

USS Ford makes history on deployment

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy's newest and largest aircraft carrier reached its 296th day of deployment Wednesday, setting a post-Vietnam War record.

That nearly 10-month mark for USS Gerald R. Ford passes a previous record set by USS Abraham Lincoln, which finished a 295-day deployment in January 2020. The Navy said then that Lincoln's was the longest carrier deployment in the post-Cold War era.

The transfer of that title to Ford is the latest development in a whipsaw deployment that has seen the ship and its more than 4,500 embarked personnel on station in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Red seas.

It also included a shipboard fire that injured three sailors and displaced hundreds more. The blaze was unrelated to combat, Navy officials have said.

In a statement Wednesday, Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine of

Virginia said he was grateful for how Ford sailors had conducted themselves during their deployment. He added that he understood the sacrifices they have made over the last 10 months amid a twice-extended deployment.

"They should be home with their loved ones," said Kaine, a member of the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on Seapower.

Ford's new record may be bested yet. The carrier likely will go into a "record-breaking" 11th month of deployment, Adm. Daryl Caudle said recently.

If that happens, the ship could eclipse some of the longest carrier deployments since 1964, including that of USS Midway, which was deployed for 332 days in 1972-73, according to USNI News data.

USS Nimitz completed a nearly 11-month deployment in 2021 that included a pre-deployment quarantine due to COVID-19. In all, Nimitz saw some 263 days un-

derway for national tasking, according to USNI.

On Wednesday, Ford remained in the U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet area of operations, a defense official said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The NAVEUR-AF/6th Fleet operating area includes the Eastern Mediterranean, where the carrier was spotted Monday on satellite images along with three destroyers and two supply vessels, according to a ship watcher.

Ford left its homeport in Norfolk, Va., on June 24 for a routine deployment to Europe.

In October, it was ordered from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean and was in the region for the capture and arrest of former Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro in January.

The carrier was presumably nearing the end of an eight-month deployment when it was ordered to the Middle East in February amid rising tensions

with Iran.

In early March, Ford entered the Red Sea, continuing its role in Operation Epic Fury, the joint U.S.-Israel campaign against Iran.

About a week later was the fire, which started in the ship's main laundry areas and displaced some 600 personnel. The injuries to the three sailors were not life-threatening.

Ford then returned to Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete on March 23 for an assessment and repairs, including rehabilitation of seven berthing compartments.

The Navy has offered few details about the fire, saying earlier this month that it remained under investigation.

After a port visit to Split, Croatia, for scheduled maintenance and crew rest, the carrier resumed operations April 3.

The Ford Carrier Strike Group includes Carrier Air Wing 8 and the destroyers USS Winston S. Churchill and USS Mahan.

US naval blockade tightens pressure on Tehran

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. naval blockade aimed at strangling Iran's economy is ramping up pressure as the war enters its seventh week, with Tehran warning of possible retaliation.

During its first 48 hours, no ships have skirted the blockade and nine vessels have complied with direction from U.S. forces to turn around and return toward an Iranian port or coastal area, U.S. Central Command said Wednesday.

The U.S. military has been enforcing the blockade of Iranian ports and coastal areas since

Monday evening local time. The effort consists of more than a dozen warships, over 100 aircraft, and a force of sailors, Marines and airmen numbering over 10,000, the command says.

U.S. forces have "completely halted economic trade going into and out of Iran by sea," said CENTCOM commander Adm. Brad Cooper in a statement Tuesday.

Though Iran has responded angrily to the blockade, it has not resulted in a return to fighting, which began in late February when the U.S. and Israel launched a series of strikes that killed many of Iran's top leaders.

However, Iran warned Wednesday that it is prepared to treat the blockade as a violation of the ceasefire reached early last week, raising the prospect of renewed conflict.

Ali Abdollahi, commander of Iran's Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters, also vowed the country's military will "not allow any exports or imports" in the Persian Gulf region, the Sea of Oman or the Red Sea, state media reported.

Iran's economy is heavily reliant on seaborne trade.

The combined loss of imports and disruption of exports could cost Iran about \$13 billion a month

in economic damage, or about \$435 million daily, estimated Miad Maleki, an Air Force veteran and sanctions expert. He previously served as a senior official in the Treasury Department and is now a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Oil and gas account for about 80% of Tehran's export earnings and nearly one-quarter of Iran's gross domestic product, Maleki added on X.

Washington hopes that the economic pressure will make Tehran more willing to accept U.S. terms for ending the war, which would include halting Iran's uranium enrichment efforts.

Army officer pleads guilty to smuggling

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

An Army lieutenant colonel who last served as deputy commander of an ordnance disposal group pleaded guilty Monday to smuggling firearms parts into the United States from Russia and selling them without a federal license to do so.

Frank Ross Talbert, 41, was assigned to the 52nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group at Fort Campbell, Ky., when he was arrested and federally charged in May 2024. He is still in the Army, according to officials at Fort Campbell.

He pleaded guilty before Judge Eli J. Richardson in the Middle District of Tennessee to 21 counts of weapon-related charges. They include violating

the Arms Export Control Act, smuggling goods into the U.S., trafficking firearms, owning an unregistered machine gun, transporting illegal weapons and dealing firearms without a license.

