Motorsports said Earnhardt informed his team of his decision early Tuesday, though he first discussed retirement with his boss on March 29. Earnhardt and team owner Rick Hendrick scheduled an afternoon news conference to discuss his decision.

“Dale Jr. has had a huge impact on our sport — and you can see that every week with his legion of fans and Junior Nation,” Jeff Gordon said in

a statement released by Fox Sports, where he now works as an analyst after spending much of last season filling in for the injured Earnhardt. “He has a tremendous sense of the history of NASCAR and, while he shares his father’s name, Dale has made a name for himself with his accomplishments in racing. While we will miss Dale on the track next year, he loves this sport, those working in the industry and the fans too much to ever be too far away.”

A third-generation racer, Earnhardt turns 43 in October, is newly married and has said he wants to start a family. He has become a vocal advocate for research into sports-related brain injuries, and the hit he took last June led to months of rehabilitation that gave him a new perspective on his life. The concussions left him with nausea, double vision, anxiety and other symptoms that he has discussed in great detail.

His wife, Amy, posted on Twitter shortly after the announcement: “I’m so proud of Dale for working so hard to get back and even prouder for his courage & self awareness to

make the decision to retire. I’m sure God has many other great plans for him and us!”

The news was the latest blow to the stock car series, which had lost Gordon and Tony Stewart to retirement the past two years. Now Earnhardt, the last of the true country boys, is following their exit. Born and raised in North Carolina, Earnhardt has deep roots in NASCAR. His late Hall of Fame father, Dale, won seven titles and, known as “The Intimidator,” was one of the greatest drivers in NASCAR history. Earnhardt’s grandfather, Ralph, ran 51 races at NASCAR’s highest level.

Earnhardt has won NASCAR’s most popular driver award a record 14 times. He has 26 career Cup victories, made his 600th career series start earlier this year. But the son of the late champion, in his 18th full-time season at the Cup level and, has never won a Cup title.

Earnhardt has driven for Hendrick since 2008 after a nasty split with Dale Earnhardt Inc., the team founded by his father but run by his

stepmother.

Earnhardt is not off to the greatest start this season, with only one top-five finish so far. He took another hit Monday at Bristol Motor Speedway when a mechanical issue caused him to crash.

“I feel good. We’ll get in here and find out,” he said as he walked to the care center.

In a typical Earnhardt move, a fan tried to take a selfie with Earnhardt as the driver made his way to the care center for the mandatory checkup after his hit. Although the fan was pushed away at the time, Earnhardt found him after his stop in the care center and later posted on Twitter the fan got his picture.

He did not seem fazed by Monday’s crash.

“I feel good. We’ll get in here and find out,” he said as he walked to the care center.

After his long layoff last season, Earnhardt discussed his comeback before this year’s Daytona 500 in February and said whenever he made his decision to retire it would be “the right thing to do.”

Curry’s 37 points help Warriors finish sweep of Blazers

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Long after the Trail Blazers had left their court, many of Golden State’s players celebrated on the floor at the Moda Center to the delight of a rather large contingent of yellow-clad fans who chanted “War-ri-ors! War-ri-ors!”

The first-round sweep was sweet, even in Portland’s house.

Stephen Curry scored 37 points and Golden State beat the Blazers 128-103 on Monday night to advance to the conference semifinals. The Warriors will face the winner of the series between the Utah Jazz and the Los Angeles Clippers, which is tied at 2.

Golden State was energized despite playing for the second

straight game without coach Steve Kerr, who has been experiencing a flare-up of symptoms stemming from back surgery a couple of years ago. Assistant Mike Brown has served as head coach in Kerr’s absence.

But the Warriors saw the return of forward Kevin Durant, who hadn’t played since Game 1 because of a strained left calf. He started and the Warriors built a 72-48 lead by the end of the opening half.

