

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

8,600 GIs to stay once Taliban deal set

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Thursday that the U.S. would pull more than 5,000 troops out of Afghanistan once it reaches an accord with the Taliban, though he seemed to rule out a complete withdrawal of American forces from the country's 18-year war.

"We're going to keep a presence there," Trump told Fox News Radio on Thursday morning.

"We're reducing that presence very substantially, and we're going to always have a presence. We're going to have high intelligence."

He said the U.S. would reduce its presence in Afghanistan — where Ameri-

can troops train and advise Afghan forces and conduct counterterrorism operations — from about 14,000 troops to about 8,600. The Pentagon did not immediately confirm the withdrawal plans, and officials said they were not anticipating such an announcement Thursday.

Trump did not indicate precisely when troops would begin exiting Afghanistan.

The president's statement came just one day after Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters at the Pentagon talks of any withdrawal were premature.

The United States' top military officer said removing American forces from Afghanistan would be tied to guaran-

tees of lower levels of violence from the Taliban.

Afghan forces now require American military power to keep from being overwhelmed by the Taliban, Dunford said. However, the general said he was optimistic ongoing U.S.-Taliban negotiations would result in a reduction of violence across the country as well as an agreement for the insurgent group to negotiate a peace deal with the central Afghan government.

Senior State Department and Taliban officials in recent days have indicated the two parties have inched closer to an agreement to end American involvement in the nation's longest war.

"I am not using the withdraw word right now," Dunford said

Wednesday during a televised news conference alongside Defense Secretary Mark Esper, the first such briefing held at the Pentagon in a year. "I am using: We're going to make sure that Afghanistan is not a sanctuary (for terrorism) and we're going to try to have an effort to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan."

Trump is a longtime critic of the war in Afghanistan, which top officials have conceded has been stalemated for at least four years. Trump has pledged since he was a candidate in 2016 to bring home American troops. In recent days, he has said any withdrawal would be based on security conditions in the country, but he also decried U.S. forces mission there as a "ridiculous" police operation.

GIs living deployment-style in Poland as future force takes shape

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

POZNAN, Poland — Months after Washington and Warsaw agreed to boost the number of American troops in Poland, questions remain about where they will come from, how many will eventually arrive and how long they will live in conditions that remind them of combat deployments.

President Donald Trump might address those issues in Poland this weekend when he visits Warsaw to commemorate the 80-year anniversary of the outbreak of World War II.

While dignitaries attend the ceremonies in Warsaw, U.S. troops at Powidz, a base around 160 miles west of the capital that serves as a logistics and aviation hub for American military personnel training in Eastern Europe, will be liv-

ing in a tent city with spotty internet service, water coming out of faucets at a trickle and a chow hall that serves ample field rations.

In summer, soldiers say they'd rather be in the air-conditioned tents than the hot barracks building, which doubles as workspace.

"In terms of living and working, it feels a lot like an immature deployment," said Army 1st Sgt. Sean Jones, the first sergeant for 1st Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment, an Apache unit out of Fort Riley, Kan., which is at Powidz for a nine-month rotation.

"Of course, we are prepared to go to an austere environment and fight the enemy and train or whatever else," he said.

"But this is a rotation, not a deployment."

Improvements to the areas temporarily hosting U.S. troops

in Poland are slowly coming, soldiers said. At Poznan, the troops are hosted at a small base in the historic city, with a metro area of more than 1 million and a large population of college students who speak English. Air conditioning is being installed on base for some 80 soldiers who live and work in an old concrete building.

"We all have between two to three roommates," said Sgt. Jennie Banks, 25, a human intelligence collector with the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley.

Buildings are being renovated to house soldiers and provide them with places "to do our jobs and protect forces in the area," said Maj. Jon Allen, a spokesman for the Mission Command Element, a headquarters based in Poznan that oversees rotational forces in Europe.

But before major infrastructure projects begin, "we need to know how many people are going to be in which places on a permanent basis," Allen said.

It's still uncertain if the Pentagon will establish a division headquarters at Poznan or elsewhere in Poland.

The U.S. mission already includes a rotational Army armored brigade, a U.S.-led multinational NATO battlegroup positioned near the Russian military exclave of Kaliningrad and an Air Force detachment at Lask. A small contingent of sailors are at Redzikowo, a northern Polish town near the Baltic coast, where work on a missile defense site continues.

Experts say the presence of U.S. forces in Poland can deter Russia, which countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region have eyed warily since it seized Crimea in 2014.

Esper: VA will lead care for troops with cancer from foam

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs will take the lead on improving access to medical care for military members exposed to potentially cancer-causing compounds during their service, Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters Wednesday.

In response to a question from McClatchy on the rising number of cancers in the military that could be connected to compounds servicemembers were exposed to while deployed overseas or during training, Esper acknowledged the role of both the Pentagon and VA may grow.

“That is one of the areas where I want to improve and make sure we are doing everything we can to assist soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines as they transition out of the service into the VA system,” Esper said.

“VA has the lead on this,” he added.