Talbert also agreed to forfeit weapons and parts, including Russian- and Bulgarian-made AK-47-type firearms, according to the 17-page plea agreement.

A sentencing hearing is scheduled for Aug. 10. He could face up to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$1 million.

An attorney for Talbert declined to comment on Monday.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection records show that Talbert received more than 350 foreign shipments of suspected

firearms and parts dating back to July 2019, according to court documents. At that time, he was stationed at Fort Hamilton, N.Y., in Brooklyn, and was assigned to the United Nations as an improvised explosive device threat mitigation adviser.

He was reassigned to Fort Campbell in July 2022 and moved to Clarksville, Tenn., where shipments continued, according to court documents. Talbert used variations of his name and his wife's name with their address for the shipments.

Sixteen shipments — all containing firearms parts or munition-related items — were intercepted and seized by Customs and Border Protection, which involved the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explo-

sives. Investigators also collected evidence of Talbert's "significant presence" in online forums where members can sell, purchase and discuss firearms.

Talbert has been in the Army since 2006 and has served overseas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait and France. His previous awards include two Bronze Star Medals, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, three Meritorious Service Medals, the Joint Service Commendation Medal and two Army Commendation Medals. He also earned the Combat Action Badge, two Combat and Special Skill Master Explosive Ordnance Disposal Badges, the Parachutist Badge and the Air Assault Badge.

US strike on alleged drug boat kills 4, 174 killed in operation

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military carried out a strike Tuesday on an alleged drug trafficking boat in the eastern Pacific Ocean, leaving four dead, according to a statement from U.S. Southern Command.

That strike brings the death toll from Operation Southern Spear to at least 174.

The campaign against drug trafficking in Latin America continues amid the U.S. military's focus on the Middle East and the conflict with Iran.

"Four male narco-terrorists were killed during this action," the statement said. "No U.S. military forces were harmed."

SOUTHCOM released an unclassified 16-second video on X showing the strike.

The strikes followed another on Monday that left two dead and strikes on Saturday against two boats in the Eastern Pacific.

Shortly after taking office, President Donald Trump designated several drug cartels as terrorist organizations, including Venezuela's Tren de Aragua. His administration has asserted that the U.S. is in an "armed conflict" with cartels and will treat their members as "unlawful combatants."

The administration, however, has offered little evidence to support its claims of killing "narcoterrorists."

The strikes have faced criticism from various foreign leaders from across the region, as well as members of Congress.

Single Marine dad inspires counselor's book for kids

By JANIQUA ROBINSON
Stars and Stripes

A mental health counselor for military families was so inspired by a single Marine's love and care for his three children that she wrote a book about it.

"My Dad Is a Marine: Home Is Where My Hero Lives," self-published by author Sacra Magdalena Durandisse in December, is based on the real-life experiences of Chief Warrant Officer 4 Juan Arce and his daughters Soledad, Camila and Alyssa.

"It's not the first time that you hear about a single parent, but his situation to me was a bit unique," Durandisse said. "They get to see the Marine, but they don't get to see the sensitive side in how he loves his children, his daughters, and that resonated with me."

The book is written for ages 3 to 11 and depicts everyday mo-

ments, such as school drop-offs and family trips, while also addressing the emotional strain deployments can place on children.

"I'm proud of really what the book is about, what it stands for," said Durandisse, who plans to use proceeds from the first 50,000 copies to create a scholarship fund for single-parent military families.

Arce, a quality assurance officer with Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 14 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., is scheduled to retire next year.

"I'm grateful for the recognition, but this isn't just my story," he said Monday. "It represents the experience of single parents in uniform who are raising their children while serving. If it resonates with even one person navigating that path, then it's worth it."

Scandal sparks fears of deeper rot on Hill

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Eric Swalwell's downfall has raised the possibility of a broader reckoning on Capitol Hill as congressional staffers, reporters and opposition researchers race to verify long-standing rumors of a sordid underground culture among the city's most powerful.

Former lawmakers across the political spectrum have warned for years of a hushed congressional bacchanal marked by inappropriate revelry and sexual misconduct. But a sense of growing momentum gripped Congress on Tuesday, as Democrats grappled with Swalwell's resignation and Republicans called for other lawmakers to face scrutiny.

The 72-hour collapse of Swalwell's political career has shifted attention not only to his closest associates in Congress but also to a larger set of sitting lawmakers from both parties suspected of lurid sexual activity. Several members have claimed that Swalwell's alleged behavior was an open secret amid a cacophony of rumors on social media of other potential offenders.

"I think that many people knew about this for a while," Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, a Florida Republican, said in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*.

Luna, who planned to lead the charge to expel Swalwell before he resigned, alleged that young staffers would talk among one another about Swalwell's conduct. Lawmakers should have done more to approach him about the rumors, she said.

Multiple current and former female staffers who spoke with *The Times* described a broader culture of warning one another about

lawmakers with reputations for inappropriate conduct.

