

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, December 29, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Russia's naval reach causes concern

BY STEVEN BEARDSLEY
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Concerns over Russia's growing naval reach overshadowed a series of missile defense milestones for the U.S. Navy in Europe this year.

The U.S. 6th Fleet welcomed the final two of four guided-missile destroyers to its base in Spain and took control of its new missile-interceptor system in Romania, both part of the elaborate ship- and shore-based shield designed to protect Europe from Iranian missiles.

The fleet participated in the first ballistic-missile test in European waters and created a task force dedicated to missile defense. Yet unease over the growing Russian presence in European waters cast the region in a Cold War light and raised questions about whether the Navy has what it needs in Europe.

"Would I want more ships? Of course," 6th Fleet commander Vice Adm. James Foggo III said in a recent interview. "I'm a fleet commander, that's what fleet commanders do — we take assets and we use them.

Over the course of this year, several countries reported suspected Russian submarines along their coasts, as well as harassment from Russian aircraft and surface ships in the Black and Baltic seas. Russia stationed the first two of a planned six new Kilo-class submarines in the Black Sea. Moscow also flexed its muscles with sea-borne cruise-missile attacks against Syrian targets — one from a ship in the Caspian Sea and another from one of the Kilo-class subs while in the eastern Mediterranean.

Adm. Mark Ferguson, the Navy's top commander in Europe and Foggo's boss, said Russian operations were reaching a level unseen in more than a decade — and designed to frustrate NATO.

The 6th Fleet has responded by deploying more ships eastward. It kept warships in the Baltic Sea for 116 days in 2015 and in the Black Sea for 123 days, largely by deploying the recently arrived destroyers in Rota, Spain. The fleet also took advantage of independent deployers from the U.S., such as the amphibious transport dock USS San Antonio and the destroyer USS Jason Dunham, both participants in the annual BaltOps ex-

ercise in the Baltic Sea.

Yet the fleet still sees little of the Navy's largest ships, the aircraft carriers and amphibious warships capable of protecting air and ground forces. Both transit regularly through Europe on their way to the Middle East, a theater busy with airstrikes against the Islamic State group, and monitoring both the Persian Gulf and Saudi airstrikes in Yemen.

The trade-offs are too great to keep a carrier in Europe long term, new Chief of Naval Operations John Richardson told an audience in Naples in October. With growing needs in Asia and the Middle East, and the recent carrier maintenance backlog, resources remain tight, he said.

That hasn't stopped commanders from asking. U.S. European Command boss Gen. Philip Breedlove told reporters during an October visit to Washington that he was lobbying for more ships to counter the Russian navy.

In Naples, Foggo said he has the forces he needs for current operations — "phase zero" — and believes he could get more if the situation changes.

Slowdown of LCS purchases eyed by defense chief

The (Jacksonville) Florida Times-Union

Defense Secretary Ash Carter tripped a political alarm by telling the Navy to curb plans for adding littoral combat ships, the smaller new vessels expected to become mainstays of Mayport Naval Station in Jacksonville, Fla.

The instruction, delivered recently in a memo to Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, apparently won't change announced plans to send eight ships to Mayport by 2020. But it could have longer-term consequences for the base, which will become the East Coast hub for the ships.

Members of Congress have already challenged a part of Carter's memo — a preliminary instruction for preparing a budget proposal expected by

February — that referenced the Navy buying 40 LCS instead of the 52 formerly planned.

"We live in dangerous times, and the only way to make America safe is to make America strong. ... Our current national security demands require more vessels in the fleet, not fewer. That includes the LCS," U.S. Rep. Ander Crenshaw, R-Fla., said in a statement last week.

The number of LCS vessels the Navy needs has been debated before, with critics questioning efforts to outfit the craft with changeable "mission packages" of equipment for tasks ranging from surface warfare to mine countermeasures.

Carter's predecessor, Chuck Hagel, last year froze plans for the final 20 of 52 ships while the Navy examined the lightly

armored vessels' firepower and survivability. The Navy later said orders for those final ships would begin by 2019 and would include significant upgrades.

The Navy is operating six LCS vessels so far, with another 18 either in construction or under contract from teams led by rival shipbuilders Lockheed Martin and Austal USA.

Carter's memo argued that Navy spending has to deliver weapons that are battlefield-ready, saying that "our military is first and foremost a war-fighting force." It emphasized focusing "more on capabilities, not only ship numbers."

