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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Marines killed in Bagram car bombing lauded for their bravery and friendship

BY CHAD GARLAND
AND CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

One of “New York City’s bravest.” A “born leader.” The “perfect son.”

The Pentagon identified the three Marines killed Monday in a car bombing outside Bagram Air Field. They died only days before family and friends expected them to return home from Afghanistan.

Now friends and family of Cpl. Robert A. Hendriks, 25, of Locust Valley, N.Y.; Sgt. Benjamin S. Hines, 31, of York, Pa.; and Staff Sgt. Christopher K.A. Slutman, 43, of Newark, Del., are left with memories and grief.

Officials are still investigating the incident, which wounded three other Americans, an Afghan contractor and five Afghan civilians. No specific details were available, Marine Forces Reserve said in a statement.

“Our focus in the wake of this attack is to support the family, friends and loved ones of our fallen Marines,” said Maj. Roger Hollenbeck, a Marine Forces Reserve spokesman. “These Marines are honored for their extraordinary bravery and for their direct contribution to the defense of this nation.”

All three killed Marines were assigned to 25th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division. They deployed to Afghanistan in October 2018 as part of a program in which Marines train and advise Georgian infantry troops that the former Soviet republic contributes to the NATO mission there.

Slutman and Hines were expected back in the U.S. in a week and a half, said Kyle Moyer, a friend and Marine veteran.

Two uniforms

News that Slutman and Hines were among the dead left family and friends in their hometowns reeling. Both were assigned to a unit based in Harrisburg, Pa.

“They were very close since ... a lot of people in our unit were from the East Coast,” said Moyer, of Morgantown, Pa. “I just really hurt for their families. ... If their families need anything, myself and other Marines, we’ll be willing to do anything to help them.”

Slutman, an infantry rifleman, leaves behind a wife and three daughters, a former Marine in his platoon said.

As a firefighter in his civilian career, he was “truly one of New York City’s bravest” and decorated for that bravery in 2014 after rescuing an unconscious woman from a burning building in the South Bronx, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a statement.

Moyer said that Marines often joked with Slutman about his age — he was in his 30s at the time — and he in turn would “rub it in our faces” by challenging everyone else to keep up.

“Christopher, he was a very caring person. He was older than everyone else, so we called him ‘the old man,’” Moyer said. “He never let things bother him.”

An upbeat leader

Marine veteran Sam Belli, 27, of Pipersville, Pa., said he served in Hines’ squad.

“He was all around a great guy with an upbeat attitude who loved the Corps through and through,” Belli said. “He never treated you like a subordinate. You were always an equal and friend.”

Belli said Hines would lift morale by doing his version of funny lines from movies. “He would know how to get everyone’s morale and attitude back on track.”

‘Heaven gained another Devil Dog’

Hendriks joined the Marines in October 2012 and served as an infantry machine gunner, Marine Forces Reserve said. The deployment to Georgia and Afghanistan was his first.

He was “the perfect son,” Erik Hendriks, his grieving father, told The New York Post on Wednesday while weeping.

On Facebook, a friend shared a photo of Hendriks and said he was a great Marine with “great potential.”

“Heaven gained another Devil Dog due to a heinous attack,” wrote Jerome Tam, whose profile and photos indicate he served in the Marines and is now a sergeant in the Army National Guard.

The deaths bring the number of American troops killed in Afghanistan this year to seven.

Stars and Stripes reporter Caitlin M. Kenney contributed to this report.

Neller: Border mission aided readiness for some Marines

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sending Marines to support the mission on the U.S.-Mexico border did not hurt service readiness and actually increased it for some units, the commandant of the Marine Corps said Tuesday.

Gen. Robert Neller was questioned Tuesday by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee during a Navy budget hearing about impacts to service readiness because Marines were deployed to help support security along the southern border. A leaked internal memo that Neller wrote in March to Navy Secretary Richard Spencer raised concerns about funding shortfalls in fiscal year 2019 due to unplanned and unbudgeted tasks including the border mission and damage from Hurricane Florence.

“So the Marines on the border, their readiness — I’ve personally checked the readiness of every unit down there and, with only one exception, there was no impact to their actual readiness. In fact, a couple of units improved their readiness,” Neller said. “So to say that going to the border was degrading our readiness is not an accurate statement.”

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., asked whether any exercises had been canceled or if units missed scheduled training because they were sent to the border. The Marines commandant said he did not know of any exercises that had been canceled.

If the Marine Corps did not get the additional funding that the service needed to pay for eight unfunded requirements, including the border mission, “then we would have to look at other sources for money, which could potentially include other exercises which would eventually affect the readiness of the force,” Neller said about the memo’s purpose.

AAFES: TV news tuned out due to 'divisive political nature'

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

Soldiers hoping to catch up on the news while eating lunch on Wednesday were out of luck unless they had cellphones at hand.

Televisions in military food courts, customer service centers, malls and other common areas will no longer show news channels "due to their divisive political nature," according to the agency that oversees retail services.