But the warnings, passed privately among junior aides, have focused on "sleazy" activity and boundary-crossing behavior, said one former legislative aide, who asked to remain anonymous. Whispers about sleazy behavior generally do not meet the coverage threshold for traditional newsrooms, which are bound by strict ethical standards.

Another former aide said that quiet guidance shared among female staffers focused on behavior that is legal but nevertheless viewed as unprofessional and unbecoming of members of Congress — a line that has prevented many from speaking out publicly.

Now, a race is on for leverage between two political parties facing comparable strategic risks — each with members facing growing questions over their alleged conduct — and for scoops among news outlets, seeking to break the story first.

The Monday resignations of Swalwell and Texas Republican Rep. Tony Gonzales, who faced his own sex scandal, was also forcing lawmakers to address the issue publicly. Sen. Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz. — one of Swalwell's closest friends in Congress — answered questions from reporters at length Tuesday, telling them he should have confronted Swalwell when he heard rumors about his behavior.

"You let your guard down. I let him into my circle. ... I deeply regret it," Gallego said.

Notably quiet was President Donald Trump, who has faced sexual assault accusations of his own and frequently parried with Swalwell throughout his presidency. Al-

though Trump posted an article reporting Swalwell's resignation on social media, he has not commented on the matter in his own words.

The unraveling scandal comes at a time when lawmakers have come together across party lines to push for transparency in the case of Jeffrey Epstein, the late sex offender and alleged sex trafficker whose network of powerful associates included Democrats and Republicans alike.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Sex scandals are not a new phenomenon on Capitol Hill, which has seen over a dozen members embroiled in controversy over the last decade, including Katie Hill of California, Cory Mills and Matt Gaetz of Florida and Blake Farenthold of Texas, among others.

But several prominent former members — including former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy — have warned of a more widespread cultural problem.

"Every member in Congress knows not to let any young staffer get around Swalwell or Matt Gaetz. It's not a secret there," McCarthy said Sunday on ABC's "This Week."

A longtime staffer who spoke on condition of anonymity said Tuesday that allegations against Swalwell have sparked conversations about how to do more to help staffers report sexual misconduct and about the need for ethics investigations to move more quickly.

"Congress has a short-term memory, that is the difficulty here," the staffer said. "After these guys leave their seats, there needs to be a concerted and consistent effort for reforms to be established and be made permanent."

Newsom calls special election

The (San Jose, Calif.) Mercury News

California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Tuesday that he's calling a special election to finish the remaining months of former Rep. Eric Swalwell's term after he resigned earlier in the day amid sexual assault allegations.

The election will be held on Aug. 18 — just two months after the June primary where nine candidates are looking to fill the 14th Congressional District seat in a new term starting next year. The top two vote-getters in June regardless of political party will move on to the November runoff and replace the victor of the special election come January 2027.

Speaker Johnson predicts House will vote to expel Florida Democrat

South Florida Sun Sentinel

Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday he expects the House of Representatives to vote to expel embattled Rep. Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick.

Cherfilus-McCormick, D-Fla., faces an April 21 hearing at which the full House Ethics Committee will consider a sanctions recommendation to the full House after its adjudicatory subcommittee found last month that she had committed 25 ethics violations, including breaking campaign finance laws.

"I do think certainly on Cherfilus-McCormick, the Ethics Committee has gone through all of its processes, and they've, they've found

some alarming facts," Johnson, R-La., told CNN during a media scrum at the Capitol. "I think the facts are indisputable at this point and so I believe it'll be the consensus of this body that she should be expelled. I mean that certainly rises to the level that's needed."

The allegations center on Cherfilus-McCormick's receipt of millions of dollars from her family's health care business following Florida's overpayment of roughly \$5 million in disaster relief funds.

The congresswoman has consistently denied any wrongdoing and has entered a not guilty plea to federal criminal charges, some of which overlap with the House ethics case.

GOP adds trans issues to voter ID push

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump turbocharged a Republican push for a voter ID and election overhaul bill known as the SAVE America Act, sparking a high-profile debate over the future of elections, proof of citizenship and an end to many mail-in ballots.

At the same time, Trump tacked on completely unrelated legislation targeting transgender Americans.

The provisions combined two of Trump's most frequent campaign topics: the spectre of illegal voting and hot-button social issues involving LGBTQ Americans. And Trump made it clear that control of Congress was a major part of the strategy.

"Only sick, demented, or deranged people in the House or Senate could vote against THE SAVE AMERICA ACT," Trump posted on social media. "If they do, each one of these points, separately, will be used against the user in his/her political campaign for office — A guaranteed loss!"

The second Trump administration has sought to roll back societal changes in favor of transgender Americans that Trump and other conservatives argued went too far.

Now that is helping to consume Senate floor time and prompting discussion over whether it could hitch a ride on a filibuster-proof budget reconciliation bill to get around

Democratic opposition.

Trump has at times threatened not to sign any other legislation until Congress passes the provisions.

The House earlier this year passed a bill containing some of the voting provisions. It was Trump who sought to add more, including the anti-transgender provisions as well as a ban on late-arriving ballots and voting by mail.

Those provisions now live in an amendment from Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., as well as a series of amendments from other Republicans.

"No more delays — let's get it done," Schmitt said on social media.