A Navy spokeswoman emphasized that said no budget decisions have been made but that the department works to deliver on both goals.

"Shipbuilding has always been a priority for the Navy, and we will continue to balance capability with capacity in our shipbuilding programs as we have always done," said Lt. Kara Yingling. She said discussing budget impacts further would be inappropriate with no decisions made.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., said last week that "we should not be leaving the Navy without the shipbuilding funds needed to meet current requirements and fulfill needs elsewhere."

Carter's memo said the Navy's plan between 2017 and 2021 should include procuring six LCS vessels, down from 14, and by 2019 buying just one variant.

US-led coalition kills leader connected to Paris attacks

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An Islamic State group leader with alleged ties to the terrorist attacks in Paris last month was among 10 ranking members of the militant group killed in recent weeks by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes.

The Operation Inherent Resolve coalition killed Charaffe al Mouadan on Dec. 24 in an unspecified location in Syria, said Army Col. Steve Warren, a spokesman for the coalition. Mouadan was directly linked with Abdel Hamid Abaaoud, the suspected ringleader in the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks in Paris that left 130 people dead, Warren said. Abaaoud was later killed during a police raid in a Paris suburb.

Mouadan wanted to launch additional attacks on Western countries and was planning such terrorist incursions, Warren said.

Nine additional Islamic State group leaders were killed in separate airstrikes in Iraq and Syria between Dec. 7 and Sunday, Warren said. They include a British-educated computer hacker, Siful Haque Sujani; an explosives manufactur-

er, Abu Anas; the militant organization's deputy finance emir, Yunis Khalash; and other significant fighters, attack planners and executioners.

"We will continue to hunt (Islamic State group) leaders who are working to recruit, plan and inspire attacks against the United States of America and our allies," Warren told reporters Tuesday at the Pentagon during a video briefing from Baghdad.

The colonel would not say whether there was evidence that Mouadan or others had designed specific plans to target the United States. However, Warren did say they aspired to eventually attack the U.S. and European countries. Removing them from the Islamic State group's chain of command, Warren added, would help degrade the organization's ability to do that.

"It's important that people understand that as long as those external attack planners are operating, the United States military will hunt them, and we will kill them," he said. "All of these terrorists had eventual designs on attacking the United States. Let's be clear about that; that's what they want to do."

Sunnis crucial to holding Ramadi

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The more than 8,000 Sunni tribal fighters recruited to join Iraq's security forces largely did not participate in the battle to retake Ramadi from Islamic State militants, but they will be integral in holding and stabilizing the city as it rebuilds, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

At the peak of the Islamic State group's hold on Ramadi, which they captured in May 2015, the terrorist organization had between 800 and 1,000 fighters occupying the city. The loss of Ramadi was blamed, in part, on the Iraqi government's failure to include Sunni tribes equally in the ranks of its security forces, giving the disenfranchised population little incentive to fight Islamic State advances in the city.

To date, 8,000 Sunni tribal fighters have been recruited, and 5,000 of them have been trained, said Col. Steve Warren, the Baghdad-based spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve.

But "they were not, frankly, a significant player in the battle for Ramadi," Warren said. "They will be significant players in the stabilization and the holding of Ramadi."

Sunni fighters and Iraqi federal police forces are now beginning to move into Ramadi's recaptured downtown. They will start forming a stabilization force to hold it after the estimated 10,000 Iraqi security forces and Iraqi army pull back from the circles that they had formed around the city and move to different ongoing operations, such as the efforts to retake Fallujah and Mosul, Warren said.

Once the remaining small pockets of Islamic State fighters are expelled, humanitarian efforts to rebuild the heavily damaged city will begin, he said.

Pentagon proposes UCMJ changes

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Under proposed legislation authored by the Pentagon, servicemembers convicted of crimes under the military's justice system would be punished by a judge guided by specific sentencing standards and would have expanded rights to appeal those convictions.

In the Military Justice Act of 2016, a 235-page proposed bill the Defense Department sent to Congress on Monday, the Pentagon recommended comprehensive reform of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice for the first time in more than three decades. The policy changes aim "to improve the quality and efficiency of the military justice system," according to the bill, which includes more than three dozen major policy changes.

The legislation proposal follows a two-year Pentagon review of the UCMJ and its Manual for Courts-Martial ordered in October 2013 by then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

"It has been more than 30 years since the department has undertaken to examine and update the UCMJ in a systematic fashion," Hagel said at the time. "The review we are now conducting will help ensure the continued effectiveness of our armed forces and the fair administration of justice for our servicemembers."