TVs mounted on walls in food courts and other areas on bases around the world frequently show a loop of news channels including Fox, CNN and MSNBC.

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service, headquartered in Dallas, sent a memo to facility managers on Monday with the subject line: "Change in TV policy."

"The Exchange has elected to play sports channels/sports programming on all common area TVs" when its own informational service known as EXTV isn't being shown, the memo said.

"As a federal entity, we remain neutral on political issues. News channels should not be shown on common area TVs due to their divisive political nature," it added.

When asked to elaborate, an exchange spokesman said only that the agency provides general guidance concerning store operations to include television programming in its facilities.

"Providing store guidance regarding operations is an ordinary course of action for the Exchange," Chris Ward, senior public affairs manager for

AAFES, told Stars and Stripes in an email.

That guidance "includes the flexibility to make adjustments based on the news of the day and local needs," he said.

AAFES operates nearly 2,700 facilities that provide goods and services to U.S. military personnel and their families worldwide. EXTV broadcasts promotional and consumer information, entertainment and advertising.

Soldiers had mixed reactions to the decision.

"One hundred percent agree," Pfc. Tyler White, 22, who is assigned to the 2nd Aviation Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, said while eating lunch at the Army's Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, South Korea.

The El Paso, Texas, native said he doesn't like having to watch CNN due to what he sees as its bias against President Donald Trump, and he imagines people on the other side of the political spectrum probably feel the same way when Fox News comes on.

"I don't really want to see people bash our president," he said. "For one, I don't want to watch what I don't agree with, let alone play it on a military base. I just think politics should stay out of the work environment."

Staff Sgt. Manuel Cardona, who is based on Camp Humphreys with the 123rd Brigade Support Battalion, didn't like the decision. He said the news broadcasts are often his only chance to catch headlines during his busy work day.

"I think it's informative. I don't have a TV," the 34-year-old Miami native said. "I think we're getting too ... sensitive about these things."

US, Thai navies hold anti-sub exercises

BY CHRISTIAN LOPEZ
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy commenced Guardian Sea, its annual training exercise with the Royal Thai Navy, with a ceremony Sunday aboard the Thai frigate HTMS Bhumibol Adulyadej.

A Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine and a replenishment oiler, vessels the Navy declined to identify by name, joined two Thai frigates, a corvette and a Sea Hawk helicopter in several exercise scenarios, according to a Navy statement.

An annual event since 2012, the exercise, which typically runs five days, is designed to test both navies' readiness for anti-submarine warfare.

"Guardian Sea 2019 is a premier exercise that demonstrates our commitment to each other in ensuring that we are ready to counter any threats together, both above and underwater," Capt. Matt Jerbi, commodore of Destroyer Squadron 7, said in the Navy statement.

Guardian Sea consists of a shore phase, in which experts meet and exchange information, and a sea phase, which focuses on the ability to track submarines while protecting surface ships, according to the Navy.

This year, for the first time, the Royal Thai Navy has deployed a towed-array sonar, a new capability for that country, according to the statement.

A towed-array sonar is a system pulled behind submarines or surface ships on a cable to enhance the vessel's ability to detect submarines.

Just before the exercise kicked off, the 7th Fleet flagship, the USS Blue Ridge, made a port visit to Laem Chabang, Thailand, for the first time in three years.

Report: Vet showed signs of mental instability

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — The disruptive behavior and mental instability of an Air Force trainee and Army veteran was apparent long before he killed his commander and himself in Texas in April 2016, according to an Air Force investigative report.

Tech. Sgt. Steven Bellino was armed with two handguns, a knife and 61 rounds of ammunition when he shot and killed Lt. Col. William Schroeder, 39, at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, then turned the gun

on himself.

Bellino entered the Army at 18.

In 1997, a handful of years into his Army career, Bellino admitted he had destroyed property, started fires, got involved in fights and broken rules that he found disagreeable, according to the Air Force Office of Special Investigations report obtained by the San Antonio Express-News under the Freedom of Information Act. He was arrested once for letting air out of tires in a parking lot while based at Fort Bragg.

Bellino fought with distinc-

tion in Afghanistan. He served as an Army Ranger, Green Beret and a military contractor in Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia.

But he struggled to settle on a career and suffered increasingly bad symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, according to audio recordings, military records and an Air Force psychiatric evaluation.

An autopsy found that Bellino died by suicide aged 41. The Air Force investigative report indicates Bellino didn't leave a suicide note, but that he wrote a farewell note in the August before his death.

Barr says Trump campaign was 'spied' on

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Attorney General William Barr declared Wednesday he believes “spying did occur” on Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, suggesting the origins of the Russia investigation may have been mishandled and aligning himself with the president at a time when Barr’s independence is under scrutiny.

Barr, appearing before a Senate panel, did not say what “spying” had taken place. He later said he wasn’t sure there had been improper surveillance but wanted to make sure proper procedures were followed. Still his remarks give a boost to President Trump and his supporters who insist his campaign was unfairly targeted by the FBI.