The Pentagon will continue to take the lead on addressing the number of military bases and communities with ground and well water contaminated by per- and polyfluoroalkyl, or PFAS, compounds, which are cancer-linked chemicals found in the military’s firefighting foam.

There’s already some momentum within the Pentagon and Congress to address the impact of Aqueous Film Forming Foam, which has been used since the 1970s to fight aircraft fires.

The foam has concentrated amounts of PFAS compounds that are linked to cancers and birth defects.

The compounds are found in everyday household products but are concentrated in firefighting foam.

US carried out cyberstrike on Iran to protect shipping

The Washington Post

American military cyber forces in June knocked out a crucial database used by Iran’s elite paramilitary force to target oil tankers and shipping traffic in the Persian Gulf hours after that force shot down an unmanned U.S. surveillance drone, according to U.S. officials.

The retaliatory strike by U.S. Cyber Command against the system used by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was approved by President Donald Trump, who that same day called off a military airstrike against Iran because killing Iranians would not be “proportionate to shooting down an unmanned drone.”

U.S. Cyber Command did not address questions on the secret operation. “As a matter of policy and for operational security, we do not discuss cyberspace operations, intelligence, or planning,” Elissa Smith, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said in a statement.

The operation was first reported by The New York Times. It has not been publicly acknowledged by the U.S. government.

The cyberstrike was in the

works for weeks if not months, officials have said, adding that the Pentagon proposed launching them after Iran’s alleged attacks on two tankers in the Gulf of Oman earlier in June.

The cyber response to a military shutdown of an unmanned drone shows how the Pentagon is expanding its repertoire of options to integrate cyber into military plans, said officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe a sensitive operation.

It also shows how CYBERCOM, which coordinated the strike with U.S. Central Command, which oversees the Middle East, is able to support regional commanders to achieve strategic aims — in this case to preserve freedom of navigation in one of the world’s most important shipping lanes.

The cyberstrike was designed to be debilitating — Iran is still trying to restore data — but proportionate and not so provocative as to result in escalation, officials said.

The cyberoperation did not target missile and rocket launch systems, as The Washington Post previously reported, said U.S. officials.

Improved Osan bump cap provides protection for airmen

By MATTHEW KEELER

Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — The 51st Fighter Wing’s safety office came up with a simple and, it hopes, a popular solution to a problem that plagues aircraft maintainers across the Air Force.

From 2015 to 2017 Air Force maintainers reported 802 on-duty injuries from striking their heads on aircraft or weapons, injuries that cost the service nearly \$2.5 million in medical care and impacts on combat capability, according to data provided by the wing safety chief, Maj. Philip Budenbender.

The Air Force tried a prototype “bump cap” — an adjustable cap embroidered with the Air Force logo and fitted around

a hard-shell dome — to protect the user’s head. Bump caps, which provide some protection from minor bumps but not as much as a hard hat, are available in the civilian world.

However, the Air Force version proved unpopular.

“Airmen said it was cumbersome, obstructed views,” Budenbender said Wednesday, “but, overall, people were just not too keen on the idea of wearing this type of hat.”

The wing’s flight safety noncommissioned officer, Master Sgt. Dustin Schwartz, came up with the idea of fitting the dome into something more familiar, a baseball cap.

“We brought up an idea, put this liner

in this baseball cap that they already feel comfortable wearing and let’s see how it does,” Budenbender said. “What we ended up doing is pulling the liner out and putting it into a squadron-style baseball cap that is produced by the guys on the flight line and they enjoy wearing it off duty.”

For the month of July, the wing safety team deployed three models of the protective insert to 26 airmen who performed daily operations on aircraft.

“During the 30-day trial, we had several head strikes that resulted in zero visits to the emergency room,” Budenbender said.

The modified caps saved about \$43,000 in medical and other costs from 33 head strikes airmen reported during the trial, he added.

Policy change hits military kids overseas

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Servicemembers stationed overseas whose son or daughter is not an American now face a new process for applying for their child's citizenship under policy changes announced Wednesday by the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The new policy, which goes into effect Oct. 29, addresses the definition of "residence" in the Immigration and Nationality Act and affects children of servicemembers and other U.S. government employees living abroad who did not acquire citizenship at birth or while they were living in the United States. Those children will no longer be considered "residing in the United States," one of

the conditions for anyone born overseas to obtain citizenship automatically.

The policy announcement triggered widespread confusion about what it meant and who would be affected.

"This policy update does not affect [children] born a U.S. citizen, period. This only affects children who were born outside the United States and were not U.S. citizens," Ken Cuccinelli, the acting director of USCIS, said Wednesday in a statement.

"This does not impact birthright citizenship. This policy update does not deny citizenship to the children of U.S. government employees or members of the military born abroad."

The Defense Department said in a statement that it has been working closely with the Department of Homeland Se-

curity and USCIS on the policy change and Pentagon officials believe the "estimated impact of this particular change is small."

