

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, August 2, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US eyes Iran ships closely at key oil route

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The Iranian navy is increasing its presence at the Strait of Hormuz, sparking concerns that Tehran is showcasing its ability to block international access to the world's most important oil transit point.

"We are aware of the increase in Iranian naval operations within the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman," U.S. Central Command spokesman Navy Capt. Bill Urban said Wednesday. "We are monitoring it closely, and will continue to work with our partners to ensure freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce in international waterways."

Iran's navy has been assembling its warships at the northern opening of the strategic waterway. The move comes as tensions have ratcheted up between Tehran and Washington over the decisions by President Donald Trump's administration to terminate its nuclear deal and to levy more sanctions against Iran.

New U.S. sanctions against Iran take effect Friday and a second set is to kick in Nov. 4, the latter targeting the Iranian energy sector and the central bank. Iranian leaders have threatened to shut down the strait if the sanctions prevent the country

from exporting crude oil.

On Tuesday, Iranian naval commander Rear Adm. Hossein Khanzadi told reporters in Iran that the military is ready to close the strait if ordered to do so.

About 18 million barrels' worth of oil moves through the Strait of Hormuz each day, making it the world's busiest energy chokepoint. Even a temporary blockage of the strait, which links the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, could lead to a sharp increase in global energy costs.

It would not be the first time Iran has attempted to block the waterway. In the 1980s, Iran and Iraq engaged in a "tanker war" in the Persian Gulf that quickly dragged in the U.S. Navy.

In 1988, the Navy launched retaliatory attacks on Iranian targets after an underwater mine nearly sank the frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts.

An Iranian frigate, the Sahand, was sunk during the clash with the loss of 45 of its crew.

Last week, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said closing the Strait of Hormuz would be regarded as an "attack on international shipping."

"It would have, obviously, an international response to reopen the shipping lanes with whatever that took, because the

world's economy depends on that energy, those energy supplies flowing out of there," Mattis told reporters.

The Navy does not currently have a carrier group operating in the Persian Gulf, but warplanes are based nearby, as is the U.S. 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain.

Should Tehran move to shut the strait, retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey predicted a swift U.S. military response.

"Danger of Iranian miscalculation in the Straits of Hormuz," McCaffrey said on Twitter. "Vital to global oil supply. Easily interdicted by Revolutionary Guard attack boats and mines. Powerful US Navy and (Air Force) will absolutely break the Iranian blockade in 60 day bloody battle."

On Monday, Trump said he was willing to meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to discuss a new nuclear deal, but that he was rebuffed by Rouhani.

Still, the escalation in tensions between Tehran and Washington resembles the climate between the U.S. and North Korea in the months ahead of Trump's summit with Kim Jong Un, some analysts say.

"That, too, was preceded closely by a dramatic rise in war tensions, while quiet preparations for the big event continued without interruption," said Debkrafile, an Israel-based security analysis group.

Identification work begins on Korean War remains

Associated Press

HONOLULU — The U.S. military is beginning the painstaking process of analyzing remains from the Korean War now that they are back on American soil after having been handed over by North Korea last week.

Vice President Mike Pence and the top commander of U.S. forces in Asia, Adm. Phil Davidson, formally received the remains contained in 55 caskets during an emotional, solemn ceremony Wednesday after they arrived by military cargo jets from South Korea.

"They were husbands and fathers, brothers and neighbors — long gone, but never lost to the memory of their loved ones," Pence said during the ceremony at a mili-

tary base in Hawaii.

Each container was covered in an American flag and was carried off the aircraft by one Marine, one sailor, one soldier and one airman. The troops carefully set each box onto risers inside a hangar as Pence stood, watching, with his hand over his heart. Davidson saluted.

Some of the invited guests wiped tears from their eyes during the procession.

The homecoming comes 65 years after an armistice ended the conflict and weeks after President Donald Trump received a commitment from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for their return.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency will take the remains to a lab on the base where forensic anthropologists will study bones and teeth to identify their

remains, genders and ages. Scientists will extract DNA and compare it to DNA samples collected from families of troops still missing from the war.

The agency also usually relies on any items that may have been found with remains like uniforms, dog tags and wedding rings to identify remains. But North Korea provided only one dog tag with the 55 boxes it handed over last week.

It could take months or years to determine their identities.

The U.S. military believes the bones are those of U.S. servicemen and potentially servicemen from other United Nations member countries who fought alongside the U.S. on behalf of South Korea during the war.

USAF accelerates training for pilots

BY JAMES BOLINGER

Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is working to streamline and improve pilot training by using virtual reality and modern teaching methods.

The first graduates of Pilot Training Next — a six-month program at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, designed to accelerate the learning curve to becoming a pilot — are slated to pin on their wings Friday, Capt. Jeff Kelley, a T-6 Texan II instructor, told Stars and Stripes in a recent phone interview.

“We believe that pilot training can be done faster, better and cheaper,” he said of the program, which is searching for inefficiencies in an Undergraduate Pilot Training program that has seen little change in more than half a century.

PTN uses new virtual reality flight simulators that allow students to refine their skills before ever stepping into a real cockpit, said 2nd Lt. Christofer Ahn, a PTN student pilot who hopes to become an astronaut.

