

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Audits: 4 more states have bonus troubles

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Pentagon audits found widespread problems in enlistment bonuses given to soldiers in several National Guard units across the country, but soldiers facing repayment demands in those states won't be eligible for waivers under a new federal law that will apply only to the California National Guard.

The bonus mistakes appeared less common than in the scandal that has rocked the California Guard, although the Army Audit Agency looked only at a small sample of the bonuses and only at four states.

Agency audits obtained by the Los Angeles Times/Tribune Washington Bureau found "little or no oversight" of bonuses and other financial incentives given to soldiers in Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri and Pennsylvania from 2006 to 2010, the only states reviewed.

The audits said those Guard units paid "incentives to ineligible soldiers" and later — like the California Guard — sought to recover the money. The reports did not say how many soldiers were affected in the other states.

In October, the Pentagon suspended an aggressive effort to recover improper bonuses from about 9,700 California Guard soldiers and veterans. Congress last week passed a law that is expected to produce waivers for most of them.

But the provision, part of the \$619 billion

defense authorization bill that President Barack Obama is expected to sign, applies only to the California Guard. Soldiers and veterans from other states facing repayment demands are not covered.

Among those ordered to repay their bonuses are soldiers who did not complete their enlistments after they were injured in combat.

While California's bonus fiasco has received the most attention, other states also were lax in ensuring that soldiers were eligible for the bonuses they got, according to the audits obtained by the Times.

None of the audits blamed fraud for the overpayments. In California, state and federal investigations focused on what prosecutors described as "massive fraud," although only one person who issued improper bonuses was sent to jail.

But the audits revealed other major problems.

In the Indiana National Guard, an audit of 130 enlistment bonuses awarded from 2006 to 2011, totaling \$1.7 million, found that 45 percent were "improperly paid to soldiers that didn't meet or maintain eligibility requirements" or were paid too much.

Since completion of the audit, an additional 1,132 cases have been found in which soldiers received improper bonuses, according to Maj. Benjamin Tooley, a spokesman for the Indiana Guard.

A total of \$1,693,975 has been recovered

from 443 soldiers, with an additional 469 cases still under review, he said.

Tooley said soldiers are facing repayment demands for several reasons, including failing the Army's physical fitness test or drug and alcohol tests, or because they changed job assignments in a way that invalidated the bonuses.

He said soldiers could appeal, and that "no instances of criminal intent, to include fraud," have been found.

In the Missouri National Guard, 30 percent of the enlistment bonuses and 70 percent of soldiers' student loan repayments — another incentive used to attract recruits — "were made to ineligible soldiers or weren't properly processed," according to the Army audit.

The audit looked at only 61 payments, a tiny sample, however. It blamed the errors on relatively minor violations of rules, not on systemic problems.

In the Pennsylvania National Guard, improper bonus payments were rare. All but four of 60 payments reviewed were "properly paid," a 2011 audit found.

But even states that were not audited are continuing to find large numbers of improper bonus payments.

Texas is still trying to recover up to \$4.6 million from 2,252 soldiers it believes violated their bonus contracts during the past decade, according to the Texas National Guard.

Osprey crash reignites anti-base furor on Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND CHIYOMI SUMIDA

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A storm is brewing on Okinawa after a controversial American aircraft crashed into the sea Tuesday night.

The Marine Corps sees the pilot as a hero because he ditched in shallow water rather than risk flying over Okinawan homes after a nighttime refueling with a C-130 severed a heavy hose and damaged the MV-22 Osprey's propeller. But

Okinawa's anti-base activists, including Gov. Takeshi Onaga, see the incident as yet another reason to reduce the U.S. military presence on the tiny, southern Japanese island.

The difference of opinion has spilled into public view, with Vice Gov. Mitsuo Ageda accusing Lt. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson, the III Marine Expeditionary Force commander, of having a "colonialist mentality," according to Japan's Mainichi newspaper.

Local media reports also

have accused Nicholson of lying about the apparent cause of the crash, which is still under investigation, and social media has seized upon Ageda's comments claiming Nicholson said Japan should be "thankful" the Osprey did no damage to nearby homes or residents.

Nicholson apologized to the Okinawan people for the incident at a Wednesday news conference.

"Okinawans believe the Osprey crashed because it became uncontrollable. When

it becomes uncontrollable, it could crash anywhere," said Masaaki Gabe, a professor of international relations at the University of the Ryukyus. "Lt. Gen. Nicholson's comments yesterday about operations that inevitably involve risk and danger is interpreted by Okinawans that Okinawa must bear that danger ... There is a possibility that the perception gap revealed through the accident could lead to further rift between Okinawa public and the [U.S.] military."