Under Section 320 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, a child who was born outside the United States can automatically become a citizen if they are physically living in the United States with their parent who is a citizen. That section no longer applies for those children living overseas with their parent.

The policy update now requires parents who are stationed overseas with their child to file Form N-600K, "Application for Citizenship and Issuance of Certificate Under Section 322," to apply for citizenship on behalf of the child before he or she turns 18

years old. Parents who submit an application for citizenship before the policy change will have it considered under the old policy.

Parents who are U.S. citizens and whose child is born overseas at a military base or at an off-base hospital outside of the United States can submit for a Consular Report of Birth Abroad to the State Department or a Certificate of Citizenship from USCIS for their child to be a citizen at the time of their birth, according to a USCIS document about the policy change.

Military bases outside the United States are not considered within the United States for birthright citizenship, so children gain citizenship through their parents, according to USCIS.

Navy survey shows poor rank for Hampton Roads

The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot

The Navy wanted to know how sailors and their families living in privatized military housing felt about their homes.

Turns out, those in Hampton Roads are less satisfied than most. Their experiences with their homes and the company that manages them, Lincoln Military Housing, ranked 40th out of 42 installations for overall satisfaction, according to the results of a national survey.

Across the country, the Navy's housing scored 70 for overall satisfaction, or "average," according to the survey, which was completed by CEL & Associates.

CEL distributed 35,125 surveys among residents in family housing, with a total 8,416 responses, or 24%. A total 3,960 surveys were distributed in Hampton Roads, with 22% response.

Local respondents gave their housing an overall score of 61, or "poor," according to the survey. They also scored their ser-

vice 61 and gave their property a 59, or "very poor."

That's down from 2018 when naval bases throughout Hampton Roads scored an overall 77 and a 75 for property and a 78 for service.

The service contracted the survey during the spring after widespread complaints across the military of shoddy living conditions, poor maintenance and bad customer service prompted congressional hearings.

Navy Region Mid-Atlantic commander Rear Adm. Charles Rock said the result "only goes to validate what we've been hearing from some of our residents."

Based on the survey's results, the Navy's housing providers must develop corrective action plans for any neighborhoods that score 75 or below. Navy Region Mid-Atlantic spokeswoman Beth Baker said all of Hampton Roads' Navy neighborhoods, which number about two dozen, scored below 75.

Russian-Turkish talk of new jets adds to tension

The Washington Post

MOSCOW — Russia and NATO-member Turkey are in talks over the possibility of creating a new fighter jet, Russian government officials said Wednesday, a step that could further challenge the United States and Ankara's standing in the Western military alliance.

The move came as President Vladimir Putin hosted his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at a major Russian aviation show on the outskirts of Moscow, a meeting which served mostly as a showcase for the two leaders' burgeoning partnership.

The two sides held "technical consultations" on the joint creation of a fighter jet as well as "initial talks" on developing a Turkish fighter aircraft, Russian media cited officials from Russia's Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation as saying. The body reports directly to Putin.

No additional details were

provided. But the discussions, though tentative, are likely to raise further alarms in Washington, which has strenuously protested against Turkey's recent purchase of the S-400 Russian missile defense systems.

U.S. officials worry Russia could use the S-400s in Turkey to gather intelligence on America's F-35 fighter jet. In response, the United States has canceled Turkey's participation in the production and purchase of the F-35 American stealth aircraft.

The optics suggested Turkish-Russian relations were growing warmer. In a video clip that went viral, Putin bought himself and Erdogan ice cream cones. (The Russian leader opted for chocolate, while Erdogan preferred vanilla).

The pair then admired Russia's newest fighter jet, the Sukhoi Su-57, which was unveiled at the show, with Erdogan getting a peek inside the cockpit. Erdogan joked about purchasing the Su-57 but stopped at that.

Watchdog finds Comey violated FBI policies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — James Comey violated FBI policies in his handling of memos documenting private conversations with President Donald Trump in the weeks before he was fired as director of the bureau, the Justice Department's inspector general said Thursday.

The watchdog's office said Comey broke FBI rules by giving one memo containing unclassified information to a friend with instructions to share the contents with a reporter. Comey also failed to notify the FBI after he was dismissed in May 2017 that he had retained some of the memos in a safe at home, the report said.

But the inspector general also concluded that none of the information shared with

the reporter was classified.

At issue are seven memos Comey wrote between January 2017 and April 2017 about conversations with Trump that Comey found unnerving or unusual. Those include a dinner at which Comey says Trump asked him to pledge his loyalty to him and a private Oval Office meeting weeks later at which Comey says the president asked him to drop an FBI investigation into former national security adviser Michael Flynn.

One week after he was fired, Comey provided a copy of the memo about Flynn to Dan Richman, his personal lawyer and a friend, and instructed him to share the contents of it with a specific reporter from The New York Times.

Comey has said he wanted to make de-

tails of the conversation public in hopes of triggering the appointment of a special counsel to lead the FBI's investigation into ties between Russia and the Trump campaign. Former FBI Director Robert Mueller was appointed special counsel one day after the story broke.