Golden State pushed the margin to 33 points in the second half. Curry swished a 31-foot three-pointer that made it 104-77 late in the third quarter and the Blazers couldn’t catch up.

Durant finished with 10 points in just under 21 minutes. All of Golden State’s starters were in double figures.

Hawks 111, Wizards 101:

Paul Millsap bounced back from a sluggish start to score 19 points while Dwight Howard had his best game of the post-season as host Atlanta pulled away from Washington to even the opening-round playoff series at 2-all.

Howard, who was a non-factor through the first three games, had a double-double by halftime and finished with 16 points and 15 rebounds.

The Hawks got double-figure scoring from seven players, including huge contributions off the bench from Kent Bazemore and Jose Calderon.

Bradley Beal scored 32 points, bouncing back from a dismal performance in Game 3, and John Wall had another stellar night with 22 points and 10 assists.

But those two, as good as they were, couldn’t match a more balanced approach by the Hawks.

Raptors 118, Bucks 93:

Norm Powell scored a career playoff-high 25 points while Kyle Lowry had 16 points and 10 assists as host Toronto beat Milwaukee in Game 5 of their playoff series.

Serge Ibaka scored 19 points and DeMar DeRozan had 18 for the Raptors, who can advance to face defending champion Cleveland in the second round with a victory in Game 6 at Milwaukee on Thursday night.

Many in the sellout crowd of 20,251 rose to their feet and chanted “Raps in six” in the final minute of the game.

DeMarre Carroll scored 12 points as all five Raptors starters reached double figures.

HR leader Thames pads total vs. Reds

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Bryan Price knew exactly what Eric Thames did to carry the Milwaukee Brewers past the Cincinnati Reds.

Thames homered twice to raise his major league-leading total to 10, Hernan Perez added a three-run shot, Matt Garza pitched for the first time this season and the Brewers beat the Reds 11-7 on Monday night.

“He’s not missing,” Price said of Thames. “As the saying goes, you may get one good pitch to hit in your at-bat, you don’t want to miss it. He’s not missing it.”

The left-handed batting Thames got just enough muscle on an 0-2 pitch from Amir Garrett (2-2) to slice an opposite-field, two-run homer in the second. Thames extended his home run streak against the Reds this season to five consecutive games

with a solo shot on a 3-2 pitch to right in the first. Perez’s three-run homer capped that inning.

“It’s not that every pitch he’s hit against us has been a terrible pitch,” the Reds manager said. “He’s hit some good pitches, too, but he doesn’t miss a mistake. That’s where we’ve gotten into a lot of trouble with him.”

Brewers manager Craig Counsell was equally impressed.

“The first at-bat, he (Garrett) threw him some good sliders,” Counsell said of Thames. “He wasn’t on the slider, and then 3-2, he was on the slider. I give Eric a lot of credit there.”

Seven of Thames’ 10 major league-leading home runs have come off the Reds’ hurlers, including five in the four-game series in mid-April at Cincinnati.

“You are facing good pitchers and good catchers that are smart and they study you

and your holes,” Thames said. “You have to be that smart to be able to hit here.”

Garza, who strained his right groin at the end of spring training, was activated from the disabled list before the game. He threw 93 pitches — 57 for strikes — and was pulled after four innings. He allowed one earned run and four hits, walked three, struck out four and handed a 10-4 lead over to the bullpen.

Five relievers followed and Carlos Torres (1-2) picked up the win.

Garza singled in a run in the third after Perez’s RBI double. Jesus Aguilar grounded out with the bases loaded in the eighth for the final run.

The Brewers chased Garrett in the fourth on Ryan Braun’s run-scoring double and Manny Pina’s RBI single. The rookie left-hander allowed nine earned runs and eight hits in 3¹/₃ innings. He walked four and struck out one.

Cubs keep rolling, overwhelm Pittsburgh

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Addison Russell set a career high with four hits while Jason Heyward homered for the third time in four games and drove in four runs as the Chicago Cubs jumped on the Pittsburgh Pirates early in a 14-3 victory on Monday night.