“We are two to three times further along in training than UPT classes that started around the same time we did,” he said via telephone last week. “We are about to graduate, and many [UPT students] have not even soloed yet.” The traditional program produces pilots after slightly longer than a year.

PTN student pilots have a flight simulator in their private quarters and can practice as much as they want and receive immediate feedback, Kelley said. If they do something wrong, they can work through mistakes without having to worry about time constraints faced by UPT classes that must share simulators. The extra practice makes for stronger students who can move on to more complicated tasks, Kelley said.

Despite its initial success, the new program won't be replacing the old one anytime soon, said Maj. Scott Van de Water, an Air Force Special Operations pilot with the leadership team organizing PTN.

“Pilot Training Next is a misnomer,” he said in a recent phone interview. “Technology is an enabler, but from my perspective it's really about people. Technology allows [the Air Force] to be more wise with our resources — time and money — in order to maximize human performance.”

Some lessons learned from PTN are already being incorporated into the old curriculum, Van de Water said.

“I think the most encouraging thing I am seeing out of this program is not necessarily about pilots of technology; it's about unleashing airmen to solve hard problems,” he said.

Enlisted chief: Change will allow airmen to apply for coveted jobs

BY WILLIAM HOWARD

Stars and Stripes

RAF LAKENHEATH, England — Airmen soon will be able to apply for duty stations based on rank and occupation rather than relying on an assignment wish list, the Air Force's enlisted chief told airmen during a town hall meeting Wednesday.

The move is just one of several improvements under development, said Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright, speaking before 1,000 airmen gathered in a hangar.

Other changes would include assigning support staff directly to units — rather than clustering them elsewhere on base — and encouraging staff sergeants to remain in service longer.

“All of these are things that we're working towards to just try and make life better for you, to allow you space to take care of yourselves, to take care of each other, be good wingmen and spend time with your families,” Wright, whose popularity has led airmen on social media to nickname him “Enlisted Jesus,” told the crowd.

The change in how duty station assignments are made will simplify career paths for airmen, Wright said.

“You get to apply and, within a couple weeks, you'll find out if you got it or you didn't,” he said. “I think that makes a little bit more sense.”

Support personnel, such as mental health professionals, chaplains, exercise physiologists, counselors and financial assistants, will be embedded into organizations, Wright said.

“They'll do [physical training] with you and they'll come out to the line and turn some wrenches with you — all in an effort to help our airmen become more resilient,” Wright said.

Wright also addressed recent reports about allowing staff sergeants to earn a military retirement.

“We are attempting to increase higher tenure for staff sergeants from 15 to 20 years,” Wright said. “One thing we want to make sure is that as we extend, more staff sergeants stay in the Air Force and it doesn't create less opportunities for promotions of our senior airmen.”

Senate sends \$708B NDAA to Trump

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday approved a \$708 billion defense policy bill that would authorize a wave of significant Defense Department increases, including servicemembers' pay and the number of troops, equipment and weapons for the 2019 fiscal year.

The National Defense Authorization Act also will usher through a series of new reforms and policy efforts. It passed by a Senate floor vote of 87 to 10.

The legislation now goes to President Donald Trump, and at this pace, the bill could see passage ahead of the start of the next fiscal year on Oct. 1, the first on-time passage of the NDAA in 22 years.

“This NDAA builds on the progress we made earlier this year in the bipartisan budget agreement, which provided for the largest year-on-year increase in funding for American armed forces in 15 years,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said ahead of Wednesday's vote. “This legislation authorizes programs which will contribute to the combat readi-

ness of America's military to meet emerging and persistent global threats. It helps ensure our servicemembers and their families will receive the full support of a grateful nation.”

In July, a joint panel of House and Senate lawmakers reached a deal on the NDAA after weeks of negotiations that followed a series of discussions and hearings with top military officials. Last week, the House passed the measure by a floor vote of 359 to 54. The lower chamber's NDAA vote came at end of the House summer session before its members left Washington for their August recess that extends until Sept. 4. The Senate was slated to work through some of its August recess, but might look for an extended break this month after all.

The NDAA, which directs policy and spending plans for the DOD, could reach Trump as early as this week. However, it remains to be seen when lawmakers will move on companion legislation that actually funds the plan. For now, the compromise NDAA authorizes a 2.6 percent pay raise for servicemembers, the largest increase in nine years, as well as new purchases of aircraft, ships, submarines and weapons.

General recommends Africa drawdown

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

U.S. Africa Command wants to pull hundreds of troops from Africa and to downsize special operations missions there in a move that coincides with the Pentagon's shift to threats posed by Russia and China.

Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, in an interview with *The New York Times* on Wednesday, said the potential drawdown doesn't amount to a retreat from Africa, but that it would help the military better deal with other threats around the world.

"We're not walking away," Waldhauser said, adding that the U.S. will "reserve the right to unilaterally return."

Waldhauser's recommendation is now under review by senior officials.

In the wake of an October ambush in Niger that killed four U.S. soldiers, military

missions in Africa have been under greater scrutiny. American commanders have acknowledged that extremists operating in places like Niger don't pose a direct threat to the U.S., which has prompted questions over whether U.S. forces are taking unnecessary risks in the region.