The inspector general's office found Comey's rationale lacking.

Richman declined to comment Thursday. But Comey noted on Twitter that the inspector general found no evidence that he or his lawyers had ever shared any classified information with the news media.

"I don't need a public apology from those who defamed me, but a quick message with a 'sorry we lied about you' would be nice," he wrote.

10 candidates qualify for next Dem debate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Struggling Democratic presidential candidates are facing the bad news that they are not among the 10 who have qualified for the next debate, a predicament that is likely to spell doom for their campaigns.

Hours ahead of a midnight Wednesday deadline to qualify, New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand announced she was dropping out of the race after spending at least \$4 million on advertising in recent months to qualify.

Billionaire climate change activist Tom Steyer, Montana Gov. Steve Bullock and

self-help guru Marianne Williamson were also among those missing September's debate, as were Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet, Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard and a handful of others.

To appear on stage in Houston next month, they had to hit 2% in at least four approved public opinion polls while securing 130,000 unique donors. Two new polls released Wednesday affirmed that they were all below the threshold.

The question shifted from who would qualify for the following debate to who would stay in the race.

"Our rules have ended up less inclusive ... than even the Republicans," Bullock said

on MSNBC, referring to the thresholds set by the Democratic National Committee. "It is what it is."

The 10 candidates who qualified for September's debate are Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Julian Castro, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Andrew Yang.

In a still-crowded Democratic field, not qualifying for the debate was expected to severely cripple a candidate's prospects. However, several have pledged to forge on in hopes of reaching the requirements in time for the next debate, in October.

Feds warn against pot use by youth, pregnant women

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal health officials issued a national warning Thursday against marijuana use by adolescents and pregnant women, as more states legalize the increasingly potent drug for medicinal and recreational use.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and Surgeon General Jerome Adams made the announcement, with Azar calling marijuana "a dangerous drug."

Officials said President Donald Trump has donated \$100,000 — one-quarter of his annual government salary — toward a digital campaign to raise awareness of the risks. Trump has forgone his official salary since taking office.

The warning comes as legal marijuana

has grown into a \$10 billion industry in the U.S., with nearly two-thirds of states legalizing it, mainly for medical uses. An increasing number of states and localities are also allowing personal recreational use.

Countering the opioid epidemic is a top issue for the White House, but marijuana had not gotten such high-level attention.

Adams said science shows that marijuana is harmful to the developing brains of teenagers and to the human fetus. The drug has also gotten stronger, with a three-fold increase in the concentration of the active ingredient THC in cultivated plants over the last 20 years.

"This ain't your mother's marijuana," Adams said.

While many states have changed their marijuana laws, federal law still treats it as

a controlled substance akin to opioids.

Federal officials say they fear the trend toward legalization may make it more enticing for teenagers to try marijuana. It's a commonly used drug among youths, they said, along with alcohol and e-cigarettes.

No states allow legal marijuana use by teens.

Adams said that for teens it carries a risk of affecting brain development, which continues in the 20s. Frequent marijuana use by teenagers is associated with changes in parts of the brain that are involved with attention, memory, decision-making and motivation.

Among pregnant women, marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug, with about 7% reporting they had used it within the past month in a 2017 study.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman charged with kidnapping car dealer

WA SPOKANE — A judge set bond at \$20,000 for a woman accused of kidnapping a car dealer during a test drive in Spokane.

KXLY-TV reported Kasandra Ayala, 32, was arrested on charges of kidnapping, taking a motor vehicle without permission and assault.

Spokane police Sgt. Terry Preuninger said a Dave Smith Nissan employee called for help during the test drive after the woman refused to pull over or let him out.

Lane change violation leads to drug charges

NE GILTNER — Court records said a North Carolina man was charged with possession of marijuana for sale after Nebraska troopers found hundreds of pounds of suspected marijuana in his vehicle.

Hamilton County Court records said David Shang, 27, of Raleigh, N.C., also is charged with lacking a tax stamp.

The Nebraska State Patrol said a trooper had pulled over Shang's pickup for an improper lane change. The patrol said a patrol K-9 alerted troopers to the presence of drugs, and about 270 pounds of pot was found in the truck bed along with more than 3,600 THC vape cartridges.

Truck plunges off bridge onto freeway

GA MARIETTA — Police said a pickup plunged off a bridge and landed on Interstate 75, killing its driver.

Cobb County police said the Chevrolet Silverado sped up a ramp over I-75. It then crashed

through a concrete barrier and fell onto the freeway below, landing between the southbound and northbound lanes.

Video from Atlanta TV stations showed the truck's crushed cab on the pavement below with its rear wheels in the air.

Police said they identified the driver as Dennis Favre, 33, of Dallas, Ga.

Sheriff: Blood trail led to vandalism suspect

NC MARION — Sheriff's deputies in North Carolina said they traced a trail of blood to the house of a 68-year-old woman who's accused of vandalizing property, keying cars, breaking windows and trying to steal license plates.