Convoys evacuate civilians from rebel zones in shattered Aleppo

Associated Press

Convoys of ambulances and buses carried civilians and rebel fighters from the last rebel enclave in the embattled Syrian city of Aleppo.

The Russian Defense Ministry said two convoys had left the enclave, accompanied by Russian military officers. The evacuations are part of a cease-fire deal following a massive government offensive that drove the opposition fighters from nearly all of eastern Aleppo, which they had held since 2012.

Russia is a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad and has been providing airstrikes in support of his forces for more than a year.

The International Committee for the Red Cross said the

evacuation of rebels and civilians from Aleppo is likely to take several days.

The aid group's Damascus-based spokeswoman, Ingy Sedky, said the second evacuation convoys contained 13 ambulances carrying wounded people.

An earlier convoy of buses and ambulances carried around 1,000, including 300 children and 28 wounded people.

A Turkish aid official said preparations had been completed to receive civilians evacuated from Aleppo. The head of the Turkish Red Crescent, Kerem Kinik, told reporters Thursday that the wounded would be the first to be transferred into Turkey.

The state-run Anadolu Agency, citing the Health Ministry, said at least 90 wounded people

are already waiting to cross from Syria into Turkey's border province of Hatay.

In addition, Anadolu said 25 U.N. trucks carrying food, medicine and other supplies have crossed into Syria.

Meanwhile, the U.N. said it's now time to move to a cessation of hostilities in Syria, humanitarian access, and a political solution to the conflict.

Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson told reporters at U.N. headquarters that it's time "to go back to basics" following the government-led campaign to retake rebel-held eastern Aleppo.

Eliasson said Syria and close allies Russia and Iran should return to the political track in order to end the "enormous suffering" and destabilization of the region, with its "huge in-

ternational impact."

He said: "I hope everybody leans back and looks at the tragedy, the horrors that have fallen on Aleppo, and then really ask themselves, 'Isn't this the moment now to go for the full cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access and political transition?'"

Assad said "history is being made" with the defeat of insurgents of Aleppo.

In a video message posted on the Syrian presidency's Telegram channel Thursday, Assad said that "what is happening is bigger than congratulations."

The handover of Aleppo's remaining opposition-run neighborhoods to government control would be a turning point in Syria's civil war, allowing Assad control of most of the country's urban centers.

Carter confident US won't give up on Afghanistan

Associated Press

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan — U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Friday that America will stick with Afghanistan for years to come as a new U.S. president takes over what is already America's longest war.

In a joint appearance in Kabul with Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, Carter said the U.S. cannot afford to give up on Afghanistan after more than 15 years of U.S. involvement, the deaths of more than 2,200 U.S. troops, and the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars.

"The interests we are pursuing here are clear and enduring," he said, citing the goals of preventing another 9/11-type of attack on American soil and helping Afghanistan attain enough stability to remain a

long-term security partner for the U.S. and the West. The war began as a response to the 9/11 attacks.

"To have a stable security partner that is eager and willing to work with the United States is an asset for the future for us," Carter said.

Carter was making his last planned trip to Afghanistan before handing off his Defense Department responsibilities to his successor. President-elect Donald Trump has nominated retired Marine Gen. James Mattis for the post.

Trump has not said if or how he will alter the U.S. course in Afghanistan, but has denounced what he calls U.S. nation-building projects.

The U.S. has about 10,000 troops in Afghanistan to train and advise Afghan security forces combatting a resilient

Taliban insurgency. U.S. special operations forces are hunting down al-Qaida and Islamic State militants.

Carter's visit comes amid concerns that despite improvements in Afghan government defenses, Taliban forces are gaining leverage and are continuing to use neighboring Pakistan as a sanctuary. By U.S. estimates, the Afghan government controls slightly less than two-thirds of the country's population.

The Taliban hold sway over about 10 percent, and the remainder of the population is "contested."

The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan said Friday "the fundamental logic" of the U.S. counterterrorism mission is solid, suggesting it should continue after the change of administrations.

"Our policy of having an enduring counterterrorism effort alongside Afghan partners is, in my view, very sound — something that we need to continue," Army Gen. John Nicholson told a news conference at Bagram.

Appearing alongside Nicholson, Carter said that having "a stable security partner that is eager and willing to work with the United States is an asset for the future for us."