AFRICOM has about 6,000 troops throughout Africa. Roughly 4,000 of them are based at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. The second-largest contingent is in Niger, where there are about 800 personnel.

Roughly 1,200 special operations troops are on missions in Africa. As part of Waldhauser's plan, those numbers would be cut by 25 percent over 18 months and 50 percent over three years, the *Times* reported. That would leave 700 special operators on the continent.

Most of the cuts are expected to come

from Central and West Africa.

In West Africa, Niger has been a focal point. Earlier this year, the U.S. began conducting armed unmanned surveillance flights in that country. A new, \$110 million drone base also is under construction in Niger.

In places like Cameroon, training missions led by U.S. special operators have achieved their main objective of building a capable indigenous force, Waldhauser said.

"That would be an example of a country where we have worked ourselves out of a job," Waldhauser said.

AFRICOM's main effort is along the eastern Horn of Africa in Somalia, where special operations troops have worked for the past several years in a campaign to assist indigenous forces in their fight against the Al-Shabab extremist group.

Turkey says Trump sanctions threaten ties

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — A senior Turkish official accused President Donald Trump on Thursday of jeopardizing the long-standing ties between Turkey and the U.S. by allowing sanctions on two Turkish ministers over the detention of an American pastor.

The Turkish government called on the U.S. to reverse its decision to subject Turkey's interior and justice ministers to financial sanctions.

Ankara also vowed to retaliate for Washington's move, which is aimed at pressuring NATO ally Turkey into releasing Pastor Andrew Brunson. The evangelical pastor originally from North Carolina is on trial

in Turkey on espionage and terrorism-related charges.

The sanctions have inflamed already tense relations between the two countries that are allied in the fight against terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan but can no longer see eye-to-eye over a series of issues, including Washington's support of Syrian Kurdish militia that Ankara considers to be terrorists.

Relations have also soured over the recent conviction in the U.S. of a Turkish banker on charges of helping Iran evade sanctions.

Ilnur Cevik, a senior adviser to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told *The Associated Press* that Turkey was delib-

erating possible measures, but wanted to "minimize the damage."

"Everyone's very disappointed. Nobody expected this kind of treatment [toward] two Cabinet ministers," Cevik said. "President Trump is taking a very small case and jeopardizing Turkish-American relations and Turkish-American friendship. What the Turkish side is doing is not burning all the bridges but trying to keep the bridge intact and try to salvage whatever is left of the relations."

The White House said the sanctions would target Turkey's justice and interior ministers, the officials Washington held responsible for the pastor's arrest and detention.

Pentagon clarifies separation policy for wounded troops

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Servicemembers wounded in combat will not face mandatory separation from the military under Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' new policy that aims to kick out troops unable to deploy for one year or more.

The Pentagon directive issued Monday fulfills a promise that Mattis made months ago when he announced the policy was aimed at increasing the military's deadliness and that troops injured on the battlefield need not worry that they will be forced

out of the service. In February, as the Pentagon unveiled the policy dubbed "deploy or get out," Mattis told reporters that wounded warriors were in a "special status" and would be exempt from the policy.

Official guidance exempting them, however, had not been published before this week.

The policy defines combat-wounded troops as servicemembers "whose injuries were the result of hostile action, meet the criteria for awarding of the Purple Heart, and whose injuries were not the result of their own misconduct."

Pentagon officials downplayed the lag in

publishing the guidance that included the exception of wounded warriors.

"It takes some time to coordinate a policy like this one with all of the stakeholders," said Air Force Maj. Carla Gleason, a Pentagon spokeswoman. She said the policy will take effect Oct. 1.

Combat-injured troops were not the only servicemembers exempted from the policy in the new guidance. The policy allows service secretaries to exempt servicemembers who are nondeployable for more than 12 months on a case-by-case basis if their retention is deemed "in the best interest of the military service."

China: Draft pact on sea feud a 'breakthrough'

Associated Press

SINGAPORE — China's top diplomat said Thursday that an initial draft of a proposed pact with Southeast Asia aimed at preventing fighting in the disputed South China Sea was a "breakthrough" in talks that can progress further without outside interference.

China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which includes four rival claimants involved in the territorial rifts, have been holding sporadic talks for years to craft a "code of conduct," a set of regional norms and rules aimed at preventing a shooting war in the disputed waters.

Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan announced at the start of an annual meeting of top diplomats from China and the 10-nation bloc in Singapore that both sides have agreed on an initial draft that will be the basis of future negotiations. He called the development a "milestone."

"This is good news," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the ASEAN ministers. "This is a breakthrough for the COC (code of conduct) negotiation."

Huddled among themselves in a separate meeting earlier, the ASEAN foreign ministers praised the completion of the draft.

According to a draft of a joint post-conference communique by the ministers, obtained by The Associated Press, they said "they were encouraged by the progress of the substantive negotiations towards the early conclusion of an effective code of conduct in the South China Sea on a mutually agreed timeline." Some of the ministers, however, were expected to repeat their concerns over China's transformation of seven disputed reefs into man-made islands, including three with runways, which now resemble small cities armed with weapons systems, including surface-to-air missiles. China has come under criticism for the militarization of the strategic waterway, but has said it has the right to build on its territory and to defend them at all costs.