The Charlotte Observer reported the McDowell County Sheriff's Office said that deputy Robert Watson responded to Crowder Cable's residence in western North Carolina twice on July 23. The first time, they found her intoxicated; the second time, she was bleeding.

Police said Watson traced a trail of blood from the scene of the vandalized cars to Cable's house next door.

Cable was charged with property damage, attempted larceny, breaking and entering a motor vehicle, attempted breaking and entering and trespassing.

Power saw used to break into clinic

TX SUGAR LAND — Police in suburban Houston are looking for a woman who used a power tool to break into a Botox clinic and steal anti-aging products.

Sugar Land police said surveillance cameras captured the burglary at the Botox RN MD Spa.

The footage shows a woman approaching the locked door of the spa and trying unsuccessfully to open it. She then retrieves a battery-powered grinding saw from a light-colored Mercedes SUV and uses it to cut into the clinic's front door.

Authorities said the woman stole an undisclosed amount of products from the clinic before driving away.

Man hits police car with stolen ambulance

TN NASHVILLE — Authorities in Tennessee said a man stole an ambulance and led police on a car chase during which he crashed into a patrol car.

News outlets reported the man has been taken into custody. Authorities didn't immediately release his identity or say what charges, if any, have been filed against him. Metro Nashville police said the ambulance was stolen from Vanderbilt University Medical Center and an officer attempted to pull it over.

Police said the driver stopped in the road and backed into the patrol car, causing its air bags to activate. The officer wasn't injured. Police said the ambulance's driver then fled and crashed into an embankment and trees.

Beer tent returns to Labor Day fest

MI BELDING — A popular Labor Day weekend festival in western Michigan is turning to beer to raise cash.

Organizers of the festival in Belding hope a beer tent will help pay bills and build a financial cushion for 2020. The event hasn't had a beer tent since the 1970s.

The beer tent will be open

only one night. Amber Rood, co-chair of the Belding Labor Day Committee, believes people might spill into area bars after last call.

Long shovels, large holes in sand face ban

SC HILTON HEAD ISLAND — Leaders of a South Carolina island are one step closer to banning long shovels and large holes in the sand to protect sea turtles and beachgoers.

The Island Packet reported Hilton Head Island public planning committee members voted unanimously for the ordinance. The full council will vote on it Sept. 17.

The proposal would ban shovels longer than 14 inches. It would also ban holes larger than 12 inches deep and 12 inches wide.

A volunteer group called The Hilton Head Island Turtle Trackers says young turtles can get trapped in large holes after they hatch in dunes and head toward the sea.

Snake Road closing to let snakes cross

IL JONESBORO — Snake Road in southern Illinois is closing to cars so snakes can cross without getting run over.

The Southern Illinoisan reported that the road winding through the Shawnee National Forest will stay closed until late October.

It's not just snakes. Frogs, turtles, newts and salamanders are also starting to migrate across the road from swamps to limestone bluffs where they'll spend the winter.

Some are endangered, so the Forest Service goes the extra mile to ensure their safety.

From wire reports

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Trio proves NFL tight ends have evolved

Associated Press

The day before Tony Gonzalez was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame this month, he was asked about being something of a pioneer at tight end. A guy who changed his position — and the game itself.

Gonzalez sort of shrugged.

"I guess everyone is doing it now," he admitted of tight ends being used in a manner that Gonzalez didn't exactly invent, but certainly perfected.

The pass-happy, vertical-stretching NFL is shifting away from relying heavily on formations with one tight end in a three-point stance. Instead, many teams feature offenses with one tight end next to a tackle on the line while sending a tight end to the slot or spread out even wider in some formations.

Star tight end Jason Witten, who returned to the Cowboys after one year working on "Monday Night Football,"

said Gonzalez, whose 17-year career ended in 2013, changed things with his route-running and pass-catching skills at the position.

"Gonzalez kind of paved the way of my generation of, 'All right, this is a mismatch,'" said Witten, who will get strong consideration to join Gonzalez in Canton one day.

Two of the best active tight ends are coming off record-breaking seasons, and another one just had the best year of his career.

Eagles star Zach Ertz made 116 receptions, a season record by a tight end. San Francisco's George Kittle had 1,377 yards receiving, setting another record at the position.

Two-time All-Pro tight end Travis Kelce was spectacular as well, setting career highs in catches (103), yards receiving (1,336) and touchdowns (10) last season.

Kittle, 25, keeps track of peers on his iPad, studying every move made by most of

the starting tight ends. He takes a particularly close look at how Kelce, 29, and Ertz, 28, are perhaps the best in the business at the position.

"I just try to pull stuff from them," Kittle said. "Ertz and Kelce are two of the top guys in the league, so if I can learn something from them, I can get to that level, too."

The best tight ends these days are too fast for linebackers to defend, and too big for defensive backs to cover. Teams often are sending tight ends on vertical routes, forcing safeties to run with them and leaving cornerbacks isolated on receivers to create deep problems for defenses.

Titans tight end Delanie Walker, entering his 14th season, has noticed players at his position have become more like wide receivers.