U.S. commanders have praised Afghan soldiers for taking the lead in battles against the less-well equipped Taliban, but they have been suffering heavy casualties.

President Barack Obama had planned to reduce U.S. troop numbers to about 1,000 by the time he left office in January, but he scrapped that approach in the face of Taliban gains.

Military sentencing guidelines rejected

By NANCY MONTGOMERY

Stars and Stripes

A sweeping change to military sentencing proposed by the Pentagon earlier this year didn't make the cut in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, leaving military juries and judges with broad discretion in deciding how to punish troops convicted of crimes.

A proposal to have military judges, not juries, sentence troops convicted at courts-martial, with sentences based on guidelines like those used in federal courts, was not included in the legislation this past week. As a result, sentences for most crimes will continue to carry a broad range of punishments. The same crime could yield a sentence ranging from "no punishment" to lifetime imprisonment.

Lt. Col. Valerie Henderson, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said Congress had adopted many of the military justice reforms proposed by the Pentagon in January after a lengthy study.

The sentencing reforms not adopted will undergo further study. Another review panel is to submit findings and recommendations to the House and Senate committees on armed services by Oct. 31, 2020.

For decades, critics of the unique military sentencing system have said it results in punishment that is unpredictable, disparate and sometimes too light.

"It was 50 years overdue, and it was the only part of the proposed reform that

would really have modernized the system," said former Air Force top prosecutor Don Christensen. "So now it's still the Wild, Wild West. The process has all the rules of a knife fight."

Victor Hansen, a professor at New England Law Boston, agreed. "It seemed to me to be a very thoughtful reform and one that is long overdue," he said.

But defenders of the process say they prefer it to what they say are rigid federal and state sentencing schemes that allow little judicial discretion.

"No two accused are the same. The variability of the sentences is actually evidence of the system working properly," said Zachary Spilman, a military appellate defense lawyer and the lead writer of a military law blog.

Some changes to the military justice system were adopted in the law.

Defendants tried by juries, who also have been required to be sentenced by the juries, may now request that the judges sentence them.

That change, said Christensen, president of the victims' advocacy group Protect Our Defenders, could benefit sexual assault defendants and could make trials rougher on accusers.

Defense lawyers who previously had to weigh how harshly to attack a reputed victim's credibility to avoid angering a jury now could be unrestrained, he said.

Another adopted provision in the law adds an article to the Uniform Code of Military

Justice criminalizing sex between military recruits and their recruiters and trainers. The provision — introduced by Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., in the wake of the 2012 Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, scandal — is similar to laws in most states that ban sex between teachers and students.

Sex between recruits and trainers, such as drill sergeants, has been illegal for some time, but a variety of regulations and command instructions might require, for instance, that prosecutors prove the trainer's actions constituted dereliction of duty.

"Now it's clear what you're charging them with; now you're just proving sex between a trainer and a trainee," Christensen said.

A further change was to tighten eligibility for automatic review by courts of criminal appeals. Instead of automatic review of sentences, including a punitive discharge and confinement for more than six months, the threshold was raised to confinement of at least two years. At the same time, those not entitled to automatic review may request it.

Eugene Fidell, a lawyer who specializes in military cases and teaches at Yale Law School, was not a fan of the appellate-rule changes or the process.

"It is indefensible that this entire process was conducted without a single public hearing," he said. "What they should have done was give everyone convicted at court-martial a right to appellate review."

Report: Beijing adds weapons to South China Sea islands

Associated Press

BEIJING — China appears to have installed anti-aircraft and anti-missile weapons on its man-made islands in the strategically vital South China Sea, a U.S. security think tank says, upping the stakes in what many see as a potential Asian powder keg.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies said in a report late Wednesday that the anti-aircraft guns and close-in weapons systems designed to guard against missile attack have been placed on all seven of China's newly created islands.

The outposts were built in recent years over objections by the U.S. and rival claimants by piling sand on top of coral reefs, followed by the construction of military-grade 10,000-

foot-long airstrips, barracks, lighthouses, radar stations and other infrastructure.

CSIS based its conclusions on satellite images taken in mid-to-late November and published on the website of its Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

In a statement, China's Defense Ministry repeated that development on the islands was mainly for civilian purposes, but added that defensive measures were "appropriate and legal."

"For example, were someone to be threatening you with armed force outside your front door, would you not get ready even a slingshot?" the ministry statement said.

The Philippines, which has troops and villagers stationed

on some reefs and islands near China's new artificial islands, expressed concern despite recently improving relations with China.

