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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Marines order stand-downs for aviation units

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Marine Corps aviation units must cease flying for a 24-hour period within the next two weeks to review safety procedures following two recent Marine crashes that killed 19 troops, the service's top general ordered Friday.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marine commandant, has ordered aviators to review "the fundamentals of safe flight operations, standardization, and combat readiness" during the "operational reset," said Capt. Ryan Alvis, a spokeswoman for the Corps.

"The intent is for flying squadrons to review selected incidents which occurred enterprise-wide and study historical examples of completed investigations in order to bring awareness and best practices to the fleet," she said.

Unit commanders will determine when to conduct the stand-downs. Neller's order instructed commanders to conduct the pause when it will not interrupt training or combat operations.

Fifteen Marines and a sailor were killed in the July 10 crash of a KC-130T tanker-transport aircraft into the Mississippi Delta. Three additional Marines died Saturday in the crash of an MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft just off the coast

of Australia.

The Marines on Wednesday announced they had determined the Ospreys were safe to fly following inspections and a preliminary investigation into Saturday's crash. In that incident, the Osprey crashed into the deck of the USS Green Bay as it was landing on the amphibious transport dock before crashing into the ocean about 18 miles off the coast of Queensland. The three Marines killed are believed to have been trapped inside the aircraft as it sank, officials said. Twenty-three others aboard the aircraft were rescued.

In the July crash, the KC-130T appears to have broken up in midair before it crashed to the ground leaving two debris trails each stretching more than a mile long, an initial investigation found. All of the personnel aboard the plane were killed. The Marines grounded its entire fleet of 12 KC-130T aircraft following the incident.

Safety stand-downs of individual airframes or for particular units are not uncommon.

Last August, the Marines ordered a similar stand-down for all F/A-18 Hornets aircraft following several crashes of the fighter jets. The Marines also temporarily grounded AV-8B Harrier and Osprey aircraft in Japan last year following non-fatal wrecks.

Ex-execus sentenced in Navy corruption case

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Two former executives of a contractor linked to a globe-spanning U.S. Navy corruption scandal have been sentenced to federal prison.

Neil Peterson received a nearly six-year sentence and Linda Raja got nearly four years on Friday in San Diego.

They worked for Singapore-based Glenn Defense Marine Asia, which supplied fuel, food and other services to Navy ships in Asian ports.

Prosecutors said the company and its CEO, nicknamed "Fat Leonard," bribed Navy officials with cash, prostitutes and gifts to obtain classified information that helped the firm overbill the Navy by nearly \$35 million.

Peterson and Raja were accused of submitting more than \$5 million in bogus invoices and service bids. They pleaded guilty in May to conspiracy.

Seventeen people, including an admiral, have pleaded guilty in the sweeping corruption case.

US F/A 18 fighter jet crash lands at Bahrain airport

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A U.S. F/A-18 fighter jet suffering an engine problem crash landed Saturday at Bahrain International Airport and its pilot ejected from the aircraft after it ran off the runway, authorities said. The pilot escaped unharmed.

The crash disrupted flights to and from the island nation off the coast of Saudi Arabia that's home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet. Images on social media showed the grey fighter jet's nose tipped into the air but largely intact after what the Navy described as an "uncontrollable" landing.

The F/A-18 took off from the USS Nimitz, an aircraft carrier now in the Persian Gulf, said Cmdr. Bill Urban, a fleet spokesman. While in flight, the plane suffered an engine malfunction, forcing the pilot to divert, Urban said.

The pilot initially tried to land at Sheikh Isa Air Base in

Bahrain, but instead had to divert to the island's commercial airport, Urban said.

"Due to the malfunction, the aircraft could not be stopped on the runway and the pilot ejected from the aircraft as it departed the runway," the commander said in a statement.

Naval officials began an investigation into the crash and were trying to help the airport resume operations, Urban said. Bahrain's Transportation and Telecommunications Ministry called the crash landing a "minor incident" in a statement and said flights resumed at the airport several hours later.

Bahrain hosts 8,000 U.S. troops, mostly sailors attached to a sprawling base called the Naval Support Activity. That base oversees some 20 U.S. and coalition naval vessels in the Gulf providing security and others running anti-piracy patrols.

Bahrain is also home to an under-construction British naval base.

White nationalists, foes clash at Virginia rally

The Washington Post

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — After a morning of violent clashes between white nationalists and counterprotesters, police ordered hundreds of people out of a downtown park — putting an end to a noon rally that hadn't begun.

Gov. Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency shortly before 11 a.m.

Police declared an unlawful assembly at about 11:40 a.m., and gave a five-minute warning to leave Emancipation Park, where hundreds of neoNazis, Ku Klux Klans members and other white nationalists had gathered to protest the removal of a Confederate statue. They were met by equal numbers of counterprotesters, including clergy, Black Lives Matter activists and Princeton professor Cornel West.

But fighting broke out way before the noon rally, starting Friday night and then again Saturday morning.

Two hours after the crowds were told to disperse, a vehicle plowed into a group of people marching peacefully through downtown Charlottesville.

An Associated Press reporter

saw at least one person receiving medical care.

Earlier, during the protest, men in combat gear, some wearing bicycle and motorcycle helmets and carrying clubs and sticks and makeshift shields fought each other in the downtown streets, with little apparent police interference. Both sides sprayed each other with chemical irritants and plastic bottles were hurled through the air.