Ben Zobrist added three RBIs for Chicago as the defending World Series champions won for the fifth time in six games. Anthony Rizzo had three hits to extend his hitting streak to 13 games.

Chicago scored four runs with two outs in the first inning off Chad Kuhl (1-2) and added five more in the second to give Brett Anderson (2-0) all the breathing room he would need.

Orioles 6, Rays 3: Adam Jones hit a tiebreaking, two-run homer in the seventh inning while Hyun Soo Kim and Jonathan Schoop also went deep as the Orioles beat the Rays on a cold, damp night at Camden Yards.

All three home runs were off Chris Archer (2-1), who gave up five runs, six hits and five walks in 6 ²/₃ innings. The right-hander didn’t allow a long ball in his previous four starts

this season.

Baltimore trailed 3-1 before Kim and Schoop connected on successive pitches in the sixth inning. In the seventh, Archer hit Seth Smith with a pitch and Jones followed with a drive deep into the left-field seats.

Twins 3, Rangers 2: Brian Dozier hit a bases-clearing double as the Twins beat Texas, ending the Rangers’ AL-best four-game winning streak.

Dozier’s two-out double in the fifth came after Martin Perez (1-3) walked the bases loaded, giving free passes to three of the bottom four batters in the Twins lineup.

White Sox 12, Royals 1: Matt Davidson had two hits and three RBIs in an eight-run sixth, Chicago’s highest-scoring inning in five years, as the host White Sox routed the struggling Royals.

Miguel Gonzalez (3-0) lowered his ERA to 2.00, allowing an unearned run and two hits in eight innings.

Davidson set a career-high with three hits and tied his best with four RBIs. Melky Cabrera, Todd Frazier and Tyler Saladino drove in two runs each for the White Sox, who out-hit the Royals 15-2.

Chicago put together its highest-scoring inning since a nine-run fifth against Texas on July 3, 2012. The Royals have lost five straight and scored a major league-low 47 runs.

Rockies 8, Nationals 4: Charlie Blackmon hit a two-run homer in the seventh and Colorado’s bullpen threw three-plus scoreless innings as the host Rockies beat Washington, ending the Nationals’ seven-game winning streak.

Trailing 4-3, Blackmon lined a hanging slider from lefty Eddy Rosario (1-1) into the right-field stands. It was Blackmon’s sixth homer of the season and followed a pinch-hit double from Pat Valaika — his first hit of the season.

The Rockies’ relievers came through once again after starter Tyler Anderson wore down. Carlos Estevez (2-0) got four outs and Adam Ottavino threw an effective eighth. Greg Holland pitched the ninth in a non-save situation after the Rockies added three insurance runs in the eighth. He got pinch-hitter Bryce Harper to ground out to end the game.

Giants 2, Dodgers 1: Matt Cain pitched six scoreless innings to beat the Dodgers for the

first time in nearly four years as the host Giants snapped a four-game losing streak with a win against Los Angeles.

Joe Panik hit a second-inning sacrifice fly off Hyun-Jin Ryu (0-4) in just the Giants’ second victory in their last eight games. Hunter Pence added a key RBI single for insurance in the seventh.

Diamondbacks 7, Padres 6: Zack Greinke struck out 11 in six innings and Chris Owings hit his first career grand slam as the host Diamondbacks held on to beat the Padres.

David Peralta homered and singled twice for the Diamondbacks, whose 9-2 start at home ties the best in club history.

Greinke (2-2) gave up a run on six hits, including three singles by Yangervis Solarte, with no walks and left with a 6-1 lead.

Angels 2, Blue Jays 1: With the infield playing in, Cameron Maybin broke from third on contact and scored on a close play at the plate in the fifth inning for the host Angels.

Right-hander Jesse Chavez went six innings for the Angels, holding the Blue Jays to one run on four hits.