"If true, it is a big concern for us and the international community who uses the South China Sea lanes for trade," Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said. "It would mean that the Chinese are militarizing the area, which is not good."

China's new island armaments "show that Beijing is serious about defense of its artificial islands in case of an armed contingency in the South China Sea," CSIS experts wrote in the report.

"Among other things, they would be the last line of defense against cruise missiles launched by the United States

or others against these soon-to-be-operational air bases," the report said.

Beijing says the islands are intended to boost maritime safety in the region, while downplaying their military utility. They also mark China's claim to ownership of practically the entire South China Sea.

Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also claim territory in the waterway through which an estimated \$5 trillion in global trade passes each year, while the U.S. Navy insists on its right to operate throughout the area, including in waters close to China's new outposts. China has strongly criticized such missions, known as freedom-of-navigation operations.

Yahoo: 1B accounts hacked

The Washington Post

Yahoo said Wednesday that more than 1 billion user accounts — meaning most of the internet giant's customers worldwide — were hacked in 2013, leading to the release of user names, telephone numbers, dates of birth and other personal information.

News of the hack, coming after the announcement in September of a separate hack affecting 500 million accounts, means that Yahoo has been the victim of the two largest data breaches ever reported. Both have been announced since Yahoo agreed to sell its core businesses to telecommunications giant Verizon in July for \$4.8 billion.

The incident raised new questions among analysts regarding the viability of that deal and whether the valuation will need to be changed, especially if the hacks trigger litigation against the company.

"This is another major blow," said Jeff Kagan, a Georgia-based telecommunications industry analyst. "It throws into question what's really going on at Yahoo. And if you don't really know what's going on at Yahoo, does Verizon have the guts to buy a potential bomb? This com-

pany could explode with major problems and major losses."

In the 2013 incident, Yahoo said that credit card and bank account numbers, which are stored separately, were not affected, but the breach did include some unencrypted "security questions" that the company uses to authenticate users.

Yahoo also reported a separate incident Wednesday in which hackers used what the company called "forged cookies" to gain access to some accounts, though it did not give the number. That incident, the company said, appeared to have links to the one announced in September involving "state-sponsored" attackers. Law enforcement officials said that breach, which happened in 2014, was probably the work of Russian hackers, though no final conclusion has been reached.

To minimize the damage, Yahoo is alerting affected customers and requiring them to change their passwords. But the scale of the hack and the time that has passed since it happened suggests that few of the company's customers were unaffected. Given the size of the two hacks, many Yahoo users are likely to have had their information stolen more than

once.

Yahoo encourages users to review all of their online accounts for suspicious activity and to change their passwords and security questions and answers for any other accounts on which they use the same or similar information used for their Yahoo account," the company said in a statement. "The company further recommends that users avoid clicking links or downloading attachments from suspicious emails and that they be cautious of unsolicited communications that ask for personal information."

Regarding the deal with Verizon, Yahoo said in a statement, "We are confident in Yahoo's value and we continue to work towards integration with Verizon."

Verizon spokesman Bob Varettoni said: "As we've said all along, we will evaluate the situation as Yahoo continues its investigation. We will review the impact of this new development before reaching any final conclusions."

The news caused a late dip in Yahoo's stock price, sending it down as much as 2.7 percent in after-hours trading.

Putin, Abe hold talks on disputed territory

Associated Press

NAGATO, Japan — The leaders of Russia and Japan held talks at a hot springs resort in western Japan on Thursday on a territorial dispute that has divided their countries for 70 years.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the summit meeting in Nagato city marks his first official visit to a G-7 country since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe invited Putin even though the G-7 nations, including Japan, still have sanctions on Russia. The talks will move to Tokyo on Friday.

Abe said he and Putin spent much of their three-hour meeting discussing the dispute over four islands seized by the former Soviet Union in the closing days of World War II, and a peace treaty officially ending the two countries' wartime hostilities.

The disagreement over the four southern Kuril islands, which Japan calls the Northern Territories, has kept the two countries from signing a peace agreement.

"We had in-depth discussions on a peace treaty," Abe told reporters.

He said the two leaders also discussed possible joint economic projects on the disputed islands. Abe hopes such economic cooperation will help solve the territorial dispute and bolster ties.

Abe did not say if there was any progress on the territorial issue.

In brief remarks before the meeting, Abe told Putin that the hot spring waters of Nagato are famous for relieving fatigue.

"I can guarantee you that the hot springs here would fully remove fatigue from our summit talks," he said.