A large contingent of Charlottesville and Virginia state police in riot gear were stationed on side streets and at nearby barricades but did not break up the melee.

There were vicious clashes on Market Street in front of Emancipation Park, where the rally was to begin at noon. A large contingent of white nationalist rallygoers holding shields and swinging wooden clubs rushed through a line of counterprotesters.

By 11 a.m., several fully armed militias and hundreds of right-wing rallygoers had poured into the small downtown park.

At about 11:40 a.m., police appeared and ordered everyone to vacate.

Tillerson says diplomats in Cuba suffered 'health attacks'

Associated Press

HAVANA — Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said U.S. diplomats in Havana had been the victims of "health attacks" that left them with hearing loss — the most definitive U.S. statement yet on a series of mysterious incidents that have puzzled longtime observers of U.S.-Cuban relations.

His comments Friday came two days after the State Department issued a vaguely worded statement saying there had been "incidents which have caused a variety of physical symptoms." U.S. officials later

revealed American diplomats had suffered unexplained losses of hearing, and on Thursday Canada's government said at least one Canadian diplomat in Cuba also had been treated for hearing loss.

"We hold the Cuban authorities responsible for finding out who is carrying out these health attacks on not just our diplomats but, as you've seen now, there are other cases with other diplomats involved," Tillerson said in Bedminster, N.J., where President Donald Trump and members of his administration spoke to reporters.

Jury awards ex-Army colonel \$8.4M over ex-cadet's rape claim

The Washington Post

Col. David "Wil" Riggins, after a highly decorated Army career that included multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, was on the verge of promotion to brigadier general in July 2013 when he got a phone call at the Pentagon from the Army's Criminal Investigative Division to come in for a meeting. Once there, he learned that a blogger in Washington state had just accused him of raping her, when both were cadets at West Point in 1986. An investigation was underway.

Riggins waived his right to an attorney and immediately gave a statement denying any sexual assault of the woman, Susan Shannon of Everett, Wash. Shannon also cooperated with the CID investigation, which could not "prove or disprove Ms. Shannon's allegation she was raped," the CID report concluded. But in the spring of 2014, with the armed forces facing heavy criticism for their handling of sexual assault cases, Secretary of the Army John McHugh recommended removing Riggins from the list for promotion to general. Riggins promptly retired.

Then, Riggins sued Shannon for defamation, claiming that every aspect of her rape claim on the West Point campus was "provably false," and that she wrote two blog posts and a Facebook post "to intentionally derail [his] promotion" to brigadier general. During a six-day trial that ended Aug. 1, a jury in Fairfax County, Va., heard from both Riggins and Shannon at length. And after 2½ hours of deliberation, they sided emphatically with Riggins, awarding him \$8.4 million in damages, an extraordinary amount for a defamation case between two private citizens.

The jury ordered Shannon to pay \$3.4 million in compensatory damages for injury to his reputation and lost wages, and \$5 million in punitive damages, "to make sure nothing like this will ever happen again," according to one of the jurors.

In Virginia, punitive damages are limited to \$350,000, and lawyers for both sides said the compensatory damages likely would be reduced to \$2 million, leaving a final judgment of \$2.3 million against Shannon, a stay-at-home mother of three teenagers. The verdict came just days after a jury in Dallas awarded more than \$1 million in damages to a wedding photographer who was harshly criticized by a beauty blogger, spurring the collapse of the photographer's business.

Shannon, 52, said she was devastated by the verdict and fearful for her family's future. "I feel like I'm a financial slave for the rest of my life" to Riggins, Shannon said. "I told the truth in my article and at trial." She and her lawyer, Benjamin Trichilo, said in an interview that they felt Fairfax Circuit Court Judge Daniel Ortiz wrongly prevented them from presenting witnesses and evidence about Riggins' past and the Army CID investigation findings, and they plan to appeal.

Riggins, 52, said the jury took the right steps toward restoring his life. "This journey we've been on the last four years," Riggins said, "it's been a nightmare. ... The large dollar amount is meaningless. All I was looking for was the opportunity to be vindicated, to set the record straight, to take every action to get my reputation back to where it was before the 15th of July [2013], when she published that false accusation."

Afghanistan seeks to double elite units

The Washington Post

CAMP MOREHEAD, Afghanistan — The Afghan military will begin expanding its elite commando units in the coming weeks, Afghan officials and military officers said, in a bid to capitalize on a force that has been one of the few success stories in the nearly 16-year-old war.

Starting in September, the training academy here — an old Russian paratrooper base tucked in a valley south of Kabul — will add an 800-man, 14-week-long commando course atop its current curriculum. Afghan officials are optimistic that in the coming years the 12,000-strong force will be able to almost double, to 22,000 troops.

As the number of commandos grows, the Ministry of Interior's elite police unit and the Afghan Air Force's Special Mission Wing also will expand, to 9,000 and 1,000 troops, respectively. The Afghan military's decision to invest in its commando forces comes with strong U.S. backing and is a key component of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's

recent military reform plan.

The commandos, with their track record of reliability, have become a favorite of U.S. military officials. They see the elite force as key to pushing back the Taliban militants who have taken over broad swaths of the country since NATO forces ended their combat mission in 2014. A recent report from the Pentagon's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan said the commandos and other special units were responsible for 80 percent of all Afghan offensive operations as of early 2017, but warned that they have been overused.