Casey Burgat, legislative af-

fairs program director at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, said Republicans see adding the seemingly unrelated amendments targeting transgender Americans to the bill as a "win-win" for them.

"If it passes, great. They get everything they want. But if it doesn't, then they get to pick and choose the ads they get to run against Democrats in vulnerable spots," Burgat said.

Democrats have called the bill a distraction from cost-of-living issues Americans face. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said the base election provisions are unconstitutional and unlikely to pass.

DOJ seeks dismissal of ex-Proud Boy's conviction

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The Justice Department said Tuesday it was seeking to vacate the conviction of Zach Rehl, the former leader of the Philadelphia Proud Boys who was found guilty of seditious conspiracy for his role in helping incite the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 — the latest development in President Donald Trump's efforts to effectively erase any criminal consequences from that ill-fated attempt to keep him in power.

In a motion filed in the Washington, D.C., Circuit Court of Appeals — the jurisdiction where Rehl was tried and convicted — prosecutors said it was "not in the interests of justice to continue to prosecute this case," and asked that Rehl's conviction be vacated so they could dismiss all charges and end the proceedings.

Prosecutors made the same request for some other Proud Boys and Oath Keepers who did not receive pardons, including Rehl's codefendants, Ethan

Nordean, Joseph Biggs, and Dominic Pezzola, who had been convicted and ordered to serve at least 10 years in prison before Trump issued the commutations.

Trump had already helped free Rehl from a 15-year prison sentence last year, commuting his sentence as well as those of 13 other accused ringleaders who helped foment the chaos at the Capitol five years ago.

Still, the commutation kept Rehl's conviction intact, and did not measure up to the broader form of relief Trump granted to 1,500 others who were also charged in connection with the attack. For those defendants, Trump issued blanket pardons as one of his first official acts back in the White House after being reelected in 2024.

Tuesday's request, if approved by the courts, could offer an even more comprehensive form of relief, because unlike a pardon, it would allow prosecutors to dismiss Rehl's indictment.

Bills try to stop betting on political prediction markets

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — The rise of political prediction markets and several well-timed trades have spurred lawmakers to introduce multiple bills aimed at stopping or regulating insider trading in prediction markets.

But lawmakers are far from agreeing on how far to extend such bans.

"Members of Congress should be prohibited from participating in prediction markets related to political events, policy decisions, and insider, non-public information," said Michael Beckel, the director of money in politics reform at Issue One, a nonprofit government transparency group.

"These are commonsense guardrails that lawmakers on both sides of the aisle should embrace and would help increase trust in the institution of Congress."

The flurry of bills introduced this Congress — more than 10 so far, according to Janice Luong, a policy associate at the Project

on Government Oversight — runs the gamut.

A bill sponsored by Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., in the Senate and Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., in the House, would prohibit betting through prediction markets on elections, government actions, sports, and military actions.

Their bill would bar such prediction markets throughout the country, rather than limiting the ban to members of Congress or government officials.

New York Democratic Rep. Ritchie Torres, meanwhile, introduced a bill in January after an anonymous Polymarket user with a new account made a \$400,000 profit by betting that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro would be out of office.

At least 50 new accounts on Polymarket placed substantial bets on a U.S.-Iran ceasefire in the hours, even minutes, before President Donald Trump announced the ceasefire late Tuesday, the Associated Press reported last week.

Japan to ban use of mobile batteries on its flights

BY HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japan will ban the use of portable lithium-ion batteries for charging electronic devices aboard commercial flights starting April 24, according to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

Passengers will be prohibited from using portable batteries on all commercial flights to and from Japan due to an increasing number of incidents in which lithium-ion mobile batteries emit smoke or catch fire, the ministry said in a news release Tuesday.

The new regulations will limit passengers to two mobile charging batteries carried aboard their flights, according to the release. Passengers may not charge those batteries via power outlets on the planes.

Travelers are prohibited from carrying mobile chargers in their checked baggage and should not store them in overhead bins, the ministry said.

Incidents involving “thermal runaway” by lithium-ion batteries are on the rise as the devices become more compact and proliferate, according to UL Standards and Engagement, formerly Underwriters Laboratories.

A portable power bank in an overhead luggage bin likely caused a fire that destroyed an Air Busan plane in Busan, South Korea, before it taxied for take-off in January, according to a BBC report in March.

Vice president tells pope to stay out of US politics

masslive.com

Vice President JD Vance has joined President Donald Trump in his escalating public dispute with Pope Leo XIV, telling the leader of the Catholic Church to stay out of American political affairs.

The friction intensified after the pontiff criticized the White House regarding the direction of the Iran war, prompting Vance to suggest during a Monday night interview on Fox News that the Vatican should limit its focus to religious and moral concerns.

“It would be best for the Vatican to stick to matters of morality, to stick to matters of what’s going on in the Catholic church and let the president of the United

States stick to dictating American public policy,” Vance said on “Special Report with Bret Baier.”

The dispute began shortly after Pope Leo suggested during prayers at Saint Peter’s Basilica that a “delusion of omnipotence” surrounds the conflict with Iran, according to NPR. On Sunday, the pressure grew when American cardinals appeared on “60 Minutes” to criticize the administration’s stance on mass deportations and the war in Iran.

Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, attempted to brush off the spat as not “particularly newsworthy.”

“We certainly have a good relationship with the Vatican but we’re also going to disagree on

substantive questions from time to time,” Vance said. “I think that’s a totally reasonable thing. I don’t think it’s particularly newsworthy.”

The vice president also defended a now-deleted social media post of Trump which depicted him as a Jesus-like figure in red and white robes healing the sick.

Vance said in his Fox News interview that the president took the image down because the incident was a misunderstood attempt at humor.

“The president was posting a joke, and of course he took it down because he recognized that a lot of people weren’t understanding his humor,” Vance told Baier.

Typhoon Sinlaku skirts past Guam

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Typhoon Sinlaku pushed past Guam on Wednesday headed for the Northern Mariana Islands packing sustained winds of 125 mph, according to a series of alerts from Guam’s Joint Information Center.

Roads blocked by debris, scattered utility outages and reports of low water pressure were among the immediate issues on Guam, which remained under Tropical Cyclone Condition of Readiness 1.

Military installations moved to TCCOR 1-R (recovery) at 4 p.m. but remained closed, except for

U.S. Naval Hospital Guam, which stayed open for emergencies.

Sinlaku was about 175 miles north of Naval Base Guam — 85 miles northwest of Saipan — as of 4 p.m. Wednesday, where it was moving northwest at 3 mph with 125 mph sustained winds.

The storm had slowed to a crawl overnight and moved only 25 miles over 14 hours, a speed that prolonged dangerous conditions near the westernmost U.S. territory.

Guam’s power infrastructure weathered the storm without an island-wide blackout, but outages were reported at various villages between Tuesday and

Wednesday.

As Guam organized its recovery efforts, the Northern Mariana Islands — primarily Rota, Saipan and Tinian — braced for Sinlaku’s arrival.

Saipan reported an island-wide power outage at 6:32 a.m. Tuesday, with 15,624 people affected.

An island-wide outage on Rota left 967 people without power, but water was still available as of the 3 p.m. Tuesday update.

On Tinian, two power feeders were out Tuesday, affecting numerous areas on the island and an undisclosed number of people. Water was still available.

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Blazers rebound from late 11-point deficit

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Deni Avdija scored 41 points — including a go-ahead 3-point play with 16.1 seconds left — and the Portland Trail Blazers clawed back from an 11-point deficit in the fourth quarter to beat the Phoenix Suns 114-110 in the NBA's play-in tournament on Tuesday night.

"It's the best thing that's ever happened to me in my career so far," Avdija said.

The 25-year-old Avdija had never played in the NBA's post-season until Tuesday — toiling for more than five years on mediocre teams in Washington and Portland — but looked comfortable on the bigger stage. He had the winning three-point play with 16.1 seconds left, scoring on a physical take to the rim while being fouled and then converting the free throw.

Avdija and the rest of the young Trail Blazers kept their cool during a physical game that featured plenty of hard fouls. Jrue Holiday finished with 21 points and Jerami Grant returned from a calf injury to

score 16.

Holiday — a two-time NBA champion with Milwaukee and Boston — was impressed with Avdija's composure.

He shot 15 of 22 from the field while adding 12 assists and seven rebounds.

Holiday said the best part of Avdija's performance was it was "kind of an off night."

"I feel like he's unique. Nobody does what he does," Holiday said. "Deni coming out here, carrying us, especially down the stretch, getting that winning bucket and being able to go home knowing we're playing San Antonio is something you love to see in Deni because this is what we expect from him now."

Blazers coach Tiago Splitter agreed that Avdija didn't have his best night despite the big numbers.

He said the 6-foot-8 forward's next test will be facing a Spurs team that will throw different looks at him on defense in a playoff series.

Jordan Goodwin drove for a layup to give Phoenix a 110-109 lead with 32 seconds left, but

Avdija, who also had 12 assists, responded with a physical take to the rim, making a layup while getting fouled and made the free throw for a 112-110 lead.

The Suns had a chance to go back ahead, but Jalen Green's 3-pointer was off the mark.

Goodwin grabbed the offensive rebound but was stripped by Matisse Thybulle to seal the win for Portland.

The Blazers earned the No. 7 seed in the Western Conference playoffs and will face the Spurs in the first round.

Phoenix will host the winner of the Los Angeles Clippers-Golden State Warriors game Friday. Whoever wins will earn the No. 8 seed and face the top-seeded Oklahoma City Thunder in the playoffs. The loser's season is over.

The final few minutes were white-knuckle basketball with the lead changing several times.

Jerami Grant — who returned after missing the final seven games of the regular season because of a calf injury — made a corner 3-pointer to give Portland a 107-106 lead with

1:54 left. Devin Booker responded with a pair of free throws for a 108-107 lead, but Avdija made a finger roll at the rim for a 109-108 lead with 37.3 seconds left.

Green led the Suns with 35 points. Booker had 22.

The Blazers led 83-82 going into the fourth despite shooting just 1 of 11 on 3-pointers in the third quarter. Phoenix pushed to its first lead of the second half when Green made a jumper on the opening possession of the fourth.