Many of the changes bring the UCMJ in line with policies in the civilian federal court system. They include requiring military judges to provide written judgments at the end of a court-martial, establishing parameters for judges to consider when sentencing servicemembers to confinement and granting all convicted

troops access to judicial review.

Other proposed reforms include establishing selection criteria for military judges and mandating how long they serve in those positions, creating standard jury sizes in noncapital courts-martial and adding new offenses to the UCMJ, including the fraudulent use of credit and debit cards.

The proposed changes were designed to ensure military law continues to "promote justice (and) to assist in maintaining good order and discipline" while it also remaining recognizable as "fair and just" to uniformed servicemembers and the American people, according to a report released Monday with the proposed legislation.

Though some recommended policies were similar to ones in civilian law, the report's authors stated that military justice cannot simply mirror the civilian federal judicial system.

Navy rolls over Pittsburgh

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — The players on Pittsburgh's sideline were jumping and cheering as Quadree Henderson ran 100 yards with the opening kickoff of the Military Bowl.

Unfortunately, the Panthers spent the remainder of the day trying — unsuccessfully — to stop Navy quarterback Keenan Reynolds.

Reynolds wrapped up his record-setting college career at Navy in spectacular fashion, running for three touchdowns and throwing for another Monday to lead the Midshipmen to a 44-28 victory.

Reynolds ran for 144 yards on 24 carries, completed 9 of 17 passes for 126 yards and had a reception for 47 yards on a trick play.

"He's a super football player," Panthers first-year coach Pat Narduzzi said. "Make no mistake, there were reasons he was in the (running) for the Heisman Trophy."

Reynolds leaves Navy (11-2) as the Football Bowl Subdivision career leader with 88 touchdowns and 530 points. His 4,559 yards rushing are the most by a quarterback in Division I history.

Quadree Ollison rushed for 73 yards and scored two touchdowns for Pitt (8-5). Nate Peterman threw a TD pass but was intercepted three times.

The Panthers' problem was that they couldn't back up Henderson's quick score.

"You feel like you have the momentum and you start fast, then we just couldn't get anything going in the first half offensively," Narduzzi said. "We got

things going in the second half, but with a missed field goal and three interceptions, you aren't going to win many football games."

After Henderson went the distance, Navy took a 21-7 halftime lead and made it 31-7 midway through the third quarter.

Pittsburgh scored two touchdowns in 17 seconds to close to 31-21, but could not complete the comeback.

It was 38-28 when Reynolds capped a nine-play drive with a 9-yard run with 4:19 remaining. The TD broke a tie with Kenneth Dixon of Louisiana Tech atop the career chart.

"To be able to seal the game and get the record at the same time is pretty cool," the 5-foot-11 senior said.

With Reynolds leading the way, the Midshipmen completed their first 11-win season in 135 years of football. That, more than all his personal accomplishments, is what he will remember.

"You play the game to win, so the record for wins is the one that means the most to me," Reynolds said.

It was the first game for the Midshipmen since they beat Army and coach Ken Niumatalolo decided to stay at Navy instead of taking the head coaching job at Brigham Young.

Niumatalolo was glad he stuck around for Reynolds' finale.

"All of Keenan's accolades are well deserved," the coach said. "What an unbelievable career he's had. Once in a generation, some of the things he's done. We're going to miss him."

Playing before a sellout crowd of 36,352 in its home stadium, Navy used its triple-option attack to overwhelm a team that

went 6-2 in the Atlantic Coast Conference and ranked 20th in the nation against the run. The Midshipmen finished with 590 yards of offense, including 417 on the ground — 114 by fullback Chris Swain.

It's not the way Narduzzi wanted to end his first season at Pitt.

"Just have to keep getting one step closer," he said. "You just have to take one step at a time. Told the seniors, they laid the foundation. We've done a lot of great things this year."

Two short TD runs and an 11-yard scoring pass to Tyler Carmona provided Navy with a 21-7 lead.

Niumatalolo momentarily abandoned the triple option in the third quarter in favor of a bit of trickery. Reynolds pitched the ball to fullback Shawn White, then went around the right side of the line for a catch-and-run that set up a 26-yard touchdown jaunt by Demond Brown.

"I was glad I actually caught the ball," Reynolds said.