The commandos "are very tired," said Maj. Gen Dawlat Waziri, the chief spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Defense. "By raising the number of commandos, we will be able to give them a breath."

Col. Mohmand Zabihullah, the operations officer for the Afghan Special Operations command, told a small group of reporters that his forces have taken steps to ensure they weren't being misused, including establishing better rela-

tions with regular units and ensuring requests for the commandos are channeled through the Ministry of Defense. It is unclear, however, how effective those measures will be if the Taliban continues to gain ground.

The Afghan commandos were initially designed to act as a raid force against Taliban commanders and other critical targets, but they have slowly turned into the Afghan military's premier shock troops. They are frequently tasked to clear areas of Taliban insurgents, often with the help of U.S. air support and western special operations forces so that regular Afghan Army units can flow in behind them.

The colonel indicated that it will take roughly four years for the commandos to nearly double their size, and that with more numbers, the troops will be able to cover more of the country. Currently, there are about a dozen Afghan commando battalions spread across Afghanistan. Each battalion is responsible for covering a specific geographic area.

Critics of the plan believe that by focusing efforts on growing the Afghan special operations troops, it ignores the roughly 150,000 regular Afghan soldiers who should be able to do many of the same tasks frequently asked of the commandos. Rapidly growing the elite forces also could dilute the commando units to a point where they are indistinguishable from regular units, suffering the same issues with discipline and morale while increasing the threat of insider attacks. In June, a commando launched multiple rockets at a group of army Green Berets, wounding four. A week before that attack, another commando opened fire on a group of American soldiers, killing three.

The surge in commandos also means more Afghan trainers, officers and noncommissioned soldiers will be needed to ensure the new units remain effective. U.S. Special Operations troops, acting as advisers to the Afghan commandos, said they are confident that the Afghans can do it.

Taliban terrorism threat on rise in remote regions

The Washington Post

KABUL, Afghanistan — First, the insurgent fighters attacked a security checkpoint, shooting half a dozen local militiamen. Then, officials said, they entered Mirza Oleng, a village in the rugged hills of northwestern Sar-e Pol province, and started grabbing civilians — men, women and children. When they were done, more than 40 people were dead.

"Some were beheaded, some had their bodies pierced, and some were thrown off the mountain," said Zabiullah Amani, a spokesman for the

Sar-e Pol governor. "They were savagely slaughtered. We don't know why they were killing civilians. We don't know what their motives were."

There were conflicting claims about who carried out the Saturday attack. The Tal-

iban, who control much of the area, claimed they killed only members of the local militia. Some officials said Islamic State fighters also were involved, and the gruesome tactics bore the hallmarks of the international Sunni extremist militia, which has fought against the Taliban and also welcomed renegades from their ranks.

But there seemed to be method to the mayhem.

The Taliban, making a summer show of force as the Trump administration weighs its options for combating the 16-year war, has been stymied in earlier efforts to take over major cities. The insurgents are now refocusing their strategy to showcase their wide geographical reach. In the past month alone, there has been a surge of scattered attacks in remote regions, especially the northwestern prov-

inces of Ghowr, Faryab and now Sar-e Pol, as well as in the south and east.

The insurgents are also using crueler tactics to intimidate the populace and local security forces — even as they provide services, security, quick-justice courts and even recreation in communities they control. They appear to be capitalizing on the high rate of civilian casualties that has fueled much of the growing public discontent with the divided, struggling government headed by President Ashraf Ghani.

Civilian war-related deaths have climbed steadily since 2012, rising from 2,769 that year to 3,498 last year, according to the United Nations mission here. The number of civilians wounded has grown from 4,821 in 2012 to 7,920 in 2016, and the combined casualty figures have

set a record every year.

"As the U.S. government ponders a new strategy, the Taliban have stepped up their attacks in order to cause worry in Washington and to show that they are everywhere in Afghanistan," said Atiqullah Amarkhel, a retired army general here. He said insurgent attacks in the north, far from the Taliban's southern strongholds, "have more propaganda and psychological impact on the population and the security forces."

Amarkhel and others said the insurgents also are hoping to exploit the deepening rifts and weaknesses within the Ghani government, which has recently seen high-level defections, public protests, constant shuffles among Cabinet ministers and a chorus of demands for change from a wide range of political groups.

China's Xi urges restraint over N. Korea

The Washington Post

BEIJING — Chinese President Xi Jinping urged President Donald Trump to exercise restraint over tensions with North Korea during a phone call Friday night, Chinese state media reported.

After a week of threats and counterthreats between Washington and Pyongyang, Xi urged both sides not to do anything that would aggravate tensions, China's CGTN state television network reported.

But North Korea continued to fuel tension Saturday, with the Rodong Sinmun newspaper reporting that almost 3.5 million

people, including students and retired soldiers, have asked to join or re-join the North Korean military to fight against the U.S. over the latest sanctions it encouraged through the U.N. Security Council.

Meanwhile, Japan finished installing surface-to-air missile interceptors in the western prefectures that North Korea said would be in the flight path of any missiles launched toward Guam, where North Korea is threatening an "enveloping strike."