"Guys aren't blocking," Walker said. "You don't see the traditional tight end on the end of the line anymore. If he's a star, he's usually in the slot

catching passes. That's a difference from 10 years ago."

Even though tight ends are often lined up on the outside, Saints coach Sean Payton said players at the position who can also block near the line of scrimmage always will be valued because of the importance they can have in the running game.

"The ones that end up in the Hall of Fame are probably guys that did both pretty well," Payton said.

Rob Gronkowski excelled at catching and blocking for New England during his nine-year career, which ended with his retirement last spring. Lions coach Matt Patricia saw Gronkowski's impact up close for eight seasons and has witnessed the evolution of how multiple tight ends are deployed on any given snap.

"That's probably one of the bigger changes that has happened in the game throughout the past 15 years," Patricia said.

NCAA's transfer rulings bringing teams angst, relief

Associated Press

With the college football season set to start for most teams this weekend, the NCAA has been handing down rulings left and right in waiver cases involving transfers seeking immediate eligibility.

Tennessee and Iowa got good news on a couple of high-profile players. Georgia Tech got one of its two waiver requests. And at Virginia Tech, offensive lineman Brock Hoffman had his final appeal for immediate eligibility denied, a decision that prompted Hoffman's father to post on Twitter a letter directed at NCAA President Mark Emmert that said the family will be "seeking legal counsel."

"The Process that you put my family through by giving us different reasons for denial and having us jump through hoops to gather different information every time we submitted it,

shows how flawed your system really is," Brian Hoffman wrote in the letter posted Wednesday.

Hoffman's case highlights the frustration many players, parents, coaches, schools and fans have with the immediate eligibility waiver. When an NCAA directive opened the door last year for more athletes to gain immediate eligibility through the waiver process after transferring, it seemed like a reasonable compromise between the longtime transfer rules in football and some other sports that allow all transfers to switch schools without sitting out. Instead, it has created more outrage directed at the NCAA.

Tim Nevius, an attorney and former NCAA investigator who has worked on transfer waiver cases, said the NCAA needs to make uniform transfer rules across all college sports regarding transfers and immedi-

ate eligibility.

"I also think because of the perception that there are inconsistent decisions made on eligibility waivers that that puts a lot of pressure on the system to change as well," said Nevius, a former college baseball player.

The revised waiver process led to quarterback Shea Patterson playing last season for Michigan and quarterback Justin Fields being eligible this season at Ohio State after transferring from Georgia.

The NCAA does not publicly comment on waiver decisions, and declined to do so in the case of Hoffman, who transferred from Coastal Carolina to Virginia Tech in the offseason. Hoffman said the move was to be closer to his mother, who had surgery to remove a non-cancerous brain tumor two years ago. The family lives in Statesville, N.C., and playing in Blacksburg, Va., brought

him about three hours closer to home by car.

The final ruling from the NCAA on Hoffman was announced Tuesday. His response on Twitter was to thank those who supported him and say he is looking forward to playing in 2020. His jab at the NCAA came in the form of an old photo posted on Twitter of former Oklahoma linebacker Brian Bosworth, who often butted heads with the NCAA, wearing a T-shirt that read National Communists Against Athletes.

For Tennessee defensive lineman Aubrey Solomon and Iowa receiver Oliver Martin, both Michigan transfers, NCAA rulings that came down this week were cause for celebration. Both were granted immediate eligibility.

The long wait, however, was excruciating.

Djokovic deals with pain at US Open

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Maybe, just maybe, Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer are feeling some lingering aftereffects of their historic Wimbledon final last month.

For Djokovic, it's in the form of a left shoulder that is hurting right now and probably contributed to slower-than-usual serves in the U.S. Open's second round Wednesday night.

For Federer, it's in the form of slow starts: He's lost the opening set each of his first two matches at Flushing Meadows for the first time in 19 times he's entered the Grand Slam tournament.

If they're going to reprise their rivalry late next week in the semifinals, both will need to improve.

Djokovic was repeatedly visited by a trainer for shoulder massages at changeovers during a ragged 6-4, 7-6 (3), 6-1

victory over 56th-ranked Juan Ignacio Londero of Argentina. Djokovic is a righty, of course, but he uses his other hand both for ball tosses on serves and on his two-fisted backhand — and both were less effective for stretches.

"I was definitely tested. This is something I've been carrying for quite a while now," said Djokovic, who repeatedly shook his left arm between points while serving in his first-round match Monday and did that again this time. "It wasn't easy playing with the pain and you have to fight and hope you get lucky with some shots."

Even though he won for the 35th time in his past 36 Slam matches, including in a fifth-set tiebreaker against Federer at the All England Club on July 14, the Serb looked uncomfortable and went away for stretches, including trailing 3-0 in the second set.

Asked how he plans to pre-

pare for his next match Friday, Djokovic replied with a laugh: "I'll probably freeze my arm for 48 hours, not do anything with it, and then see what happens."

Federer, meanwhile, is not about to start trying new tricks now, despite needing to come back twice already.