Police set to give more details on killing of Colo. homeowner

Associated Press

AURORA, Colo. — A decorated Vietnam War veteran woke up to the sound of his front door crashing in and saw a naked intruder attack his grandson, so he acted to protect his loved ones, according to his family's lawyer.

As the intruder tried to choke and drown the boy in the bathroom, Richard Black, 73, and his son desperately tried to pull him off early Monday, even poking him in the eyes, before Black grabbed his 9 mm handgun and shot the intruder twice in the chest, lawyer Siddhartha H. Rathod said.

Soon after, police responding to 911 calls shot and killed Black in his house outside Denver.

"Mr. Black did everything right. His actions saved his grandson's life. He should be in the mayor's office, getting a commendation for his heroism.

Instead, he's in the morgue," Rathod said.

It's the fourth police shooting in the city of Aurora in about a month. Police said the officer who killed Black also was involved in a fatal shooting June 27 that is still being investigated.

Police in Aurora — Colorado's third-largest city, on the eastern edge of Denver — so far have released only some details as they investigate the shooting in the racially mixed neighborhood of mostly 1950s ranch homes, saying they need to balance transparency with ensuring a credible investigation.

But they planned to release more information at a news conference Thursday.

"We know how important it is for our community to know and understand what occurred the night of this officer-involved shooting and making sure you have the best information possible," Chief Nick Metz

said in a video posted online Wednesday.

He expressed frustration with unspecified false information that has spread in the absence of more details from police. He said police know what happened — based on evidence including 911 recordings, officer body camera footage and interviews. Metz also expressed his sympathy to members of Black's family.

"This has been a very tragic situation and a very heartbreaking situation for everyone involved, and our hearts go out to the Black family," the chief said.

Police previously have said officers responded to a "very chaotic and violent scene" and one 911 call said an intruder was breaking in to the home.

Black's wife, Jeanette, called authorities from outside, describing her husband and son, who are white, and the intruder, who was black, Rathod said.

Mexico jetliner crash survivors recount harrowing ordeal; some resume travel

Associated Press

DURANGO, Mexico — Just a day after a harrowing escape from a crashed and burning Aeromexico jetliner, many of its 103 passengers and crew went to work on resuming their travel, with some even boarding new flights from the same airport in western Mexico.

Those who escaped serious injury scrambled to find clothing Wednesday, having lost their suitcases the previous afternoon when the plane plowed into a field shortly after takeoff during a violent storm. U.S. citizens who lost their passports met with consular officials who came to Durango to assist.

Some passengers spoke of one survivor who had sworn never to get onto another plane and planned to buy a car to

drive back to the U.S.

Jose Luis Corral, 52, a business owner from Portland, Ore., still wore a neck brace from injuries he suffered in the crash.

"It's so fast, terrifying to see all the people screaming," recalled Corral, who was one of four people who helped the plane's badly injured pilot escape the blaze.

The pilot suffered a serious neck injury and was in the hospital. Forty-eight others were also injured, and 22 remained hospitalized Wednesday. Miraculously, no one died.

Aeromexico CEO Andres Conesa said late Wednesday that the pilot couldn't feel his feet when he was removed through a cockpit window but after surgery had regained feeling throughout his legs.

Alberto Herrera, a webpage engineer from Chicago, said the storm shook the plane and seemed to come from nowhere.

"When we were sitting on the plane there was a little drizzle, but nothing to worry about. It was just a little light rain, super light, like barely hitting the windows," Herrera, 35, said.

But another passenger, Ramin Parsa, 32, of Los Angeles, said the weather was ominous even before takeoff.

"The airplane actually was shaking before we even moved so I knew it was dangerous weather," he said.

"I think it was a mistake by the pilot. He should not have taken off," Parsa said.

Durango state Gov. Jose Aispuro said it was too soon to speculate on the cause of the crash.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Drivers cited for going too slow under law

ID BOISE — Idaho police are starting to enforce a new law that targets slow drivers using the passing lanes of highways.

The Idaho Press reported that two drivers were cited as of July 27 for driving too slowly in the passing lane since the law took effect July 1.

Idaho State Police have given warnings to three other drivers.

Lt. Shawn Staley said drivers who hold up traffic by going below the speed limit in the left lane could face a \$90 fine.

Identical twins to marry identical twins

MI GRASS LAKE — Two sets of 24-year-old identical twins had their first date together, became engaged at the same time and are now preparing to tie the knot in Michigan.

The Jackson Citizen Patriot reported that identical twins Krissie and Kassie Bevier will marry Zack and Nick Lewan in Grass Lake.

Krissie and Zack's wedding will be held on Friday, while Kassie and Nick will get hitched on Saturday. The four will share their reception Saturday night.

Dog credited with saving chickens

KS LAWRENCE — A Kansas dog is credited with batting a young hawk out of the air to save his owner's chickens.

The Lawrence Journal-World reported that Taylor and Kailey Petrehn were having dinner when their dog, Cooper, saw the hawk swooping in for some dinner of its own. Cooper smacked the hawk down and cornered it without injuring it.

Taylor Petrehn said he grabbed the bird right away and released it into a neighbor's yard and the hawk flew away.

Cooper is a 110-pound Anatolian Shepherd-Great Pyrenees mix whose owner says he "gets along with chickens really well."