In South Korea, the government began the environmental survey needed to complete the deployment of the Terminal

High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system — a sign that the liberal government is now trying to expedite the deployment.

In his phone call with Trump, Xi said China hoped the parties concerned would exercise restraint and refrain from taking any action that will aggravate tensions on the peninsula, according to CGTN. Dialogue, negotiations and a political settlement are the fundamental ways of solving the Korean Peninsula's nuclear issue, Xi said during the call, which took place Saturday Beijing time.

"The Chinese leader expressed Beijing's willingness

to maintain communication with the U.S. to appropriately resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue," the network reported.

China has viewed the rising tensions between Washington and Pyongyang with some alarm, and repeatedly has urged dialogue to lower tensions. Although China supported stiffer United Nations sanctions last weekend after repeated North Korean missile tests, Chinese officials also want a restart of six-party talks, which stalled in 2009. Those talks would involve North and South Korea, the U.S., China, Russia and Japan.

North Korea still working on how to deliver a nuke to US

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — No need to duck and cover just yet. While U.S. intelligence officials are pretty sure North Korea can put a nuclear warhead on an intercontinental missile that could reach the U.S., experts aren't convinced the bomb could survive the flight to America.

They cite lingering questions about Kim Jong Un's nuclear knowhow. Could North Korea deploy nuclear weapons successfully time after time and hit their intended targets? Would its weapon system break apart from the heat and stress it would sustain as it re-enters the Earth's atmosphere at roughly 10 times faster than a speeding bullet?

"I don't think North Korea has a good measure of how accurate the missile is at this point," said Michael Elleman, an expert with the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "They don't know if the re-entry technologies will really hold up — whether the bomb will survive the trip."

North Korea has short-range missiles that can hit its neigh-

bors. It has tested an intermediate one that could strike Guam, a U.S. territory, as well as a longer-range missile that could reach Hawaii and perhaps the West Coast of the U.S. The intermediate- and long-range missiles are still being developed and it's still questionable if they can strike targets reliably.

Kim must do more tests to master what is known as "re-entry" in missile parlance, experts believe. The process involves shielding a nuclear warhead from the high temperatures and the forces it faces when it re-enters the Earth's atmosphere at about 15,500 mph.

"In principle, Kim Jong Un could hit the United States with a nuclear weapon," said Elleman, a former scientist at Lockheed Martin's Research and Development Laboratory who also worked as missile expert for U.N. weapons inspection missions. "In practice, I think they are probably a half-year to a full year away from having something that will work more often than it would fail."

U.S. officials also think it's just a matter of time before Kim's program fully matures.

National Intelligence Director Dan Coats told Congress in May that Kim has been photographed beside a nuclear warhead design and missile airframes to show that North Korea has warheads small enough to fit on a missile.

That same month, Lt. Gen Vincent Stewart, the Defense Intelligence Agency director, told lawmakers that while Kim still must work on the technical aspects of re-entry, it's only a "matter of enough trial and error to make that work. They understand the physics, so it's just a matter of design."

Coats and Stewart testified before North Korea conducted its first test of an intercontinental missile on July 4. On July 28, it conducted a second test of its long-range Hwasong-14 ICBM.

The second test flight was captured by a rooftop camera operated by Japan's NHK television on the northern island of Hokkaido. Elleman, who analyzed the video, concluded that it most likely "disintegrated" before splashdown, suggesting North Korea is still struggling with re-entry.

Dozens killed in train crash in Egypt

Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Egypt — Two passenger trains collided Friday just outside of Alexandria killing 43 people, according to authorities, the country's deadliest rail accident in more than a decade.

Magdy Hegazy, a top health official in Alexandria, said the crash also injured 122 people.

The Egyptian Railways Authority said earlier that a train coming from Cairo crashed into the back of a train waiting at a small station in the district of Khorshid, just east of Alexandria.

The stationary train had just arrived from Port Said, a Mediterranean city on the northern tip of the Suez Canal, when it was hit, according to the statement.

The statement did not say what caused the accident.

Friday's accident was the deadliest rail accident since 2006, when at least 51 people were killed when two commuter trains collided near Cairo.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Scientists on research vessel spot rare whale

AK ANCHORAGE — Researchers studying critically endangered North Pacific right whales sometimes go years without finding their subjects. This month, they got lucky.

A research vessel in the Bering Sea photographed two of the animals Aug. 6 and obtained a biopsy sample from one, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said.

NOAA Fisheries research biologist Jessica Crance was on board the Yushin Maru 2 when the whales were spotted. Using an acoustic recorder, Crance picked up faint calls of a right whale east of Bristol Bay, Alaska.

The right whale sampled Sunday had been seen eight times before, said Phillip Clapham, head of the cetacean program at NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle. The last time was a decade ago.

Metal object off coast baffles beachgoers

RI WESTERLY — Beachgoers are puzzled and concerned about a mysterious object lodged about 10 feet underwater just off Westerly's East Beach.

The circular object with stainless steel legs is capped with concrete. The Westerly Sun reported that the object was first seen last summer but could not be found on follow up attempts.

East Beach Association President Peter Brockmann said he's been asking experts about the object's origin. He said the best tip he received was from University of Rhode Island oceanographers who theorized it is a for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers water current profiler.

Brockmann said they will try to uproot the object next week.