Barr was testifying for a second day at a congressional budget hearing that was dominated by questions about special counsel Robert Mueller’s Trump-Russia

investigation. Barr said he expects to release a redacted copy of Mueller’s report next week, and Democrats have repeatedly expressed concern that his version will conceal wrongdoing by the president.

Barr, who was nominated to his post by Trump four months ago, was asked about spying by Republican Sen. Jerry Moran. He said that though he did not have specific evidence of wrongdoing, “I do have questions about it.”

“I think spying on a political campaign is a big deal,” Barr said.

Asked by Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen if he believed spying on the campaign occurred, Barr said, “Yes I think spying did occur. The question is whether it was adequately predicated.”

Barr said he is reviewing his department’s actions in investigating Trump. A separate investigation is being conducted by the Justice Department inspector gen-

eral into the early days of the FBI’s Russia probe, which Barr said he expects to conclude sometime around May or June.

“I feel that I have an obligation to ensure government power was not abused,” Barr said.

Asked again about spying at the end of the hearing, Barr tempered his tone. “I am not saying improper surveillance occurred. I am saying I am concerned about it, and I am looking into it,” he said.

Barr’s reference to “spying” may refer to a secret surveillance warrant that the FBI obtained in the fall of 2016 to monitor the communications of former Trump campaign aide Carter Page, who has not been charged with any wrongdoing and has denied being a Russian spy. That warrant included a reference to research that was conducted by an ex-British spy who was funded in part by Democrats to look into Trump’s ties to Russia.

NYC orders mandatory vaccines for measles

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Health officials Tuesday ordered nearly everyone in a heavily Orthodox Jewish New York City neighborhood to be vaccinated for measles or face fines, reviving a public health strategy that experts say hasn’t been used in the U.S. in recent times.

The emergency order came as the city, a suburban New York county and some other parts of the nation grapple with a spurt in a disease the U.S. declared eradicated almost two decades ago.

“This is an unusual action,” New York Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged, “and it’s because of the sheer extent of the crisis.”

Meanwhile, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention elevated its response to measles, establishing a larger team to focus on outbreaks that have sickened 465 people nationwide this year — the second-greatest number of cases reported in the U.S. since measles was eliminated domestically in 2000.

The nation’s biggest city is in the midst of its biggest measles outbreak since 1991,

with 285 cases diagnosed since last fall — compared with two in all of 2017, officials said. They blamed the spike partly on anti-vaccine campaigns spreading misinformation that immunizations are dangerous.

News of the order got a mixed reaction among Orthodox Jews in Williamsburg, the Brooklyn neighborhood affected by the order. Some residents — even those who support vaccination — said they felt uncomfortable about the city pushing inoculations on people who don’t want them.

Others remain convinced, against expert assurances, that vaccines are unsafe.

Parts of missing F-35A found; search continues for pilot

By HANA KUSUMOTO

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The U.S. Navy joined the search for a missing Japan Air Self-Defense Force pilot whose F-35A Lightning II stealth fighter went down Tuesday in the Pacific Ocean.

The JASDF said Wednesday a search team found parts of the aircraft’s left and right rudders in the water around 9:45 p.m. Tuesday.

A Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and the USS Stethem, a destroyer, joined the Japanese-led search for the pilot, according to a Navy news release Wednesday.

A JASDF spokesman described the pilot as a major in his 40s.

This is the first accident involving an F-35A anywhere, Asahi Shimbun reported. A Marine Corps F-35B fighter jet crashed near the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort, S.C., in September.

The JASDF fighter disappeared from radar screens and communication with it was lost just before 7:30 p.m., Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya told reporters Tuesday night. The jet was approximately 85 miles east of Misawa Air Base, its home field, in the Aomori prefecture in northeastern Japan.

The pilot was conducting a nighttime anti-fighter combat drill with three other

F-35As, Iwaya said.

The spokesman, who spoke on a standard condition of anonymity, said communications with the pilot indicated nothing abnormal, although the pilot called off the training before the jet disappeared.

A JASDF search team of 11 aircraft, including UH-60Js and U-125s as well as Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships and aircraft, began searching the area where the fighter went missing shortly after the incident. The Japan Coast Guard also sent ships to the scene, the spokesman said.

The cause of the crash is under investigation by the aircraft accidents investigation commission, the spokesman said.

Turkish president: Missile deal with Moscow is final

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The president of Turkey said Wednesday that his country's plan to acquire a Russian air defense system has been finalized, marking the latest rejection of a demand by Washington that the NATO ally abandon its deal with Moscow or face consequences.

"The agreement concerning the S-400 (missile system) is a done deal," President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told Turkish reporters after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. "We are today at the point of delivery."

Turkey's insistence on moving forward with the missile order has provoked threats from top U.S. officials, who warn that the deal would mean the cancellation of a plan to sell F-35 fighters to Ankara.