It was the start of an 11-0 run that gave the Suns a 93-83 advantage.

Royce O'Neale's steal and 3-pointer put Phoenix ahead 98-87 lead with 7:13 remaining, but that's when Portland started its comeback.

The Suns led 33-31 after one quarter, but the Blazers pushed to a 55-41 advantage by midway through the second.

Phoenix bounced back to cut the deficit to 65-62 at the break after Green completed a four-point play — hitting a 3 while being fouled — with one second remaining.

Ball, Bridges lead Hornets to late-game win over Heat

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — LaMelo Ball made a layup with 4.7 seconds left in overtime, Miles Bridges blocked Davion Mitchell's attempt at a winning layup at the buzzer and the Charlotte Hornets beat Miami 127-126 in a wild start to the NBA's play-in games, eliminating the Heat from the playoffs on Tuesday night.

Ball finished with 30 points and 10 assists and Bridges had 28 points and nine rebounds as Charlotte won its first post-season home game in a decade. Coby White had 19 points, including a turnaround 3 with 10.8 second left in regulation to send the game to OT.

Mitchell scored 28 points and Andrew Wiggins added 27 for Miami, which lost Bam Adebayo to a lower back injury when Ball tripped him in the second quarter.

The Hornets will travel to face the loser of Wednesday's matchup between Philadelphia and Orlando on Friday night for the eighth and final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. Charlotte is seeking its first playoff appearance in a decade.

Ball's driving layup put the Hornets up by five with 26 seconds left in OT. But he made two critical mistakes after that.

Tyler Herro, who scored 23 points for the Heat, hit a twist-

ing, corner 3, and Ball then turned the ball over in the backcourt and fouled Herro on a 3-point shot.

Herro made all three free throws to give Miami a 126-125 lead with 8.7 seconds left.

After a timeout, Ball drove the right side of the lane and made a leaning, right-handed layup to give Charlotte the lead.

The Heat, without any timeouts, pushed the ball up the court and Bridges chased down Mitchell to block his layup attempt, setting off a frenzied celebration. Ball flexed at midcourt as players mobbed each other.

Despite the loss of Adebayo,

Miami remained in control until late in the third quarter, when White banked in a 3-pointer and then added another 3 at the top of the key as part of a 10-0 Charlotte run.

White, acquired in a midseason trade with Chicago, drained another 3 in the closing seconds of the third quarter to give the Hornets a 89-83 lead.

The Heat then built a 102-95 lead in the fourth quarter behind two 3s from Wiggins.

Charlotte tied it when White caught an inbounds pass and made an unbalanced 3 from the corner.

Herro had a chance to win it in regulation, but hit the back iron on a 3-point try.

Caps top Jackets as Ovi thinks on retirement

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Alex Ovechkin had an assist on the go-ahead goal in what could be the final game of his record-breaking career, and the Washington Capitals defeated the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 on Tuesday night in the season finale for both teams.

Ovechkin had the second assist on Jakob Chychrun's power-play goal with 4:07 remaining in the third period. He finished the season leading Washington with 32 goals and 64 points.

Ovechkin, the NHL's all-time goals leader, has said he will consider retirement over the offseason. He has spent his entire 21-year career with the Capitals.

Anthony Beauvillier also scored for Washington and Clay Stevenson stopped 27 shots.

Boone Jenner scored for Columbus and Jet Greaves made 19 saves.

Bruins 4, Devils 0: Mark Kastelic scored twice in the first period, Jeremy Swayman earned his second shutout of the season and host Boston clinched the top wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference with a win over New Jersey.

The Bruins needed a win to

lock up the top wild-card position. Boston will face Atlantic Division champion Buffalo in the first round of the playoffs.

Ten Boston players recorded points in the game. Sean Kuraly had a pair of assists and David Pastrnak reached 100 points for the fourth straight season with an assist on one of the Bruins' four goals in the first.

Mammoth 5, Jets 3: Nick Schmaltz scored twice as host Utah beat Winnipeg and secured the first wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

Schmaltz scored his first goal for the Mammoth 4:54 into the second period on the power-play, assisted by Mikhail Sergachev and Dylan Guenther. He added a power-play goal 7:16 into the third, assisted by Logan Cooley and Clayton Keller.

Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor had a goal and an assist and Isak Rosen also scored for the Jets, which lost a third straight.

Canucks 4, Kings 3 (OT): Jake DeBrusk scored his second goal of the game in overtime and host Vancouver beat Los Angeles.

DeBrusk collected a pass from center Elias Pettersson and tapped in a shot to seal the victory

2:58 into the extra period.

Quinton Byfield and Alex Laferrriere each had a goal and an assist for the Kings (35-26-20). Adrian Kempe scored his 36th of the season and Darcy Kuemper made 21 saves.

Blues 7, Penguins 5: Jimmy Snuggerud scored twice and assisted on both of Dylan Holloway's goals in the third period as host St. Louis rallied from a three-goal deficit to beat Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh raced out to a 3-0 lead in the first period despite resting most of its regular players, including Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, with the playoffs looming this weekend. The Blues surged ahead with five consecutive goals in a span of just over 20 minutes, with Holloway and Pavel Buchnevich scoring 44 seconds apart in the third period.