Video shows car's fall from parking garage

TX AUSTIN — Police in Austin released surveillance video showing a car plunging seven stories from a parking garage and striking another vehicle as it lands in an alley.

The video, released Thursday, shows the car landing atop an SUV then rolling upside down onto the ground. Moments later, people run to help the driver escape.

Police said the July accident happened when the woman drove through retention wires on the seventh floor, hit a building across the street and fell to the alley.

The SUV's driver wasn't hurt.

Man allegedly stalked sheriff nearly 20 years

OH COLUMBUS — Federal authorities charged an Ohio man with harassing a county sheriff for nearly two decades via letters, emails and websites, with the alleged harassment apparently dating to the man's arrest by the sheriff in 1999.

William Young, of Columbus, was charged with one count of cyberstalking.

Young has falsely accused Delaware County Sheriff Russell Martin of pedophilia and corruption, and filed numerous lawsuits for alleged fraud and corruption against him, another officer and the Delaware Police Department, according to an FBI affidavit.

Martin told investigators the harassment has caused him distress over the years and required him to change his routines, along with always having a gun hand free as he leaves his house or walks to his car after leaving work.

Man accused of having pipe bomb in vehicle

MO CAMDENTON — A Missouri man is charged with a felony weapons count after a deputy reportedly found a pipe bomb in his vehicle after a chase stemming from a traffic stop.

Joshua Crook, 31, of Camdenton, is charged with felony counts of possession of a controlled substance, resisting arrest, and possession and transport of a weapon. He also faces misdemeanor counts of unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle and unlawful possession of drug paraphernalia.

Camden County authorities allege that after Crook sped away from a deputy who tried to pull him over, his vehicle hit a mailbox. While later searching the vehicle, the deputy reportedly found what turned out to be a pipe bomb.

Paramedic internship candidate saves man

CA SAN LUIS OBISPO — A man who started choking in a San Luis Obispo coffeehouse was saved by a California State University, Sacramento student who was waiting to interview for a paramedic internship.

Coastal Peaks Coffee owner Mike Knight told The Tribune newspaper he was leaving his office when he heard someone choking and saw a young man quickly come to the man's aid.

The student, Will Stewart, was waiting with other candidates for internships with San Luis Ambulance.

Fred Motlo, a San Luis Ambulance field supervisor, said Stewart didn't mention the incident during the internship interview, and they did not find out about it until later.

Stewart got the internship.

Schools prepare for eclipse on 1st day

UT SALT LAKE CITY — With some Utah students going back to school on the same day as the once-in-a-generation solar eclipse, one school district spent about \$30,000 on protective eyewear so its students can watch what officials consider a great learning opportunity.

The Salt Lake Tribune reported Granite School District schools will follow an assembly schedule on Aug. 21 to allow the students and staff to witness the solar event while minimizing disruption.

Salt Lake City School District and Murray School District campuses will also resume class on the same day, but officials will leave it up to school administrators to decide whether they will organize eclipse viewing activities.

Scientists to prep T. rex skull as part of display

WA SEATTLE — Visitors to Seattle's Burke Museum will have a chance to watch as paleontologists work on a skull of a Tyrannosaurus rex that lived more than 66 million years ago.

A team of paleontologists were to begin removing the rock encasing the 4-foot-long dinosaur skull. Museum visitors will be able to watch through a large glass window and follow the progress.

Burke scientists last year unearthed the bones in the Hell Creek Formation in Montana. The discovery included a fairly complete skull, vertebrae, ribs, hips and lower jaw bones.

The team has spent the past year preparing the dinosaur's lower jaw bone and ribs, which will be on display.

From wire reports

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Two QBs compete for top job in Denver

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch don't need to worry about anyone but each other.

Heading into the zenith of their QB competition next week, they can rest assured the Broncos brass has their backs even as fans fret over the duo's oft-times ho-hum jockeying for the job.

Neither quarterback was particularly inspiring in the Broncos' 24-17 win at Chicago in their preseason opener Thursday night — particularly in comparison to Bears rookie Mitch Trubisky, who threw for 166 yards and led three scoring drives.

Siemian did nothing to loosen his grip on the job, and Lynch did nothing to bridge the gap. Neither one had a turnover or a touchdown.

Before the game, however, general manager John Elway again refuted a report that he'd been scouring other rosters for a passer. And after the game, coach Vance Joseph put the kibosh on the notion that Kyle Slotter had moved into the mix with his magnificent mop-up performance.

After Siemian and Lynch

managed just three points on seven combined drives, Slotter led two long TD drives in the fourth quarter. He threw a 47-yard scoring pass to rookie Isaiah McKenzie and then handed off to rookie De'Angelo Henderson for a game-winning 41-yard scamper with 1:58 remaining.

Slotter's passer rating was a perfect 158.3.

"It was awesome," said Slotter, an undrafted rookie from Northern Colorado who's been getting some snaps with the third-stringers only because seventh-round draft pick Chad Kelly is recovering from knee and wrist injuries.

"That's everything you dream of as a kid: dropping back and throwing a touchdown in the National Football League and leading another one," Slotter said. "It was just a blessing to have an opportunity to be in this position."

His performance begs the question: shouldn't he be included in the Broncos' quarterback race?

"As a starter for us?" Joseph responded. "No. We've got Trevor and we've got Paxton, who we're satisfied with. They're both playing good football. Outside of the penalties, I was impressed with both guys.