Turkey's standing inside NATO also could be in play.

"Turkey must choose," Vice President Mike Pence said last week on the sidelines of a NATO meeting in Washington. "Does it want to remain a

critical partner in the most successful military alliance in the history of the world or does it want to risk the security of that partnership by making reckless decisions that undermine our alliance?"

U.S. military leaders have said the S-400 is incompatible with NATO systems and risks giving Moscow access to sensitive F-35 technology that could give Russia an edge in countering the stealth jet.

Last week, Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, nominated to serve as the next head of U.S. European Command and NATO supreme allied commander, also said Turkey should not be allowed to have both U.S. and Russian systems, calling the idea "unsustainable."

Turkey also says the deal shouldn't stop it from gaining access to the F-35. Ankara has ordered 100 of the fighters, the first three of which have been delivered to Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., where four Turkish pilots are training on the aircraft.

Israel's Netanyahu headed to 5th term

Associated Press

Benjamin Netanyahu is headed toward a historic fifth term as Israel's prime minister, as Israel's Blue and White party leaders conceded defeat in the election Wednesday.

The outcome affirmed Israel's continued tilt to the right and further dimmed hopes of a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reelection will also give Netanyahu an important boost as he braces for the likelihood of criminal charges in a series of corruption scandals.

Two of Netanyahu's potential allies, hawkish former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and economic-centric Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, have yet to formally confirm they would sit with Netanyahu and could emerge as wild cards. In any case, the country now faces what could be weeks of political negotiations over the composition of a ruling coalition.

But under nearly every scenario, Netanyahu was the big winner.

The long-time Israeli leader had fought a tight, ugly race against centrist ex-military chief Benny Gantz, whose nascent Blue and White party emerged as a viable alternative to Netanyahu's decade in power.

Yair Lapid, the Blue and White party's No. 2 figure, told

a press conference Wednesday that though his party "did not win in this round, I respect the voters." He said his party will "embitter" Netanyahu's life from the opposition.

The spotlight now falls on Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, who will consult with party representatives next week before picking the candidate with the best chance of assembling a parliamentary majority. Together with his current Jewish ultra-Orthodox and nationalist partners, Netanyahu seemed to have a clear path toward building a coalition government that has a majority in the 120-seat parliament.

Rivlin said that for the first time, his discussions with party leaders would be broadcast on live television "in the name of transparency."

"It's a night of tremendous victory," Netanyahu told supporters early Wednesday. "I was very moved that the nation of Israel once again entrusted me for the fifth time, and with an even greater trust."

He said he had already begun talking to fellow right wing and religious parties about forming a new coalition.

"I want to make it clear, it will be a right-wing government, but I intend to be the prime minister of all Israeli citizens, right or left, Jews and non-Jews alike," he said.

Fukushima evacuation order is partially lifted

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan partially lifted an evacuation order in one of the two hometowns of the tsunami-wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant Wednesday for the first time since the 2011 disaster.

Decontamination efforts have lowered radiation levels significantly in the area about 4 miles southwest of the plant where three reactors had meltdowns due to the damage caused by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The action allows people to return to about 40 percent of Okuma. The other

hometown, Futaba, remains off-limits, as are several other towns nearby.

Many former residents are reluctant to return as the complicated process to safely decommission the plant continues. Opponents of lifting the evacuation orders in long-abandoned communities say the government is promoting residents' return to showcase safety ahead of the Tokyo Olympics next summer.

The government has pushed for an aggressive decontamination program by removing topsoil, chopping trees and washing down houses and roads in contaminated

areas, though experts say the effort only caused the contamination to move from one place to another, creating massive amounts of radioactive waste and the need for its long-term storage.

The meltdowns at three of Fukushima Dai-ichi's six reactors caused massive radiation leaks that contaminated the plant's surroundings, forcing at its peak some 160,000 people to evacuate their homes.

Many people are reluctant to return home because of lingering concerns about radiation, and they have adapted to new jobs and homes after more than eight years away.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

2 men are arrested in theft of statues

MN COON RAPIDS — Minnesota authorities arrested two men suspected of stealing a bald eagle statue from an Army veteran's home and two lion statues from the city of Anoka.

KMSP-TV reported that Coon Rapids police said they received tips on social media that led them to the suspects, who had the statues in the basement of a home where they were staying.

Police said Alan Kalisch, 28, told officers he stole the custom-made eagle statue valued at \$1,300.

Gregory Gerads, 51, told police he stole the lions from Anoka.

Woman with 35 suspensions arrested

NY LAKE RONKONKOMA — Police said a woman with 35 driver's license suspensions has been arrested again for driving while intoxicated.

Suffolk County police said the Central Islip woman was driving on Portion Road in Lake Ronkonkoma early Sunday morning when her vehicle crashed into a traffic sign and a tree.

Officers arrested the 30-year-old woman, who also did not have a court-ordered alcohol interlock in her vehicle.

More wheels stolen from police cars

MS JACKSON — Thieves continue to slow the roll of the Jackson Police Department.