Driver's sneeze attack blamed for crash

GA ATHENS — A motorist told police that her sneezing attack was so severe that it caused her to crash her SUV into a minivan in Athens.

Citing a police report, The Athens Banner-Herald reported that the minivan had slowed for a yellow light when it was struck by the SUV.

Police said the 43-year-old Mississippi woman said she'd been sneezing constantly and that after one of her sneezes, "the next thing she knew the air bag hit her in her face"

Police said the SUV driver was cited for following another vehicle too closely.

Bear tears through classic car on trip

AK ANCHORAGE — A North Carolina man driving a classic convertible on a road trip through Alaska learned his car is not impenetrable to bears.

Tom Cotter awoke recently to find his red Shelby Cobra with a gaping hole in the roof and claw scratches all over the body — the aftermath of a bear burglary, KTUU-TV reported.

Cotter has been touring the state with a group of friends also driving classic Shelby Cobras.

The bear likely broke into the car for a snack. A friend of Cotter's had left a package of Fig Newtons behind the seat.

College, farmers to launch 'seaweed lab'

ME BAR HARBOR — A Maine college is partnering with a seaweed farm to launch a research and production facility in Bar Harbor.

The partnership is between College of the Atlantic and Springtide Seaweed. Springtide is run by Sarah Redmond and Trey Angera, who plan to use the saltwater lab to culture seed stock for other seaweed farms in the North Atlantic.

College of the Atlantic also said Redmond and Angera will work to incorporate "the social, environmental and scientific aspects" of the seaweed business into the college's curriculum.

Restaurant fights back over worm video

NJ ASBURY PARK — A New Jersey shore restaurant fought back against a customer who posted a video of a worm crawling out of a piece of fish.

The video was shot over the weekend at Stella Marina Bar & Restaurant in Asbury Park and shows the thin, pale worm crawling out of a piece of cod.

In a Facebook post, people at the restaurant criticize customer Jim Guinee for trying to "destroy" their "reputation and possible livelihoods" and say they stopped serving the cod dish after the worms were discovered.

The restaurant wrote that parasitic roundworms "are frequently found in the guts and in the flesh of fish" and occasionally are missed by inspectors.

Autistic workers man a food truck

FL TAMPA — A Florida coffeehouse that employs only autistic adults is hit-

ting the road in a food truck.

The founder of the Artistas Cafe in Tampa said being on wheels will better help the coffeehouse's mission of showing the public that autistic workers can make good employees.

The Tampa Bay Times reported that the mobile coffeehouse will be available only when requested at an event starting this month.

The food truck, called the Bean Mobile, will serve fruit smoothies, coffee and snacks

Estate named to historic register

NH MOULTONBOROUGH — A mountaintop New Hampshire estate known as "Castle in the Clouds" has been named to the National Register of Historic Places.

The nearly 5,300-acre estate in the Ossipee Mountains was originally owned by shoe manufacturer Thomas Plant. Called Lucknow, it offers 75-mile views across Lake Winnepesaukee and to the mountains.

There's a 2-mile entry drive and driveway with stone posts and retaining walls, gardens and 40 miles of mountain roads and bridle paths.

Police investigate after Nazi flag hoisted

WY LARAMIE — An investigation was underway after someone replaced an American flag with a Nazi flag at a park in southeastern Wyoming.

The Laramie Boomerang reported police found the crumpled American flag shoved in the corner of the band shell at Washington Park on Monday. Officers folded it and then hoisted it back up the city-owned flagpole, and the Nazi flag was taken as evidence.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

How many rentals will stay with teams?

Associated Press

NEW YORK — When baseball stars on expiring contracts get traded in July, there's usually no need to find long-term housing.

Infielders Manny Machado, Mike Moustakas and Brian Dozier; starting pitchers Cole Hamels, J.A. Happ and Nathan Eovaldi; catcher Martin Maldonado; and closer Zach Britton are among the players dealt ahead of this week's deadline for trades without waivers. All could be eligible for free agency after the World Series.

Most will find new clubs, like Randy Johnson (Houston for Arizona after 1998), CC Sabathia (Milwaukee for the Yankees after 2008), Aroldis Chapman (Chicago Cubs for a Yankees return following 2016) and Yu Darvish (Los Angeles Dodgers for the Chicago Cubs last offseason).

Few decide to stay, such as Yoenis Cespedes with the New York Mets after the 2015 season.

Adding to the intrigue is last offseason's slow free-agent market, which saw veterans scramble during spring training to find cut-rate contracts as

opening day approached.

A look at some of the potential free agents and their situations:

Cole Hamels

Chicago is paying just \$5 million to the 34-year-old left-hander, who struck out nine Wednesday night to win his Cubs debut 9-2 at Pittsburgh. If he is overwhelming the rest of the way, the Cubs likely would exercise his \$19 million option for 2019. Otherwise, they would decline and get reimbursed by Texas for his \$6 million buyout. If he is reasonably successful but not dominant, Wrigley Field could be his home for the next two years rather than him taking the risk of going on the market and getting squeezed.