"So, no."

In the Broncos' pregame television broadcast, Elway reaffirmed his faith in Siemian and Lynch and once again refuted a report that he'd sought a trade for Bengals backup QB AJ McCarron this month.

When the radio report surfaced Wednesday, Elway responded with this tweet: "Rumor of us being interested in anyone other than the QBs we have is another example of irresponsible, fake news!!"

Asked why he felt compelled to reply so forcefully (even channeling Donald Trump and the president's trademark phrase) Elway said, "Because it was not true. It's flat-out not true. We have not talked to anybody in Cincinnati. That has not been on our radar screen at all."

Elway said he wanted to make sure his players knew there was nothing to the rumor, "so that's why we came out as hard as we did." He especially wanted Siemian and Lynch to know management hadn't lost faith in them, he added.

"I'm excited about Trevor and Paxton and the way they've been working," Elway said. "We feel good about them."

Siemian began to separate

himself from Lynch last week and time is running out for Lynch to catch up. The Broncos practice with the 49ers two days next week in advance of their game in which Lynch will start.

Big impressions: Jamaal Carter, an undrafted rookie safety out of Miami, led the team with six solo stops and also recovered a fumble. Wide receiver Cody Latimer, on the hot seat after the Broncos drafted two wide receivers, caught all seven passes thrown his way.

Spoke too soon?: The Broncos didn't wait for the preseason to arrive before announcing McKenzie had won the punt return job. Then, Kalif Raymond went out and piled up 75 yards on two touches against the Bears' backups, a 34-yard punt return and a 41-yard kick-off return.

Gone in 60 seconds: The starting defense was slated to play longer, but Chris Harris Jr.'s 50-yard pick-six on the third snap meant the end of the day for many of the starters after exactly one minute.

"We were good after that one," Harris said. "I'm glad I was able to cut it short for everybody."

Steelers make most of Giants' mistakes in preseason win

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — Rookie quarterback Josh Dobbs threw a 28-yard touchdown pass and Chris Boswell kicked a 37-yard field goal in the third quarter to give Pittsburgh the lead for good in a 20-12 preseason win over the New York Giants on Friday night.

The Steelers capitalized on two major Giants' turnovers in the preseason opener for both teams.

Terrell Watson added a 15-yard touchdown run in a game that had little offense with Ben Roethlisberger of the Steelers and Eli Manning of the Giants being given the night off.

Pittsburgh also was without

injured backup Landry Jones, but that didn't matter because the Giants didn't get much from either Josh Johnson or Geno Smith, and New York was generous with the football.

Dobbs, a fourth-round draft pick out of Tennessee, hit Cobi Hamilton on his touchdown pass on the first play after Donte Deayon fumbled a punt inside his own 30 and Mike Hilton recovered.

Bengals 23, Buccaneers 12: Ryan Fitzpatrick made a good initial impression with Tampa Bay, completing his first series with a 6-yard touchdown run, before host Cincinnati pulled away.

The 34-year-old quarterback

signed a one-year deal for a chance to back up Jameis Winston. Fitzpatrick had mixed results after his TD, going 6-for-13 overall with an interception. He also scrambled twice for 15 yards. Fitzpatrick lost the ball while trying to throw, but recovered his fumble.

Ryan Griffin — Tampa Bay's third-string quarterback the past two seasons — left in the fourth quarter with a shoulder injury and didn't return, forcing Fitzpatrick back into the game.

Tampa Bay opened the game with a 14-play, 92-yard drive, but had to settle for a field goal after Adam "Pacman" Jones broke up a pair of Winston's

passes in the end zone. Jones is suspended by the NFL for the season opener because of his offseason arrest.

49ers 27, Chiefs 17: Alex Smith led host Kansas City to a quick touchdown and first-round pick Patrick Mahomes II had an impressive debut, before backups led San Francisco to the victory.

Smith hit speedster Tyreek Hill for a 32-yard gain on the first play of the game, and Spencer Ware capped a 75-yard march with a short TD run to give the Chiefs a 7-0 lead.

It was the only series for Smith, who finished 4-for-6 for 48 yards.

Matsuyama, Kisner share lead in PGA

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Hideki Matsuyama and Kevin Kisner faced the toughest Quail Hollow had to offer and share the lead in the PGA Championship going into the weekend of the year's final major.

Odds are Quail Hollow won't be the same test the rest of the way.

Clouds quickly gathered Saturday morning about the time some two dozen players were finishing the rain-delayed second round. Chris Stroud picked up a birdie on the par-5 seventh and completed another 3-under 68 to inch closer to the lead. He was two shots behind, along with Jason Day.

Scattered storms were expected the rest of the weekend.

The change in the course was immediate after heavy rain halted play for nearly two hours Friday. Players were

able to aim at flags, knowing the putting surfaces were soft enough that the ball wouldn't roll too far.

Day spoke about being able to smash driver off the tee because it was less likely for the ball to bounce through the fairways and into the rough.

Now, it's a sprint to the finish.

Kisner and Matsuyama, both leading a major for the first time, were at 8-under 134. Day and Stroud were two shots behind while Louis Oosthuizen and Francesco Molinari of Italy were three back.

Sixteen players remained under par.