Sgt. Roderick Holmes told local news outlets that three

police cars were towed after police discovered their wheels had been stolen. The cars had been parked behind a police museum in downtown Jackson. Holmes said police aren't sure when the wheels were taken.

It's the second time in recent weeks that thieves have taken wheels from a Jackson patrol car. A car was left on blocks outside the police training academy in March in west Jackson after thieves stole tires and rims.

Man dies, responders injured in bee attack

AZ YUMA — Authorities said a Yuma man died and several first responders were injured in a bee attack.

The Yuma Sun reported the incident occurred Sunday evening when Yuma County sheriff's deputies got reports of a swarm of bees stinging a man.

Sheriff's spokesman Alfonso Zavala said Epigmenio Gonzalez, 51, was attempting to remove a beehive from a couch in the backyard. Zavala said deputies and paramedics found him running while covered in bees.

Rural/Metro fire spokesman Charly McMurdie said firefighters sprayed Gonzalez with water. He was taken to the hospital but was pronounced dead.

Education official launches video series

NH EXETER — The commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Education has launched a video series of school cafeterias titled "School Days, Lunch Trays & Gourmets."

It's modeled after Guy Fieri and the Food Network's television program, "Diners, Drive-

Ins and Dives."

Commissioner Frank Edelblut wants to give viewers an inside look at the work that goes on behind the scenes to make school lunch happen.

In each video, starting with one from Exeter High School, he discusses and prepares food with staff, serving students, and then joining them for a quick bite.

19th-century family graves to be relocated

GA SAVANNAH — The discovery of what is believed to be a family cemetery dating to the early 19th century halted a private development in Savannah as city officials work to document the discovery and develop a process to relocate the graves.

Savannah Development Services Director Julie McLean said the city shut down construction of an auto parts store in September after an area resident alerted them that at one time there had been grave markers on the property and the family cemetery was subsequently identified on a city map.

Live Civil War-era cannonball detonated

KS PLEASANTON — Authorities in eastern Kansas detonated a Civil War-era cannonball that had been on public display for two decades before officials determined it was live ordnance.

Kansas City television station KMBC reported that the cannonball had been on display for 20 years at a Pleasanton museum before it was detonated last week.

A visitor to the museum Thursday noticed a fuse in the

cannonball and alerted museum officials that it might still be live. Museum officials contacted authorities, and Fort Riley's Explosives Ordnance Disposal Unit later came out to detonate it in a controlled environment.

Officer in tap shoes in chase, arrest

CT HARTFORD — A suspected car thief was in custody in Connecticut after being caught by a gumshoe in training wearing tap shoes.

Hartford police said a detective trainee wearing tap shoes and a bow tie made an arrest after a foot chase, when he spotted a stolen car and boxed it in.

Police said the driver got out and the office, Jay Montrose, gave chase on foot, eventually catching Dante Flowers, 25, who was then charged with numerous offenses including larceny and possession of narcotics.

Police did not say why Montrose was sporting that footwear, but noted the bow tie is part of his personal style.

Agency blames WWE organizers for delays

NJ EASTRUTHERFORD — New Jersey's transit agency is blaming the organizers of WWE's Wrestlemania event for lengthy train delays at MetLife Stadium.

Thousands of people heading home from the show last weekend were stuck waiting in long lines for trains and buses operated by New Jersey Transit.

NJ Transit said event organizers' decision to extend the event until 12:30 a.m. caused the problems.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Tiger, McIlroy top Masters contenders

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The Masters should have been the first major Rory McIlroy won.

Now it is the only one he is missing.

Augusta National was thought to be the domain of Tiger Woods when he won four green jackets before turning 30.

Now he is 43, with eight surgeries behind him, so far removed from his last Masters victory that the club has changed chairmen twice since he last won 14 years ago.

McIlroy and Woods are the central figures at the 83rd Masters, which starts Thursday. They share the stage with a cast of characters that gets deeper and stronger every year, so tough that 23 of the last 25 major champions were among the top 25 in the world rankings.

One is looking to join the most elite group in golf by capturing the final leg of the career Grand Slam.

The other is looking to recapture glory on a course where his red shirt was blazing among the azaleas, dogwoods and all the colors of springtime in Augusta.

Woods has always had a hold on the Masters, so much that his Sunday shirt packed as much interest as the green jacket. To see him two years ago walk gingerly to the Masters Club dinner for past champions was to wonder if he would ever shine at Augusta, much less play. It was only a few weeks later that Woods had a fourth surgery on his back to fuse the lower spine.

He not only returned, Woods capped his remarkable comeback by winning in Georgia last year for his 80th career victory on

the PGA Tour. But it was at East Lake in late September, not at Augusta National the second week in April.

Is his comeback complete without a major?

Woods last year was still learning what his fused back was capable of doing. He was coming off two close calls in Florida, but he didn't break par at the Masters until the final day, when it was much too late.