Manny Machado

He is among the most-anticipated of the players in this offseason's market, a free agent at age 26 who could command a deal of eight-to-10 years or more, perhaps with an opt out or two that could set him up for free agency again in his early 30s. Even if he leads the Los Angeles Dodgers to their first World Series title since 1988, he almost certainly would seek his market value. But if he does

bring a trophy to La-La Land, there will be pressure on management to pay to keep him in Dodgers blue.

Mike Moustakas

A World Series champion and two-time All-Star with Kansas City, he expected a big-money, long-term contract as a free agent last winter. Instead, he re-signed with the Royals in March for an end-of-offseason closeout price: \$5.5 million guaranteed and \$2.2 million in performance bonuses he is on track to earn. He joined a Milwaukee team that has never won a World Series, losing to St. Louis in its only appearance in 1982. His home runs are down slightly this year and his RBIs up. He turns 30 next month. His deal's \$15 million mutual option seems designed not to be exercised. If he powers the Brewers to a deep October run, he'll likely decline. If he doesn't perform, the team will say, "No, thanks."

Martin Maldonado

He is likely a short-term guest in Houston. Brian McCann had knee surgery last month and is due back in August, and the Astros obtained the Gold Glove winner from the Los Angeles Angels as an upgrade while he is out. Houston holds a \$15 mil-

lion option on McCann, who is valued by the team's pitchers and in the clubhouse.

J.A. Happ

A left-hander who turns 36 in October, Happ could find happiness in Yankee Stadium. New York's rotation is uncertain behind Luis Severino, with concerns about Masahiro Tanaka's elbow, CC Sabathia's knee and Sonny Gray's fortitude. Jordan Montgomery won't return from Tommy John surgery until late next season at the earliest, and while New York is expected to pursue a top free-agent starter such as Dallas Keuchel, or Clayton Kershaw if he opts out of his Dodgers deal, New York wants more rotation depth.

Zach Britton

It is hard to imagine Britton staying in the Bronx, where Aroldis Chapman is the closer and starting pitching is a more urgent need. But David Robertson is a free agent after the season and Dellin Betances is under control for only one more year. New York general manager Brian Cashman gave Andrew Miller a \$36 million, four-year deal after the 2014 season when he already had Robertson to close and Betances to set up.

Baseball's offense bounces back with better July

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Offense is on the rebound in Major League Baseball.

After a historic drop during the season's first three months that concerned the sport's leadership, the big league batting average in July was .255, according to the Elias Sports Bureau, raising the season's average from .246 to .248. Unless it goes up to at least .251 during the final two months, the season average would be the lowest since .244 in 1972.

There were 6,546 hits and 6,195 strikeouts in July, reversing an anomaly in which strikeouts exceeded hits in two of the first three full months.

Overall this season, batters have whiffed more than hit: There have been 27,285 strikeouts and 27,218 hits with the season about two-thirds through. Strikeouts topped hits in April (6,656 to 6,360) and June (6,776 to 6,640) while hits slightly exceeded strikeouts in May (7,033 to 6,971). Before this year, the previous low differential for a full month was in April 2017, when there were 138 more hits than strikeouts.

Strikeouts per game averaged 16.6 in July, down from 16.9 in June, 16.75 in May and 17.5 in April, which was a record for a full calendar month. Strikeouts project to 41,207, which would be the 11th consecutive season setting a record, topping last

year's 40,104. The total was 32,884 in 2008.

There were 857 home runs in 373 games in July, an average of 2.30 that left the season average at 2.29. The average was 2.52 through July last year, just above the record-setting final figure of 2.51.

Weather could have been a factor in the early drop, since balls travel farther in warmer temperatures. The 48.9 degree average U.S. temperature in April was the coldest since 1997, according to the National Weather Service, and May's 65.4 degree average broke the previous high, set in 1934. June's 71.5 degree average was the third-highest in 124 years of records, behind only 1933

and 2016. July data will not be available until next week.

Baseball officials have attributed the offensive drop partly to the increased use of infield shifts and to more frequent pitching changes that bring hard-throwing relievers into games.

Officials also are concerned about attendance — this year's average of 28,863 is down 5.2 percent from 30,453 through July last year, and this season could be the first with an average below 30,000 since 2003. Baseball officials cite bad weather that had led to 45 postponements, six more than last year's season total, and many early season games being played in colder temperatures.

Astros knock Seattle into wild-card tie

Associated Press

SEATTLE — When the Seattle Mariners were rolling in the middle of June, it appeared unlikely anyone in their own division would be contending with them for one of the wild-card spots in the American League.

On Wednesday, the Mariners were knocked from the lead for the second wild card in the AL, caught by division rival Oakland.

Marwin Gonzalez hit two of Houston's four home runs, and the Astros beat the Mariners 8-3, dropping Seattle into a tie with the Athletics in the wild-card race. Seattle led the A's by 11 games in the middle of June, but has seen the entire lead disappear over the past six weeks.

"I'm not worried really about anybody else right now. We need to get back to playing like we're capable of playing. It just hasn't happened here recently," Seattle manager Scott Servais said. "We'll have a good game here or there. But

like I said, start putting together some streaks together, just quality game after game, good pitching, more importantly on offense, we've got to do more offensively."