Jordan Spieth figured he was too far back to chase the final leg of the career Grand Slam this year. He didn't take advantage of the softened conditions and shot 73 to go into the weekend 11 shots behind.

Kisner had the hardest end of the draw, when the greens Thursday afternoon were as fast they have been all year and close to the same Friday morning.

And while Matsuyama was in the better side of the draw, he did most of his damage before the storms arrived. The 25-year-old Japanese star already was 5 under for his round in tough conditions, and he added two birdies after the rain. He is simply playing some of his best golf.

The cut was at 5-over 147 when the second round ended, and there was some drama.

Bernd Wiesberger returned to complete three holes. He was at 5 over, right on the cut line, but facing the two easiest holes on the front nine of Quail Hollow. If he had finished his round at 4 over — that would have required one birdie and

two pars — the cut would have gone to 4 over and eliminated Adam Scott, Charles Howell III and Kevin Chappell.

Wiesberger missed birdie chances, and then three-putted for bogey on the ninth hole from 50 feet. So not only did the Austrian fail to move the cut line, he wound up missing the cut with that bogey on his last hole.

It was his first missed cut around the world dating to last year's PGA Championship. And it gave new life to Scott, who will miss the next three weeks to be with his expectant wife.

Scott is at No. 61 in the FedEx Cup on the PGA Tour. By the time he returns, he will have been eliminated from the playoffs and his season would be over.

So the weekend at Quail Hollow at least gave him a chance to improve his standing.

MLS gaining respect while expanding its footprint

Associated Press

ATLANTA — There was a time when Major League Soccer depended on a shortlist of marquee names to generate excitement about a match.

A David Beckham, Frank Lampard or Steven Gerrard.

Times are changing. Since its inaugural season in 1996, the league has gained respect around the world and MLS continues to expand its footprint on the global soccer stage. Sure, the English Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga, Serie A and French Ligue 1 still have the talent, market dominance and history to be considered by many the best in the world, but MLS is trending upward.

"It's brilliant seeing the growth of this league," said Colorado Rapids goalie Tim Howard, who left the then-New York MetroStars in 2003 and played 13 years in the EPL before returning to MLS last year. "When I left, Don Garber was the commissioner and he

had promised new teams, new stadiums, expansion, growth, better players, bigger fan bases, and he's delivered."

The league started with 10 clubs in 1996, but now consists of 22 and its goal is to have 28. Atlanta United and Minnesota United are in their first seasons, Los Angeles FC is set to join in 2018 and a Beckham-owned Miami franchise is nearing a deal and could start play in 2020.

Twelve locations are competing for four expansion bids, two of which are expected to be announced later this year.

The value of clubs also is soaring. The average MLS club was valued at \$185 million in 2016 by Forbes, a 400 percent increase since 2008. MLS is in year three of its eight-year deals with ESPN, FOX Sports and Univision Deportes. World-class facilities are being built, the talent on the field is better and the world is taking notice.

First-year San Jose president Tom Fox said ownership

groups "have built slowly, brick by brick."

"They didn't step up to the plate and try to hit home runs," Fox said. "They've been trying to hit a series of singles to move the runners around the bags, and I think they've done an excellent job of that in a market that's much more competitive."

When it comes to attendance, MLS is in the same conversation as some of the top leagues.

Average MLS attendance has increased by more than 5,000 fans since 2008. The league's average home attendance this season is currently 21,513, which is only behind the 2016-17 season average in the Bundesliga (41,511), English Premier League (35,822), La Liga (27,700), Mexico's Liga MX (25,050), China's Super League (23,780) and Italy's Serie A (22,164), according to worldfootball.net. It's ahead of France's Ligue 1 (21,029), Japan's J1 League (19,107) and Brazil's Serie A (16,286).

In a market where football is

king, stadiums can be the key to the soccer's growth — and to receiving an expansion bid.

United Soccer League's Sacramento Republic FC is vying for an expansion bid. Officials from the team broke ground on a \$245 million privately financed stadium in Sacramento last week. Atlanta United's new home is the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, a multipurpose facility the team will share with the Atlanta Falcons (both franchises are owned by Home Depot co-founder Arthur Blank). Minnesota United's Allianz Field, a soccer-specific stadium, will open in 2018.

Despite the league's growth, MLS still has much work to do on the international stage.

It is losing the TV battle on its home pitch. Mexico's top league, Liga MX, dominates ratings in the U.S.

Last year's final game netted 3.3 million viewers in the U.S., and more than 6 million viewers overall on Univision and Univision Deportes.

Yankees end Red Sox's 8-game win streak

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Yankees' offense was asleep for seven innings and so was the sellout crowd. New York was about to get shut out for the second straight night and drop a season-high 5½ games behind first-place Boston.

Aaron Hicks woke everyone up with his bat, then made a rocket of a throw, preserving a ninth-inning lead with a double play that electrified fans and bailed out Aroldis Chapman in yet another Yankees-Red Sox thriller.

"We need to get as many wins as we can against these guys and just show that we're willing to fight back," Hicks said after his two-run homer sparked a five-run eighth inning that led the Yankees to a 5-4 win Friday. New York cut its AL East deficit to 3½ games and stopped Boston's winning streak at eight.