It was 31-7 before Peterman threw a 4-yard TD pass to Ollison, and a 22-yard fumble return by Jordan Whitehead got Pitt within 10 points.

After Navy scored another touchdown, Ollison ran for a 45-yard score to make it 38-28.

But this was to be Reynolds' day. In his final significant drive with the Midshipmen, he converted three third downs and drew the Panthers offside on a fourth-and-3.

Soon after that, he walked off the field for the final time.

"We can come back for our 20-year reunion," Reynolds said, "and talk about it and just kick back and laugh."

Broncos outlast Bengals

Associated Press

DENVER — DeMarcus Ware put the clamps on the loose football and punched Denver's ticket to the playoffs.

"The ball was on the ground and I was feeling like, 'There's no way somebody's going to take this ball from me,'" Ware said after his fumble recovery in overtime sealed Denver's 20-17 victory over Cincinnati on Monday night.

Russell Bodine's catchable shotgun snap eluded AJ McCarron, who was making his second start in place of Andy Dalton. He raced to recover it, but Ware swept past right tackle Andrew Smith and secured Denver's fifth consecutive trip to the postseason.

"It was my fault. I told the team that," McCarron said. "I looked up to see the coverage and the snap caught me by surprise."

McCarron also hurt his left wrist on the play and wrapped it afterward. He said he wasn't sure how bad it's hurt, but "I'll get it checked out tomorrow and we'll see."

This was just the big play Ware's been looking for ever since missing a month with a bad back.

"Felt great to finish the game that way," Ware said. "We thought we were going to finish it with the field goal but at the end of the game, it's all about that win."

Ware's recovery followed a 37-yard field goal by Brandon McManus, whose shanked 45-yarder at the end of regulation made necessary the extra drama.

"I'm 24 years old and I don't think I've ever kicked the ball like that in my life: grade school, elementary school, or anything like that," McManus said. "I just wrapped my toe around it and I knew I had to bounce back."

He did, helping the Broncos (11-4) overcome a 14-0 first-half deficit and denying the Bengals (11-4) their first road win on a Monday night since 1990.

"There's an old saying: 'It's not how you start, it's how you finish,'" Broncos quarterback Brock Osweiler said. "And this team finished great tonight."

The Bengals blew a chance to earn a bye in the playoffs and move ahead of the New England Patriots in the race for the AFC's top seed.

"We knew what we have in front of us, an opportunity to get the bye," said Carlos Dunlap, who collected all three sacks of Osweiler. "It is what it is now. Now we're going to move on."

Denver, which was in danger of becoming the first team since the 1970 merger to miss the playoffs after starting 10-2, snapped a two-game skid with its third overtime win of the season.

Now, the Broncos can earn the top seed in the AFC with a win over San Diego and a loss by New England at Miami next weekend.

McCarron drove the Bengals on two long first-half drives, covering 80 and 90 yards and eating up a total of 16:24 to put Cincinnati ahead 14-0.

Minnesota holds off Central Michigan

Associated Press

DETROIT — Cooper Rush was being taken down from behind, so to avoid a sack, he tossed the ball toward a receiver.

"Looking back, probably should have just ate it," the Central Michigan quarterback said.

Rush's risky pass was intercepted, and the Chippewas fell 21-14 to Minnesota on Monday night in the Quick Lane Bowl. It was a tough ending to a terrific season for Rush, who set CMU's single-season record for yards passing.

Central Michigan (7-6) took a 14-13 lead with 11:08 remaining on a 13-yard touchdown run by Romello Ross. Minnesota responded by driving 74 yards in 13 plays, and quarterback Mitch Leidner ran 13 yards for the go-ahead touchdown with 4:26 to play. Leidner then threw to KJ Maye for a 2-point conversion.

CMU drove back into Minnesota territory, but Rush's ill-advised pass was picked off by Brian Boddy-Calhoun with 2:10 to play.

"We felt like we were right there," CMU coach John Bonamego said. "Just not enough at the end, a few too many mistakes, but Minnesota had a good plan,

they executed it. They definitely deserved the win."

Minnesota (6-7) ended a trying season on a positive note. Coach Jerry Kill retired in late October because of continued difficulty managing his epilepsy and his job. The Gophers were 5-7 after the regular season but were able to play on because not enough teams reached six wins to fill all the bowls.