He got to the third round by beating Damir Dzumhur 3-6, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4 on an afternoon when rain postponed all but nine scheduled singles matches and every doubles contest.

Still, it's not as if the guy is going to seek some sort of magic solution. Working up more of a sweat in the gym before heading to the court, say. Or playing an extra practice set.

What he chose to focus on, instead, is looking on the bright side: "Can only do better," Federer said, "which is a great thing, moving forward."

At a Flushing Meadows flush with surprises so far — half of the top 12-seeded men already

were gone by the time Federer stepped into Arthur Ashe Stadium — he cleaned up his act quickly.

Indeed, Federer was one of the lucky ones who will stay on the usual play-one-day, get-a-day-off Grand Slam schedule. Only matches at Ashe or Louis Armstrong Stadium, the event's two arenas with retractable roofs, were held.

That included a loss by two-time champion Venus Williams to No. 5 seed Elina Svitolina, and victories for No. 2 Ash Barty, No. 3 Karolina Pliskova and 2017 runner-up Madison Keys on the women's side, and a win for No. 7 Kei Nishikori on the men's. In the last matches completed on Day 3, which both ended at around midnight, Serena Williams came back to beat 17-year-old American Caty McNally 5-7, 6-3, 6-1, and qualifier Dominik Koepfer of Germany eliminated Reilly Opelka of the U.S. 6-4, 6-4, 7-6 (2).

Americans arrive in China ahead of FIBA World Cup

Associated Press

SHANGHAI — After a month of practice and years of planning, the U.S. men's basketball team has arrived at the World Cup.

An all-night flight from Sydney to Shanghai that landed early Thursday brought the two-time defending World Cup champion Americans to China's most-populous city, where they'll play three first-round games starting Sunday. It took more than 10 hours of flying time, then another two-plus hours for the team to clear customs and finally reach its hotel.

From there, a few hours of relaxing awaited before an afternoon practice.

"The challenges begin," U.S. coach Gregg Popovich said.

A handful of fans waited outside the team hotel on a rainy morning, getting there a couple of hours before the buses from the airport pulled in just with

the hope of grabbing a few autographs. Some players obliged, as did Popovich — who used a gold marker to carefully sign his name on an array of photos, sneakers and basketballs.

Players said finally getting to China brought a different feel.

"It's kicked in," U.S. guard Kemba Walker of the Boston Celtics said after practice. "The next game we play, it's the real thing. We're focused, we're locked in and we're ready to play."

It's not like there haven't been challenges already. Just consider the travel itineraries for the U.S. to this point.

The flights from Los Angeles to Melbourne, then Melbourne to Sydney and now Sydney to Shanghai add up to nearly 30 hours and 14,000 miles in the air. If the U.S. makes the medal round, there'll be about another 2,500 miles of travel within China. Add the return flight to the U.S. after the tournament,

and the trip's total will easily exceed 22,000 miles — more than half a regular season's worth of travel for most NBA teams.

All that flying comes in the span of basically a month.

And that doesn't even count what it took for players to individually reach Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the site of the two training camp weeks, or the promotional trip to China that Donovan Mitchell made earlier this summer.

"I think we're good," said Mitchell, the Utah Jazz standout who has seen quite a following in China on his past trips to the basketball-crazed nation. "I think we're doing well. We got here and guys' energy in practice was great, guys were sharp. When you start to worry about how much we've been traveling, that's when it starts to become a mental thing."

The Americans went 3-1 on their pre-World Cup tour,

beating Spain in Anaheim, Calif., then splitting two games against Australia in Melbourne — the loss snapping a 78-game winning streak for the senior national team against major competition, dating back to 2006 — before topping Canada in the final tuneup.

Up next on Sunday is the Czech Republic, an opponent that caught Popovich's eye for the way it battled Lithuania in a pre-World Cup friendly.

"We have a great team of guys, very unselfish group," Bucks center Brook Lopez said before the team left Australia. "We all have the same goal in mind. A lot of young guys, so we have a lot of guys who are learning on the fly. We don't have a problem being a team. Our guys have come together really quick."

And now, with the trip to the other side of the world finally complete, the games now count.

Reds' Aquino hits 13th HR in August

Associated Press

MIAMI — After seeing five Cincinnati teammates go deep earlier this week, Aristides Aquino joined the power party.

Aquino tied a National League rookie mark with his 13th home run this month, leading Anthony DeSclafani and the Reds over the Miami Marlins 5-0 Wednesday night.

Eugenio Suarez hit his 38th homer, connecting in the fourth consecutive game for the Reds. Cincinnati used the long ball to take the first two games at Marlins Park, and Aquino quickly got into the swing.

Aquino hit a three-run drive

in the first inning, keeping up a surge that began after he was promoted from the minors Aug. 1. The 24-year-old outfielder matched the NL homer mark for rookies in a month set by Cody Bellinger of the Dodgers in June 2017.

"I've been asked about him and you just have to watch him and enjoy him," Reds manager David Bell said. "I wish I had better words to describe what we're all seeing. To keep it going, he continues to have quality at-bats."