The Mariners were 21 games over .500 at 46-25 after a 1-0 win on June 16, while Oakland was just below .500 at 35-36. Seattle hasn't played terribly in the following six weeks, but its 17-20 record is pedestrian compared to Oakland's 29-10 mark and why the A's have caught up so quickly.

"We have to get back to playing really good baseball and then we'll worry about the other guys," Servais said.

The Mariners and A's are still looking up at Houston in the AL West. After a five-game losing streak, the Astros rebounded to win the final two games of the series. Houston has a five-game cushion over both teams.

Gonzalez hit a solo home run off Wade LeBlanc (6-2) with two outs in the second inning and added a two-run shot in

the fourth. Jake Marisnick, recalled from the minors before the game, added a two-run shot off LeBlanc and Max Stassi greeted reliever Nick Vincent with a three-run homer in the fifth to break the game open.

Gonzalez had the third multi-homer game of his career after not hitting a longball since June 27 against Toronto.

"When you look at our team when we're at our best, it is guys like Marwin and (Josh) Reddick. Stassi hit a big home run today. Jake comes up from the minor leagues and immediately produces," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said. "This is a very deep team, and when you go through some stretches that you don't play your best, you can kind of forget that this team is built pretty well."

LeBlanc's outing was his worst of the season as he was unable to locate his off-speed pitches down in the strike zone. The seven earned runs were the second-most allowed in his career as a starter and the

three homers matched a career high. LeBlanc lost for the second time in his past four starts after winning his first five decisions of the season.

Dallas Keuchel (9-9) improved to 6-1 in his past nine starts, throwing seven innings, allowing three runs and striking out two. He retired 11 straight at one point and 11 of the 21 outs he recorded came via the groundball.

The bottom of Seattle's lineup pieced together four consecutive hits in the second, capped by RBI singles from Andrew Romine and Zach Vincej. But Seattle's offense continued to lag and was otherwise limited to Nelson Cruz's solo home run in the sixth, his 26th of the season.

"For us to get a series win here was big, but it's not make or break," Keuchel said. "We know we're good enough to win this division. It's just a matter of getting guys healthy."

MLB roundup

Orioles chase Gray in third inning, down Yankees

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sonny Gray was chased in the third inning by the team with the worst record in the majors, big league-loss leader Alex Cobb ended a nine-start winless streak and the Baltimore Orioles beat the New York Yankees 7-5 on Wednesday.

Despite what appeared to be a midgame lecture in the dugout by third base coach Phil Nevin during a rain delay, New York (68-38) dropped 5½ games behind Boston (75-34) heading into a four-game series at Fenway Park starting Thursday.

Gray (8-8) allowed seven runs, eight hits and two walks in 2⅔ innings, raising his ERA to 5.56. He was booted as he walked off the mound and was replaced by Lance Lynn.

Cobb (3-14) had been 0-7

since winning at the New York Mets on June 5, losing his last five outings.

He breezed against the Yankees with an early 7-1 lead, allowing one run and seven hits in six innings and stopping Baltimore's streak of 11 consecutive road losses. Gleyber Torres homered twice for New York, a solo drive in the second and a three-run shot in the ninth.

Cubs 9, Pirates 2: Cole Hamels (6-9) had little trouble in his return to the National League, keeping host Pittsburgh in check over five innings to lead Chicago.

Nationals 5, Mets 3: Tommy Milone (1-0) worked seven strong innings to get his first win in more than a year, Anthony Rendon homered and host Washington beat New York to move back above .500.

Indians 2, Twins 0: Carlos

Carrasco (13-5) struck out 10 in 7⅓ innings, winning his fourth straight start since returning from the disabled list to carry visiting Cleveland past Minnesota.

Athletics 8, Blue Jays 3: Sean Manaea (10-7) pitched effectively into the seventh inning, Jonathan Lucroy drove in four runs and host Oakland completed a season sweep of Toronto.

Tigers 7, Reds 4: Jose Iglesias drove in three runs, Jim Adduci homered and host Detroit survived the loss of pitcher Mike Fiers to an early injury to beat Cincinnati.

Rays 7, Angels 2: Willy Adames homered and drove in two on the day host Tampa Bay gave him the regular shortstop job.

Royals 10, White Sox 5: Alex Gordon hit a two-run

homer and drove in four, helping visiting Kansas City pound sloppy Chicago.

Jakob Junis (6-11) pitched 5⅔ innings of four-run ball in his first win since May 18. The 24-year-old right-hander was 0-8 with a 6.67 ERA in his previous 10 starts.

Dodgers 6, Brewers 4 (10): Yasmani Grandal hit a two-run homer — his second of the game — in the 10th inning, rallying Los Angeles past Milwaukee to snap a three-game skid.

The win was also highlighted by Brian Dozier's homer in his Dodgers debut after arriving from Minnesota on Tuesday.

Cardinals 6, Rockies 3: Tyler O'Neill hit a tiebreaking pinch single in the sixth inning and five dominated beginning in the third to lift host St. Louis over Colorado.

Ohio State puts Meyer on paid leave

Associated Press

Urban Meyer's Ohio State program has been one of the best in college football and for the most part has avoided major off-field issues and player behavior problems that tarnished his championship teams at Florida.

Now Meyer appears to be in jeopardy of losing his job as Buckeyes coach over the handling of a longtime assistant who has been accused of domestic violence.