"We played by the rules," said Tracy Claeys, who took over as coach after Kill's retirement. "If they don't want 5-7 teams in the bowl, then change the rule, but right now that's the rule."

All three teams that went to bowls at 5-7 — Minnesota, Nebraska and San Jose State — ended up winning.

Both Minnesota and CMU had to overcome plenty of adversity this season. Minnesota had to play on after Kill's retirement. He was an honorary captain for the Gophers at the pregame coin toss Monday.

Bonamego was diagnosed with cancer in his left tonsil and underwent treatment before the season. That was a tough way for him to begin his first season at the helm at CMU.

"I'll always remember our seniors and

how they bought in from day one and worked," Bonamego said. "Coaching changes and transitions are tough on programs."

Rush ran for the game's first touchdown Monday, scoring from 1 yard out to give CMU a 7-3 lead early in the second quarter. The Gophers took a 10-7 lead into halftime thanks to an 11-yard touchdown pass from Leidner to Maye.

It was 13-7 in the third when an onside kick by Minnesota was unsuccessful, giving the Chippewas the ball at midfield. CMU wasn't able to do anything with that field position, but after a failed fourth down by Minnesota early in the fourth, the Chippewas went 56 yards in four plays.

CMU took the lead on the run by Ross. Minnesota appeared to have him stopped at about the 3-yard line, but the Chippewas were able to push the pile into the end zone.

Ross ran for 100 yards on 19 carries, but Rush was pretty well contained. He went only 15 of 29 for 145 yards with an interception.

The announced attendance was 34,217 despite a winter storm that was passing through Michigan.



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Irving's three lift Cavaliers

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Kyrie Irving sank a three-point shot as the shot clock expired with 21.9 seconds to play and the Cleveland Cavaliers held on to hand the Phoenix Suns their fifth loss in a row, 101-97 on Monday night.

Brandon Knight's three-pointer cut Cleveland's lead to 96-95 with 1:27 to go and, after LeBron James missed a jumper, Knight hit another three but it was waved off because of an offensive foul against the Suns' Tyson Chandler.

In his fourth game since returning from knee surgery, Irving also hit a 12-foot floater to put Cleveland ahead 96-92 with 1:44 to go.

Irving scored 22 points, J.R. Smith had 17 and Kevin Love added 16 for the Cavs, who ended a two-game skid. James had 14 points, only two on 0-for-3 shooting in the fourth quarter.

Warriors 122, Kings 103: Stephen Curry overcame a slow start to score 23 points as part of his sixth career triple-double and host Golden State beat Sacramento for its 29th victory in 30 games this season.

Curry added a career-high 14 rebounds

and 10 assists, Klay Thompson scored 29 and Draymond Green had 25 points for the Warriors.

Spurs 101, Timberwolves 95: Kawhi Leonard had 17 points and 11 rebounds, Boban Marjanovic also scored 17 and San Antonio remained undefeated at home by holding off Minnesota.

The Spurs had six players in double figures and overcame the early ejection of coach Gregg Popovich, who was thrown out with 1:13 remaining in the first half on two successive technical fouls following a non-call on LaMarcus Aldridge.

Hornets 108, Lakers 98: Kemba Walker scored 18 of his 38 points in the fourth quarter, and Charlotte defeated Los Angeles in Kobe Bryant's final game in Charlotte against the team that drafted him — and promptly traded him — nearly 20 years ago.

Bulls 104, Raptors 97: Tony Snell and Pau Gasol each had 22 points, Derrick Rose added 20 and host Chicago pulled away late to beat Toronto.

Pacers 93, Hawks 87: Monta Ellis scored 26 points and host Indiana snapped Atlanta's six-game winning streak.

Magic 104, Pelicans 89: Nik Vucevic scored 28 points and matched his career high with seven assists, leading host Orlando over New Orleans.

Clippers 108, Wizards 91: Chris Paul scored 23 points, reserve Jamal Crawford added 21 and Los Angeles again overcame Blake Griffin's absence to beat host Washington.

DeAndre Jordan had 15 points and 13 rebounds for the Clippers, who got 54 points from substitutes in their third straight win — second since Griffin was ruled out for at least two weeks with a quadriceps strain.

Nets 111, Heat 105: Wayne Ellington tied a career best with seven three-pointers and scored 26 points, Brook Lopez added 26 points and 12 rebounds, and visiting Brooklyn rallied from 16 points down in the third quarter to beat Miami.