Now he is building, and while his results in five tournaments this year have not been anything special, Woods has been gearing for this week.

"I'm right there where I need to be," he said. "I've gotten a little bit more consistent with my play, and I think that everything is headed on track toward April."

His last two majors were telling because he was in the hunt at both of them until the final hour. He briefly had the lead at Carnoustie in the British Open. He chased Brooks Koepka all the way to the finish line in the PGA Championship.

As for McIlroy, he has not finished out of the top 10 in all seven of his tournaments this year, including a victory at The Players Championship against the best field in golf.

McIlroy has spent the last year reading books on life and success, working more on his attitude than his golf game. He is determined not to let the sport define his success. And it appears to be paying off. Las Vegas has installed him as the favorite at the Masters.

"I would have said a couple of years ago, 'I need to win a Masters, I need a green jacket,' where now it's, 'I want to win it.' And I'd love to win it," he said. "But if I

don't, I'm OK. Maybe some people will say that I'm not motivated enough. Believe me, I am motivated to make the most of what I have and to put my name among some of the greats of our game."

This figures to be his biggest test. So powerful is the allure of Augusta National and the exclusivity of the club and its list of winners that players have been haunted over the years at being left out, whether it was Greg Norman or Tom Weiskopf, David Duval or Tom Kite.

That's just the mystique. Equally tough will be the players Woods and McIlroy are trying to beat.

McIlroy at No. 3 is among five players who are vying for No. 1 in the world — Justin Rose, Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka and Justin Thomas are the others. All of them have reached the top of the ranking before, all of them having won a major or more. It has never been this crowded at the top since the ranking began in 1986.

Missing from that list, and perhaps the most intriguing player besides Woods and McIlroy, is Jordan Spieth.

No one has performed as well at Augusta as Spieth since his debut five years ago — two runner-up finishes, a wire-to-wire victory, in the hunt on Sunday every year and ending the day atop the leaderboard eight times out of 20 rounds.

But he is in the worst slump of his young career, winless since the 2017 British Open, no performance in the top 20 this year. He says his game is close. The Masters might be the ultimate measure of how close — or far — he really is.

Molinari carries momentum into Augusta

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Francesco Molinari still recalls his first experience at the Masters, especially the nerves of trying to pick the right club for the par-3 12th, all while having defending champion Tiger Woods in the same group.

That was 13 years ago. He was caddying for his brother, Edoardo, the U.S. Amateur champion.

"I carried the clubs and prayed that he was going to hit good shots," Molinari said. "It's a tough course to caddie around."

Molinari was on his second year on the European Tour,

and he picked up his first victory a month after the Masters. Now he is 36, and while he jokingly refers to himself as "no spring chicken," the Italian has emerged as one of the threats at Augusta National this week.

He might not look imposing because he lacks the power that garners so much attention in the modern game.

"Francesco is dangerous, isn't he?" three-time Masters champion Nick Faldo said.

It didn't happen overnight, and not without enormous work on his swing and the mental side of the game. The results speak volumes. Since he left Augusta National last year, Molinari won the European

flagship event at Wentworth, shot 62 in the final round to win the Quicken Loans National, captured his first major by outplaying Woods at Carnoustie to win the British Open and became the first European to go 5-0 in the Ryder Cup.

If that wasn't enough, he rallied past the likes to Rory McIlroy and Tommy Fleetwood to win the Arnold Palmer Invitational, and only a tough three-putt from above the 18th hole kept him from reaching the final of the Match Play.

He has never finished better than a tie for 19th at Augusta National. He's never been playing this well, either.

"I'm in a much different posi-

tion to where I was coming in the last few years. I can't deny that," Molinari said. "I feel good about my game — beginning of the week, I think pretty much everyone does. All majors — I think here, Augusta, especially — they are tough tests, and if you are not on your game, you're going to pay the price for it."

But confidence comes with results, and Molinari has had plenty of success.

Presented with the notion that he might not have as intimidating presence as the big hitters, Molinari doesn't disagree.

He doesn't back down, either.

Nationals rally past Phillies in 10th

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Juan Soto took a mighty swing and the ball soared over nearly everything.

The 20-year-old slugger hit a three-run homer in the 10th inning and the Washington Nationals rallied from a five-run deficit to beat the Philadelphia Phillies 10-6 on Tuesday night.

Brian Dozier and Anthony Rendon hit consecutive singles off Jose Alvarez (0-1) to start the 10th and Soto followed with a towering shot over the right-field foul pole. A video review upheld the fair call.

“When I hit it, just see it fly,” Soto said. “They pitched me away, away. I had to be patient, wait for the miss.”

Bryce Harper crushed a three-run homer off former Nationals teammate Stephen Strasburg, but Victor Robles tied it at 6 on a solo shot off Edubray Ramos with two outs and two strikes in the ninth.

Ramos hadn't pitched in six days and has

one career save but Phillies manager Gabe Kapler brought him in to protect a one-run lead. David Robertson and Pat Neshek weren't available.