Hurricanes 2, Islanders 1: Mark Jankowski scored the go-ahead goal in the third period, and visiting Carolina defeated New York.

Nikolaj Ehlers also scored for the Hurricanes, and Brandon Bussi made 28 saves. Carolina closed the regular season with four wins in its final five games and finished atop the Eastern

Conference.

Flyers 4, Canadiens 2: Matvei Michkov had a goal and two assists and Porter Martone had one goal to lead playoff-bound Philadelphia to a win over visiting Montreal.

The Flyers rested most of their key veterans a night after they secured their first playoff berth since 2020 and first home playoff series since 2018.

Wild 3, Ducks 2: Hunter Haight got his first career goal and rookie Jesper Wallstedt auditioned for action in the playoffs with 35 saves, as host Minnesota finished its regular season by beating Anaheim.

Danila Yurov and Robby Fabbrri also scored for the playoff-bound Wild, who have won 21 of their last 22 games against the Ducks, including eight in a row.

Avalanche 3, Flames 1: Gabriel Landeskog scored the go-ahead goal at 15:07 of the third period to lead visiting Colorado over Calgary.

The score was tied at 1 in the final five minutes of the game when Cale Makar sent a pass across to Brett Kulak, whose shot deflected in off Landeskog in front.

Athletic's Russini exits after Vrabel photos published

Associated Press

NFL reporter Dianna Russini has resigned from The Athletic less than a week after published photos of her and New England Patriots coach Mike Vrabel at an Arizona resort prompted an internal investigation at The New York Times-owned sports outlet.

The New York Post last week published the photos of Vrabel and Russini at the Sedona hotel and said they were taken before the NFL owners meetings that began in Phoenix on March 29.

"I have covered the NFL with professionalism and dedication throughout my career, and I stand behind every story I have ever published. When the Page

Six item first appeared, The Athletic supported me unequivocally, expressed confidence in my work and pride in my journalism. For that I am grateful. In the days that followed, unfortunately, commentators in various media have engaged in self-feeding speculation that is simply unmoored from the facts," Russini said in a letter sent Tuesday to Athletic Executive Editor Steven Ginsberg and obtained by The Associated Press.

"Moreover, this media frenzy is hurtling forward without regard for the review process The Athletic is trying to complete. It continues to escalate, fueled by repeated leaks, and I have no in-

terest in submitting to a public inquiry that has already caused far more damage than I am willing to accept. Rather than allowing this to continue, I have decided to step aside now — before my current contract expires on June 30. I do so not because I accept the narrative that has been constructed around this episode, but because I refuse to lend it further oxygen or to let it define me or my career."

Russini joined The Athletic in 2023 after nearly a decade at ESPN, where she held various roles, including "SportsCenter" anchor, NFL analyst and insider.

She hosted a podcast for The Athletic and made appearances on their video platform.

Vrabel and Russini, who are both married, released statements to the Post after publication of the photos downplaying what the photos depict.

Russini said they "don't represent the group of six people who were hanging out during the day."

Vrabel told the newspaper: "Those photos show a completely innocent interaction and any suggestion otherwise is laughable."

Vrabel didn't attend New England's pre-draft news conference Monday.

The New York Times reported Saturday that the digital outlet was investigating Russini's conduct.

Cardinals rally to beat Guardians in extras

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Cardinals rookie JJ Wetherholt homered twice, second baseman Juan Brito allowed Masyn Winn's potential game-ending grounder to bounce into right field and St. Louis stopped a three-game losing streak when it rallied to beat the Cleveland Guardians 6-5 in 10 innings on Tuesday night.

Wetherholt had his first multi-homer game, going deep for the first time since homering in his debut on opening day. His solo homer off Joey Cantillo tied the score 2-2 in the third and his two-run drive against Erik Sabrowski cut the Cardinals' deficit to 5-4 in the eighth.

With two outs in the ninth, Winn reached when his two-hopper hit off Brito's left wrist for just the sixth error by the Guardians this season. Winn advanced on Cade Smith's wild pitch and scored on Yohel Pozo's opposite-field double that bounced to the right-center field wall.

Riley O'Brien (2-0) pitched a perfect 10th, stranding automatic runner Chase DeLauter at third when Brito grounded out.

Automatic runner Thomas Saggese advanced to third in the bottom half on a wild pitch by Tim Herrin (0-1) and scored with a headfirst slide, just beating the throw from right fielder Angel Martínez on Nathan Church's sacrifice fly.

Blue Jays 9, Brewers 7 (10): Vladimir Guerrero Jr. doubled home the go-ahead run in the 10th inning as visiting Toronto beat Milwaukee to hand the Brewers their sixth consecutive loss.

Milwaukee had forced extra innings by scoring twice against Jeff Hoffman in the bottom of the ninth after the Blue Jays got three runs off Trevor Megill in the top half of the inning.

The Brewers' skid is their longest since June 2023, when they also dropped six straight.

Rays 8, White Sox 5: Shane McClanahan (1-1) pitched five

innings of three-run ball for his first win in nearly three years, and visiting Tampa Bay beat Chicago for its fourth straight victory.