Mavericks 103, Bucks 93: Wesley Matthews scored 22 points, including two clutch three-pointers in the fourth quarter, and host Dallas held off Milwaukee.

Jazz 95, 76ers 91: Gordon Hayward scored 24 points, including a three-pointer that put host Utah ahead for good against Philadelphia.

Tar Heels rolls over Spartans

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — North Carolina's final nonconference game revealed little about whether the seventh-ranked Tar Heels are ready to make good on all those preseason predictions that included favorite status in the Atlantic Coast Conference and a No. 1 national ranking.

In fact, the Tar Heels enter league play facing the same question they did to start the season: Can they guard well enough?

Brice Johnson had 16 points and 16 rebounds to help UNC roll past UNC Greensboro 96-63 on Monday night, the kind of lopsided game that offered coach Roy Williams positives to point to (offense, rebounding) and another chance to drive home his point about defense.

"I'm frustrated because guys shoot 52 percent against us," he said after the Spartans did that after halftime. "I keep saying to them: 'Guys, nobody's ever been the best team unless they guarded people.'"

The trick now is stepping up in a demanding 18-game ACC schedule that begins Wednesday against Clemson.

The Tar Heels (11-2) took a double-digit lead by midway through the first half and led by 19 by halftime, though they had some trouble putting the game out of reach against the Spartans (4-9) until the final 8 minutes.

Francis Alonzo scored 11 of his 17 points after halftime to help UNCG hang around.

No. 9 Butler 92, IUPUI 54: Kelan Martin scored 19 points and Roosevelt Jones had 17 points and five steals for visiting Butler.

The Bulldogs (11-1) have won eight straight since a November loss to Miami. They are 7-0 at home this season.

IUPUI (4-11) was led by Darell Combs with 11 points and T.J. Henderson with 10, not nearly enough against Butler's up-tempo offense.

No. 15 Duke 105, Elon 66: Freshman Brandon Ingram matched a season high with 26 points for host Duke.

Ingram had 11 rebounds while freshman Luke Kennard added 18 points and Grayson Allen and Matt Jones had 17 apiece for the Blue Devils (10-2).

No. 16 Villanova 77, Penn 57: Freshman Jalen Brunson scored 22 points to lead host Villanova.

The Wildcats (10-2) scored the first 14 points and led 30-3, cruising in their final game before the Big East opener Thursday against No. 6 Xavier.

Daniel Ochefu had 12 points and 10 rebounds for Villanova.

No. 21 Utah 115, College of Idaho 74: Dakarai Tucker and Kyle Kuzma both scored 17 points to help host Utah survive an early scare.

Jakob Poeltl made all six of his field goal attempts on his way to 15 points and 10 rebounds for the Utes (11-2). Brandon Taylor scored 15 points and Lorenzo Bonam added 12 in the final tuneup for Pac-12 play, which begins later this week with three straight road games.

Army 91, Monmouth 84: Tanner Plomb scored 27 points and Kyle Wilson had 21 to lead host Army past Monmouth.

Plomb and Wilson made four three-pointers apiece. Army (9-3), which gets 40 percent of its points on treys, rebounded from a 7 of 37 three-point night in a loss to Marist that snapped a five-game win streak. The Black Knights were 11 of 28 from the arc, the 10th time in 12 games they have reached 10 three-pointers.

Holtby, Capitals win eighth straight game

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Washington Capitals are off to the best start in franchise history, and captain Alex Ovechkin says goalkeeper Braden Holtby has been the team's most important player.

Holtby made 31 saves and Ovechkin scored to lead the Capitals over the Buffalo Sabres 2-0 on Monday night for their eighth straight win.

Ovechkin scored 19 seconds into the second period and Jay Beagle scored about 12 minutes later to help the Eastern Conference-leading Capitals improve to 27-6-2.

Washington has earned a point in 15 of its last 16 games and trails the Dallas Stars by one point for the NHL lead.

Holtby got his 22nd career shutout and second this season. He leads the NHL with 23 victories and is 15-0-1 in his last 17 games. He also leads the NHL with a 1.86 goals-against average.

"We knew he's good," Ovechkin said. "He's our best player and probably the best goalie in the league right now."

Defenseman Karl Alzner said Holtby is "definitely a main reason why we're sitting on top right now."

Linus Ullmark made 24 saves for the Sabres.

Sabres forward Evander Kane played for the first time since The Buffalo News reported that Buffalo police were investigating a sex crime allegation against him.