“Would we have liked a full bullpen? Absolutely,” Kapler said. “But we had a few guys down who we had used regularly.”

Aaron Nola took a four-run lead into the seventh before giving up a two-run homer to Yan Gomes and a solo shot to pinch-hitter Howie Kendrick.

Nola, who finished third in NL Cy Young Award voting last year, gave up five runs — four earned — and seven hits in 6¹/₃ innings. He has a 6.46 ERA after three starts.

Sean Doolittle (3-0) got five outs for the win, and Washington's struggling bullpen came through with six scoreless innings from four relievers.

“I'm proud of them,” manager Dave Martinez said.

Strasburg allowed six runs and six hits in four innings. He was 5-0 with a 1.58

ERA over 10 career starts in Philadelphia before getting roughed up.

Maikel Franco tied it at 1 in the third with his fourth homer, all batting out of the eighth spot in the lineup. He hit in the middle of the order most of his career until this season. Strasburg then lost control of the strike zone. He walked Nola and Jean Segura before throwing three straight changeups in the same spot to Harper. The slugger missed one, fouled one and then blasted his fourth homer to left-center.

Segura lined a two-run triple to right to extend the lead to 6-1 in the fourth.

Harper, who spent his first seven seasons in Washington before signing a \$330 million, 13-year contract with the Phillies, also homered in his first game against his old team last week.

Doolittle struck out Harper in the ninth to preserve the tie.

“That was fun,” Doolittle said. “The energy in the stadium was electric.”

MLB roundup

Angels beat Brewers after Trout injured

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Tommy La Stella homered twice and drove in four runs, and the Los Angeles Angels beat the Milwaukee Brewers 11-8 on Tuesday after Mike Trout departed with a groin injury.

Los Angeles extended its winning streak to five games. Jonathan Lucroy had two hits and three RBIs against his first major league team.

Trout left in the fourth inning after he strained his right groin while sliding into second base in the second. The Angels say their \$426.5 million center fielder is day to day.

Cam Bedrosian (1-0) pitched a scoreless inning for the win and Cody Allen got three outs for his third save.

Yasmani Grandal homered twice and drove in three runs for Milwaukee. Alex Wilson (1-1) got the loss.

Blue Jays 7, Red Sox 5: Chris Sale (0-3) let an opposing runner steal home, Mookie Betts fanned with two on for the final out and Boston stum-

bled again, losing to Toronto in its home opener.

After receiving their World Series rings, the Red Sox fell to 3-9. A return to Fenway Park failed to shake the doldrums that plagued Boston during a season-opening trip to Seattle, Oakland and Arizona.

Twins 14, Mets 8: Jacob deGrom's (2-1) record-tying streak of quality starts ended at 26 when he allowed two home runs to Mitch Garver and one to Eddie Rosario in a drubbing by visiting Minnesota.

Minnesota had six homers, including a pair by Jonathan Schoop.

Cardinals 4, Dodgers 0: Yadier Molina drove in three runs, Paul Goldschmidt homered and host St. Louis beat Los Angeles despite an embarrassing play by Marcell Ozuna.

St. Louis already had a 4-0 lead when Kike Hernandez led off the eighth with a drive to left. Ozuna went back and climbed up the wall, but he misjudged the ball and tumbled onto the warning track as he

tried to make the play. Hernandez's drive bounced over for a ground-rule double, but Mike Mayers and Andrew Miller managed to escape the threat.

Astros 6, Yankees 3: Jose Altuve hit his 100th homer and George Springer's two-run double in the eighth inning helped host Houston to its third straight comeback win.

Mariners 6, Royals 3: Dee Gordon got three hits and drove in two runs as high-scoring Seattle extended baseball's best record by beating Kansas City.

Indians 8, Tigers 2: Corey Kluber (1-2) earned his first win of the season in his third start, powered by four Cleveland home runs.

Braves 7, Rockies 1: Dansby Swanson and Ronald Acuna Jr. homered, leading Max Fried and visiting Atlanta past Colorado.

Giants 7, Padres 2: Kevin Pillar drove in four runs for host San Francisco for the second straight game, and Evan Longoria broke out of a long slump with an RBI single.

The Giants set a season high for runs, one night after blowing a five-run lead with ace Madison Bumgarner on the mound.

Reds 14, Marlins 0: Matt Kemp started his team's spree of three consecutive homers, and host Cincinnati stopped its eight-game losing streak after its manager and an outfielder were suspended.

Athletics 13, Orioles 2: Jurickson Profar got four hits and drove in a career-high five runs, helping visiting Oakland stop a four-game slide.

Slumping Orioles slugger Chris Davis didn't play, a day after he set the major league record for the longest hitless streak by a position player at 0-for-49.

Diamondbacks 5, Rangers 4: Jarrod Dyson connected for a two-run homer in the ninth inning, lifting host Arizona over Texas.

Rays 10, White Sox 5: Austin Meadows homered and set a career high with four hits, powering visiting Tampa Bay.