Ryan Vilade had three hits, including an RBI double, and scored three runs for the Rays. Ben Williamson doubled twice and drove in three runs as Tampa Bay spoiled the major league debut of White Sox starter Nick Schultz.

Schultz (0-1), Chicago's top pitching prospect, allowed four runs on three hits and four walks in 4 1/3 innings.

Astros 7, Rockies 6: Christian Walker had three hits, including a home run, and host Houston used a six-run third inning to snap an eight-game losing streak with a win over Colorado.

The losing streak was the Astros' longest since ending the 2013 season with a 15-game skid.

Houston trailed 3-0 before Walker hit a solo homer in the second inning. The Astros then took advantage of two errors by Rockies second baseman Willi Castro to score six times in the third.

Diamondbacks 4, Orioles 3: Ildemaro Vargas hit a three-run homer in the fifth inning to lift visiting Arizona over Baltimore.

A night after the Orioles rallied from a 7-1 deficit, Arizona turned the tables with a smaller comeback. The Diamondbacks were down 2-0 when Vargas connected off Trevor Rogers (2-1) for his second homer of the year.

Merrill Kelly (1-0) allowed two runs and five hits in 5 1/3 innings in his first start of the season. He walked four and struck out three.

Reds 2, Giants 1: Spencer Steer and Sal Stewart hit solo home runs and Brady Singer allowed one run in six innings as host Cincinnati beat San Francisco.

Singer (1-1), who lasted 2 2/3 innings in his previous start, needed just 75 pitches to get

through six innings on Tuesday. He allowed one run and six hits with no walks and one strikeout.

Tigers 2, Royals 1: Kenley Jansen got his 479th save, moving past Lee Smith for sole possession of third place on the career list, and host Detroit rallied from an eighth-inning deficit to beat Kansas City for its fourth straight win.

Jansen stranded the tying run at third for his third save this season. Only Mariano Rivera (652) and Trevor Hoffman (601) have more saves than Jansen.

Cubs 10, Phillies 4: Carson Kelly hit a three-run homer, Colin Rea (2-0) pitched six innings of three-run ball out of the bullpen and visiting Chicago rallied to beat Philadelphia.

Nico Hoerner and Alex Bregman each had three RBIs for the Cubs. Edmundo Sosa hit a three-run home run for the Phillies in the second.

Nationals 5, Pirates 4: CJ Abrams went 3 for 4 with a home run, a double and two RBIs as visiting Washington held off Pittsburgh.

Abrams hit a solo shot down the left-field line in the fourth inning to extend the Nationals' lead to 4-1. He also hit the third of three consecutive RBI singles in the first inning, following Brady House and Daylen Lile, as Washington took a 3-0 lead.

Angels 7, Yankees 1: Mike Trout homered for the third time in two games, combining with Jo Adell and Jorge Soler for three consecutive long balls in a five-pitch span against Ryan Weathers in the first inning, and visiting Los Angeles beat New York.

Trout hit a 2-1 fastball to the loading dock adjacent to Monument Park in center field and Adell hit another fastball on the next pitch into the visiting bullpen in left-center field. Three pitches later, Soler drove a 2-0 fastball into the left-field seats.

Braves 6, Marlins 5: Dominic Smith hit a go-ahead, three-run double in the eighth inning as part of a four-RBI night, and

host Atlanta rebounded from a four-run deficit to beat Miami.

The Braves trailed 4-0 in the second inning and 5-3 in the eighth when Drake Baldwin singled off Pete Fairbanks (0-1) leading off, Mike Yastrzemski singled with two outs and Ozzie Albies was hit by a pitch to set up Smith's bases-clearing double.

Twins 6, Red Sox 0: Byron Buxton homered twice and Mick Abel (1-2) pitched seven sharp innings as host Minnesota beat Boston.

Buxton had four hits and scored four runs, while Brooks Lee also homered for the Twins. Minnesota has won eight of nine.

Padres 4, Mariners 1: Xander Bogaerts had three hits and three RBIs, and Mason Miller pitched a perfect ninth inning for host San Diego, which beat Seattle for its sixth straight win and ninth in 10 games.

Miller recorded his fifth save and extended his scoreless innings streak to 29 2/3, the longest active streak in the majors and third-longest in Padres history. He has struck out 20 of his 27 batters faced.

Athletics 2, Rangers 1: Jacob Wilson hit a two-run single and made a nice defensive play at shortstop, helping the host Athletics to a win over Texas that ended a seven-game losing streak against the Rangers.

Jeffrey Springs (3-0) allowed one run and five hits over 6 2/3 innings with five strikeouts. Mark Leiter Jr. struck out two in a perfect ninth for his second save, finishing a four-hitter.

Dodgers 2, Mets 1: World Series MVP Yoshinobu Yamamoto and rookie Nolan McLean duelled through seven innings, Kyle Tucker singled in the go-ahead run in the eighth and host Los Angeles edged New York, sending the Mets to their seventh straight loss.

Shohei Ohtani extended his streak of reaching base to 48 consecutive games with an intentional walk by Raley in the eighth. He finished 0 for 3.