Kane spoke to reporters at a morning skate Monday for about 30 seconds, saying he did nothing wrong and is looking forward to having his name cleared. He did not take questions.

Kane had four shots on goal and three hits in 20:20 of ice time. He left the game briefly in the second period after taking a puck to the face but was able to return.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said before the game he was worried about the investigation affecting Kane mentally.

After the game, Bylsma said Kane "was eager to get on the ice and be with his team and play with his team tonight, and it showed."

"I enjoy playing hockey," Kane said. "I enjoy being around the rink, around the

guys, playing in this league. I don't take that lightly."

Buffalo was shut out for the third time in five games and the fourth time this season.

The Sabres appeared to break the shutout early in the third period when Jamie McGinn sent a slap shot past Holtby. The goal lamp went off and the horn sounded, but the puck hit the outside of the net and did not go in.

Buffalo's Tyler Ennis crashed the net and pushed the puck past Holtby with 4:10 remaining, but the referee immediately waved off the goal. Bylsma challenged the call, but replays determined that Ennis made incidental contact with Holtby while the puck was in the crease.

Buffalo could not convert on three power plays and is now 0 for 17 on power-play chances over its last five games.

The Capitals improved to 19-0-0 when leading after two periods.

Avalanche 6, Sharks 3: Nathan MacKinnon scored twice on power plays and added an empty-net goal, Carl Soderberg and Blake Comeau also scored on power plays and Colorado ended a 13-game losing streak in San Jose.

Matt Duchene also scored, and the Avalanche won their fourth straight on the road to improve to 6-1-1 over their last eight games.

Patrick Marleau, Melker Karlsson and Tomas Hertl scored for the Sharks. San Jose owns the worst home record in the league at 4-10 and has lost four straight at home and seven of eight.

Colorado's Calvin Pickard stopped 35 shots for his first decision of the season and his first win in over a year. Martin Jones saved 20 of 25 for the Sharks.

Canadiens 4, Lightning 3 (SO): Max Pacioretty won it in the third round of a shootout and Montreal beat host Tampa Bay to end a six-game losing streak.

Brian Flynn also scored in the shootout for Montreal. Valtteri Filppula had a shootout score for Tampa Bay.

The Canadiens got goals from Tomas Plekanec, Alex Galchenyuk and Dale Weise.

Nikita Kucherov, Jason Garrison and Ryan Callahan scored for the Lightning,

who are 2-1-1 on a six-game homestand. Tampa Bay centers Tyler Johnson and Brian Boyle both returned after being out with upper-body injuries.

Mike Condon made 36 saves through overtime for Montreal, while Tampa Bay's Ben Bishop stopped 31 shots.

Kings 5, Canucks 0: Tyler Toffoli scored three goals, Jonathan Quick got the 40th shutout of his NHL career and Los Angeles beat host Vancouver.

The Kings won their second straight and snapped Vancouver's two-game win streak. The Canucks have yet to win three games in a row this season.

Quick made 27 saves in his second shutout this season and was rarely tested. The Kings outshot the Canucks 38-27, leading 1-0 after one period and 3-0 after two.

Toffoli finished his hat trick on a power play with 7:04 left. Derek Forbort got his first NHL goal and Brayden McNabb also scored. Anze Kopitar had four assists.

Vancouver was shut out for the fourth time in its past 11 games.

Wild 3, Red Wings 1: Mikko Koivu scored twice, Devan Dubnyk made 28 saves in a surprise appearance and Minnesota beat visiting Detroit.

Dubnyk suffered a cut on his arm in practice Sunday and had to have stitches. He was expected to sit, but Darcy Kuemper was announced out with an upper-body injury about an hour before the game.

Charlie Coyle scored for the third time in four games for Minnesota. Koivu scored a power-play goal in the third and added an empty-net tally for Minnesota, which had lost three of four.

Pavel Datsyuk scored his fourth goal of the season for Detroit. Petr Mrazek made 32 saves for the Red Wings.

Predators 5, Rangers 3: James Neal scored twice, Mike Ribeiro had three assists and Nashville held off visiting New York.

Filip Forsberg, Craig Smith and Ryan Ellis also scored for the Predators. Roman Josi added two assists, Pekka Rinne had 26 saves and Nashville won for the third time in four games.

Jesper Fast, Rick Nash and J.T. Miller had goals but New York lost its fourth in five games.