Ohio State placed Meyer on paid administrative leave Wednesday while it investigates claims that his wife knew about allegations of abuse against former Buckeyes assistant Zach Smith, who was fired last week.

Smith's ex-wife, Courtney Smith, told sports website Stadium that she told Shelley Meyer in 2015 that Zach Smith had assaulted her. Courtney Smith provided text messages to former ESPN reporter Brett McMurphy between her and Shelley Meyer about Zach

Smith's behavior, and threatening text messages she said were sent to her by Zach Smith.

"Shelley said she was going to have to tell Urban," Courtney Smith told Stadium. "I said, 'That's fine, you should tell Urban.'"

Courtney Smith said she did not know if Shelley Meyer told Urban Meyer about the allegations against Zach Smith, who has never been convicted of a crime or charged with assaulting his ex-wife.

Zach Smith's attorney, Brad Koffel, said in a statement to ESPN on Wednesday, "Once he gets his chance to tell his side of events, don't be surprised when it is corroborated by every police who ever responded to Ms. Smith's calls."

Ohio State will now look into what Urban Meyer knew and when, which could determine whether he remains coach.

Meyer is heading into his seventh season at Ohio State, where he is 73-8 with a national title in 2014 and two Big Ten Conference championships. Shelley Meyer is a registered

nurse and is employed as an instructor at Ohio State. Both Meyer and his wife could be in violation of Ohio State's Title IX sexual misconduct policy on reporting allegations of domestic violence against university employees.

Violation of the university's policy could result in Meyer being fired with cause by the university, according to provisions placed in his contract when it was extended by two years in April. The deal runs through 2022 and increases Meyer's salary to \$7.6 million in 2018, with annual 6 percent raises for the bulk of his compensation.

Offensive coordinator Ryan Day will serve as acting head coach for the Buckeyes, expected to be one of the top teams in the nation again this season. Ohio State's first preseason practice is scheduled for Friday. The season starts Sept. 1 with a game against Oregon State in Columbus.

Meyer said in a statement that he and athletic director Gene Smith agreed that him

going on leave was best for the investigation.

"This allows the team to conduct training camp with minimal distraction. I eagerly look forward to the resolution of this matter," Meyer said.

Meyer is on the short list of most accomplished coaches in college football history, with three national championships and an .851 winning percentage in 16 seasons at Bowling Green, Utah, Florida and now Ohio State, the team he grew up rooting for in Northeast Ohio.

Meyer won national championships with Florida in 2006 and '08, but his teams also had more than two dozen players get into trouble with the law. He resigned twice at Florida, citing health reasons, first in the 2009 season after the Gators lost the Southeastern Conference championship game while trying to repeat as national champs. He changed his mind soon after and coached another season. The Gators went 8-5 in 2010, and afterward, Meyer stepped down for good.

Clemson's national title rise fueled by hold on ACC

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Dabo Swinney has built Clemson into an every-year power with regular College Football Playoff appearances and a recent national championship. None of that could've happened without first asserting unquestioned control of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

The Tigers open practice this week as the overwhelming favorite to become the first team to win four straight ACC titles since Florida State's romp through the 1990s. They also could become only the second power-conference team to win four straight league championship games.

"I didn't sit back and say, 'Well we're Clemson and we're going to go out there and everybody's going to try to catch us,'" Swinney said during the ACC Kickoff preseason media days. "But I definitely envisioned Clemson being one of the best programs in the country, and I envisioned this league growing and becoming one of the most dominant leagues in the country."

Indeed, the Tigers' rise helped the ACC climb onto level footing with its touted Southeastern Conference neighbor.

It wasn't long ago that Clemson was chasing Florida State in the ACC's power-heavy Atlantic Division. The Seminoles won three straight ACC titles from 2012-14 while going 26-1 against league teams — 3-0 against Clemson — and winning a national championship in the final BCS season of 2013. But the Tigers followed that with their own impres-

sive run, giving the league a sustained stretch of top-flight success while putting the ACC alongside the SEC as the only leagues to reach all four playoffs.

Clemson is 25-2 against ACC teams in the past three seasons, with 18 wins by double-digit margins. The losses at home against Pittsburgh in 2016 and at Syracuse last year came by a combined four points. And last year's 38-3 rout of then-No. 7 Miami made Clemson only the fifth team to win at least three straight power-conference championship games since the SEC held the first in 1992, a group featuring FSU, Alabama in the SEC (2014-16) and Oklahoma in the Big 12 (2006-08).

Another December crown in Charlotte would allow Clemson to join Steve Spurrier's Florida

teams in the SEC (1993-96) as the only power-conference schools to win four straight league title games.

Clemson is on the verge of the ACC's longest reign since Bobby Bowden's Seminoles arrived in 1992 and won at least a share of the title for nine straight seasons, going 70-2 in the nine-team league.

Yet offensive lineman Mitch Hyatt and defensive lineman Clelin Ferrell dismissed questions about a gap between Clemson and everyone else.

"I wouldn't say that," Ferrell said. "You can talk about that as far as the past years, it might be a big gap. ... This 2018 team hasn't done anything. There's not really a gap as far as what we've done."

Besides, Hyatt noted, there have been close calls.