Hanley Ramirez's two-run,

first-inning homer and Andrew Benintendi's fifth-inning solo drive off Jaime Garcia built a 3-0 lead for Eduardo Rodriguez, who held the Yankees to two hits in six innings. Matt Barnes followed with a hitless seventh that extended the scoreless streak by Boston's bullpen to 19 innings.

And then the drama began.

In the first of 10 games between the AL East rivals in 24 days, the Yankees sent 11 batters to the plate in the eighth. Pinch-hitter Brett Gardner was nicked on a foot by a pitch from Addison Reed (0-1), a call originally missed by plate umpire Fieldin Culbreth and overturned on video review. Didi Gregorius and Todd Frazier followed Hicks' home run with RBI singles and Ronald Torreyes hit a sacrifice fly for a 5-3 lead.

And there was more.

Pitching for the first time since Saturday, Chapman

walked Jackie Bradley Jr. on four pitches and Eduardo Nunez on five. He missed outside with a 100.6 mph fastball, and Benintendi — whose bases-loaded walk against Chapman gave Boston a July 14 win at Fenway Park — came to the plate as Dellin Betances warmed up.

Benintendi lofted an 0-2 pitch 327 feet to Hicks, just in front of the left-field warning track, and Bradley scored on the sacrifice fly. The strong-armed Hicks, who returned Thursday from a lengthy stay on the disabled list, made a one-hop throw to third base that was about 6 feet to the fair side of the base. Frazier made a backhand catch and swiped Nunez on the back as the former Yankee slid head-first and reached for the base with his left arm.

"If it happened again tomorrow, I would take the chance tomorrow again," said Nunez, a former Yankee acquired by Boston from San Francisco last

month. "That's how you play the game."

Mitch Moreland flied out, giving Chapman his 15th save in 18 chances.

"If he's safe right there," Gardner said, "the next play's a sacrifice fly and the game's tied, right? Who knows how it would have played out? A game-changer on both sides of the ball."

Boston and New York met while 1-2 in the division this late in the season for the first time since 2011.

Hicks, back from an oblique injury that sidelined him since June 25, hooked an inside slider high down the right-field line. He tried to will the drive fair.

"Of course, I'm talking to the ball," he said.

And what did he tell it?

"Go!"

That made it 3-2 and stopped the Yankees' shutout streak at 16 innings.

MLB roundup

Lackey wins 5th straight start as Cubs down Arizona

Associated Press

PHOENIX — John Lackey won his fifth straight start and the Chicago Cubs opened a weekend series in the desert with an 8-3 victory over the Arizona Diamondbacks on Friday night.

Kyle Schwarber and Alex Avila hit consecutive home runs off Taijuan Walker (6-6) to start the sixth inning after David Peralta's two-run shot had cut the Cubs' lead to 3-2 in the fifth.

Paul Goldschmidt's solo homer with one out in the sixth ended Lackey's night. Lackey (10-9) allowed three runs on four hits in 5⅓ innings, struck out seven and walked three on just 85 pitches.

The Cubs, who lost two of three at home to the Diamondbacks just over a week ago, won for just their third time in nine

games to stay a game up on St. Louis in the NL Central. The Diamondbacks have lost five of six and are 1-3 halfway through an eight-game homestand.

Marlins 6, Rockies 3: Giancarlo Stanton hit his major league-leading 40th home run as host Miami beat Colorado.

Indians 5, Rays 0: Carlos Carrasco took another no-hit try into the late innings at Tropicana Field, losing his bid on a two-out single in the seventh by Logan Morrison but leading Cleveland over Tampa Bay.

Rangers 6, Astros 4: Cole Hamels pitched seven scoreless innings, Elvis Andrus scored each time after his three hits and Texas handed visiting Houston its fourth straight loss.

Cardinals 8, Braves 5: Paul DeJong hit two doubles and drove in three runs as surging host St. Louis won its season-

high seventh straight game. Atlanta has lost four in a row.

Twins 9, Tigers 4: Max Kepler and Eddie Rosario homered and drove in three runs each as visiting Minnesota extended its winning streak to six.

White Sox 6, Royals 3: Tim Anderson hit a two-run homer to cap a four-run, seventh-inning rally, and Reynaldo Lopez pitched six strong innings as host Chicago won its fourth straight.

Pirates 4, Blue Jays 2: Pittsburgh star outfielder Andrew McCutchen limped off because of a sore left knee one batter after hitting an RBI double during visiting Pittsburgh's seventh win in nine games.

Tests performed at the stadium showed no damage.

Mets 7, Phillies 6: Amed Rosario's first career homer broke a tie leading off the ninth

inning, Yoenis Cespedes and Michael Conforto also went deep and New York beat host Philadelphia.

Reds 11, Brewers 10: Zack Cozart and Eugenio Suarez each had three hits and two RBIs, and visiting Cincinnati built an early lead and held on to send Milwaukee to its sixth loss in a row.

Padres 4, Dodgers 3: Jose Pirela hit a tiebreaking home run leading off the eighth inning, Manuel Margot added two solo homers and visiting San Diego beat Los Angeles.

Angels 6, Mariners 5: Mike Trout scored from second base on Jean Segura's error in the top of the ninth inning, and Los Angeles beat host Seattle.

Athletics 5, Orioles 4: Jed Lowrie had two hits, including an RBI double in a decisive bottom of the eighth inning, as host Oakland defeated Baltimore.