The major league rookie record for homers in a month is 18 by Rudy York of Detroit

in August 1937. Aquino, who got one at-bat in the majors last year, also doubled as the Reds beat Miami for the third straight day.

"You're back and forth with the adjustments and he's been able to keep up with that," Bell said.

DeSclafani (9-7) had his longest outing of the season, throwing seven innings of two-hit ball. He struck out eight and walked one.

"My last few outings I've felt very good," DeSclafani said. "Trying to get ahead and mix speeds. I made the pitch when I needed to and had some defen-

sive plays. It's all good."

Tucker Barnhart's double off Sandy Alcantara (4-12) in the fourth increased Cincinnati's lead to 4-0. Barnhart drove in Aquino, who reached on a lead-off double.

"I'm just trying to grind out at-bats, put hits together and drive guys in when they're on base," Barnhart said.

Alcantara gave up four runs and six hits, struck out eight and walked one in six innings. Miami's representative in this year's All-Star Game, Alcantara lost his sixth consecutive decision and is winless since June 21.

MLB roundup

Realmuto, Phillies rack up 17 hits in rout of Pirates

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — J.T. Realmuto had three hits, including a homer and a triple, Corey Dickerson also went deep and the Philadelphia Phillies got 17 hits in a 12-3 victory over the Pittsburgh Pirates on Wednesday night.

Cesar Hernandez contributed three hits and three RBIs. Rhys Hoskins doubled, tripled and drove in a run to help the Phillies stay close in the NL wild-card race.

Every position player who started for the Phillies had at least one hit and RBI.

Starling Marte homered and had three hits for Pittsburgh, and Josh Bell hit a two-run shot.

Pirates rookie Bryan Reynolds, who began the day leading the NL in batting, went 0-for-3 to snap his seven-game hitting streak and drop his average to .330.

Vince Velasquez (6-7) went five innings and allowed two runs on five hits with five strikeouts and no walks.

Mitch Keller (1-3), a 23-year-old rookie making his seventh career start, pitched into the

fifth for Pittsburgh.

Yankees 7, Mariners 3: Aaron Judge hit the 101st homer of his career, Gary Sanchez, DJ LeMahieu and Mike Ford also went deep, and New York won at Seattle to complete a three-game sweep.

Sanchez hit a towering two-run homer in the first. Ford snapped a 2-2 tie with his sixth home run in the past 14 games, and Judge broke the game open with a two-run shot as part of the Yankees' four-run fifth inning. LeMahieu added his 23rd of the season in the ninth.

Red Sox 7, Rockies 4: Xander Bogaerts went deep twice as Boston extended its home run streak to 18 games in a win at Colorado.

It's the third-longest streak in franchise history. The best run for the Red Sox was 22 straight games with a homer in 2016.

Brewers 4, Cardinals 1: Keston Hiura homered and drove in three runs, Jordan Lyles turned in another strong start and host Milwaukee snapped St. Louis' six-game winning streak.

The NL Central-leading Cardinals had won 15 of 18. The Brewers ended a three-game

skid.

Dodgers 6, Padres 4 (10): Kike Hernandez scored the tie-breaking run on shortstop Luis Urias' throwing error with two outs in the 10th inning and Los Angeles won at San Diego after Kenley Jansen blew his seventh save on a wild pitch in the ninth.

The Dodgers' magic number for clinching their seventh straight NL West title is down to nine. They took two of three from the Padres after losing two of three to the New York Yankees at Dodger Stadium last weekend.

Indians 4, Tigers 2: Jason Kipnis homered twice and Francisco Lindor also went deep to lift Cleveland to another win at Detroit.

Braves 9, Blue Jays 4: Freddie Freeman hit his 36th home run of the season and drove in a pair of runs, Matt Joyce homered and had two RBIs and Atlanta won at Toronto.

Cubs 10, Mets 7: Kyle Schwarber hit one of his team's three homers against a stunned Noah Syndergaard, and Chicago built an early nine-run lead before closer Craig Kimbrel held off host New York in the

ninth.

Royals 6, Athletics 4: Hunter Dozier homered before driving in the go-ahead run in the seventh inning, Ryan O'Hearn also went deep and host Kansas City held on to beat Oakland.

Nationals 8, Orioles 4: Max Scherzer struck out eight to reach the 200 mark for an eighth straight season, Kurt Suzuki homered and drove in four runs and host Washington beat Baltimore.

Astros 8, Rays 6: George Springer broke a tie with a bloop RBI single in a three-run seventh inning and host Houston rallied to beat Tampa Bay and extend its winning streak to six.

Twins 8, White Sox 2: Jonathan Schoop hit two homers and drove in four runs, Mitch Garver also connected and Minnesota won at Chicago for its fourth straight victory.

Rangers 3, Angels 0: Ariel Jurado pitched six innings of two-hit ball to earn his second victory since June, and Delino DeShields reached over the center-field fence to make a spectacular homer-stealing catch as Texas won at Los Angeles.