NHL playoffs

Several teams have goalie questions

Associated Press

Mike Smith and David Rittich helped the Calgary Flames finish first in the Western Conference.

Yet there are still questions about how far those goalies can carry their team in the playoffs.

Smith and Rittich sounds more like a law firm than the goaltending tandem anyone expected the NHL's second-best team to have. Smith is a 37-year-old veteran with a sub-.900 save percentage seven years removed from his last playoff action, while Rittich is a 26-year-old in his first full year in the league who would be getting his first taste of the Stanley Cup playoffs.

It's not out of the realm of possibility the Flames split the duties like they did all season, and as a result they're one of several teams with goaltend-

ing questions as the playoffs begin. Winnipeg, San Jose and Toronto are among the other serious contenders with significant question marks in net at the wrong time of year to have them.

"We wouldn't be where we are without our goaltending," Calgary general manager Brad Treliving said. "We've gotten strong goaltending all year at the right time. What we've never really had is times in the year where both guys are maybe going through a little bit of a skid."

Treliving wouldn't be surprised if coach Bill Peters uses both goalies in the playoffs, a "nontraditional" strategy but not one he thinks is a problem. Smith figures to start Game 1 of the first round against Colorado on Thursday, but it's up in the air after that.

The Flames at least know they can turn to another goalie

if one falters. San Jose — which had the worst team save percentage in the NHL at .889 — will go with Martin Jones, but backup Aaron Dell has struggled plenty this season, too. The Sharks also open against the defending West champion Vegas Golden Knights, who have arguably the best goaltending situation in the playoffs assuming Marc-Andre Fleury is healthy.

Winnipeg will ride with Connor Hellebuyck, even though Laurent Brossoit should be back from injury to back up in Game 1 Wednesday against St. Louis, which has out-of-nowhere phenom Jordan Binnington. Hellebuyck has not been quite as stellar this year as last when he carried a strong regular season into the West final, though that run could pay dividends this time around.

"One thing that you can't substitute is experience," Jets

GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said. "Once you go through something and you experience it, you have a mental template of how you need to act and what you liked about it, what you didn't like about it. So now he's got that experience. He likes to play big games."

With big games to come against the Boston Bruins, Toronto's Frederik Andersen better be up to the task for the Maple Leafs to avoid a third consecutive first-round exit. Andersen is 3-3-3 with a 3.94 goals-against average and .881 save percentage in his last 10 games and wondered if injuries have thrown off his rhythm.

"I think I've played more games and felt better" in previous seasons, Andersen said. "This year I've been banged up a little bit at times and obviously with the time I missed, it's been different."

Sports briefs

Magic Johnson abruptly resigns as Lakers' president

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Magic Johnson abruptly quit as the Los Angeles Lakers' president of basketball operations Tuesday night, citing his desire to return to the simpler life he enjoyed as a wealthy businessman and beloved former player before taking charge of this tempestuous franchise just over two years ago.

Johnson didn't tell owner Jeanie Buss or general manager Rob Pelinka about his shocking decision before he announced it in front of reporters about 90 minutes before the final game of the Lakers' sixth consecutive losing season.

Los Angeles, which is missing the NBA playoffs yet again despite the offseason addition of LeBron James, played well

after Johnson's announcement, but still lost 104-101 to Portland.

"I want to go back to having fun," Johnson said, fighting off tears. "I want to go back to being who I was before taking on this job. We're halfway there with LeBron coming (last summer). I think this summer, with that other star coming in, whoever is going to bring him in, I think this team is really going to be in position to contend for a championship with the growth of the young players."

Johnson didn't directly tie his decision to the future of Luke Walton, but the third-year coach was widely expected to be fired by Johnson. Without using names, Johnson repeatedly mentioned Buss' affinity for Walton, who was in place before Johnson got his job in

February 2017, and Johnson's desire not to cause upheaval between the owner and her chosen coach.

Johnson, who will turn 60 in August, also has many thriving business interests along with ownership stakes in the Los Angeles Dodgers and Los Angeles FC.

Devils draw top pick in NHL Draft lottery

TORONTO — The New Jersey Devils will have the No. 1 pick at this year's NHL Draft.

The team was announced Tuesday night as the winner of the draft lottery.

The Colorado Avalanche had the best odds of landing the first pick at 18.5 percent, but they drew the No. 4 selection.

The New York Rangers will pick second and the Chicago Blackhawks will select third at the June draft.

The 15 teams that failed to qualify for the 2019 playoffs — or the franchises that acquired the first-round picks of non-playoff clubs — participated in the lottery.

The Montreal Canadiens, Vancouver Canucks and Edmonton Oilers were the Canadian teams involved. Edmonton drew the No. 8 pick, Vancouver earned the 10th overall selection and Montreal will pick 15th.

Colorado, which opens the postseason Thursday against the Calgary Flames, acquired its selection from the Ottawa Senators in the trade for Matt Duchene in November 2017.