Putin replied, "Better not to get too tired." He also credited Abe's efforts for "a certain movement in the development of Russian-Japanese ties."

Electoral voters not out for revolt

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hounded to abandon Donald Trump, Republican electors appear to be in no mood for an insurrection in the presidential campaign's last voting ritual. This most untraditional of elections is on course to produce a traditional outcome Monday — an Electoral College ticket to the White House for the president-elect.

Whether they like Trump or not, and some surely don't, scores of the Republicans chosen to cast votes in the state-capital meetings told The Associated Press they feel bound by history, duty, party loyalty or the law to rubber-stamp their states' results to make him president. Appeals

numbering in the tens of thousands — drowning inboxes, ringing cellphones, stuffing home and office mailboxes with actual handwritten letters — have not swayed them.

The AP tried to reach all 538 electors and interviewed more than 330 of them, finding widespread Democratic aggravation with the electoral process but little expectation that the hustle of anti-Trump maneuvering can derail him. For that to happen, Republican-appointed electors would have to stage an unprecedented defection and Democrats would need to buck tradition by peeling away from Hillary Clinton and swinging behind a consensus candidate in sufficient numbers.

Still, people going to the typically ho-hum electoral gatherings have been drawn into the rough-and-tumble of campaign-season politics. Republicans are being beseeched to revolt in a torrent of lobbying, centered on the argument that Clinton won the popular vote and Trump is unsuited to the presidency. Most of it is falling on deaf ears.

It takes 270 electoral votes to make a president. Despite losing the national popular vote, Trump won enough states to total 306 electoral votes. He would need to see three dozen fall away for him to lose his majority. Only one Republican elector told the AP he won't vote for Trump.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Tombstone kills boy, 8, playing in a cemetery

AR LYNN — Authorities said an 8-year-old boy who was playing in a church cemetery was killed when a tombstone broke and fell on top of him.

The Lawrence County Sheriff's Office said the boy was attending a birthday party at the church Saturday afternoon when the accident happened in the town of Lynn, about 100 miles northeast of Little Rock. Detective Andrew Turner told Jonesboro television station KAIT the boy was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Turner said investigators do not believe foul play was involved. The boy's name hasn't been released.

The church's pastor, Jeff Neely, said church members plan to support the boy's family, both financially and in prayer.

Officer is 4th accused of domestic violence

CA SANTA CLARA — A Santa Clara police officer has been accused of domestic violence, marking the fourth time an officer in the department has been arrested in the past two years.

The San Jose Mercury News reported that Officer Daniel Burde was arrested early Saturday and booked into the Santa Clara County jail on a charge of felony domestic violence.

Santa Clara police Lt. Daniel Moreno said Burde was off-duty when officers were called to respond to reports of a domestic incident. Moreno said the girlfriend's injuries were apparent to responding officers, but not so extensive that she required hospitalization.

Burde is the fourth officer to be arrested in the past two years.

Moreno said the number of officers accused of wrongdoing is unusual for the department.

Family says 'Ditto' to neighbor's Yule display

MI WESTLAND — A suburban Detroit family is conceding that it can't match the neighbors' holiday display.

The Detroit News reported Jami Kelly used plywood and a few strings of white lights to form the word "Ditto" with an arrow pointing toward the home next-door in Westland.

Kelly, 34, said her family started doing its own light display but realized that the creation couldn't compare. "Nothing measures up," she said.

Kelly's neighbors have an elaborate display, including reindeer, a large snow globe and a huge bear on the roof. Kelly said she got the idea for her own display online.

Reaction saves driver from a flying boat oar

FL FORT LAUDERDALE — A 33-year-old woman's quick instincts likely saved her life when a boat oar crashed through the driver's side windshield of her sports utility vehicle as she drove on Florida's Alligator Alley.

Christina Kay Theisen told the SunSentinel she's glad she wasn't on her phone or changing the radio station last week as she drove home after a business trip.

The Florida Highway Patrol said the oar either dropped from a recreational vehicle as Theisen passed by or it kicked up from the asphalt. It struck the front end of her Chevy Suburban before going through the windshield.

Theisen said she quickly ducked to the right and was able to keep control of the vehicle.

Atlanta zoo announces names of Panda cubs

GA ATLANTA — The new giant panda cubs at the Atlanta zoo now have names.

Zoo Atlanta announced that the twin cubs' names are Ya Lun and Xi Lun. The names were revealed at a naming celebration Monday, their 100th day of life, in accordance with Chinese tradition.

The zoo said Ya means elegant and Xi means happy. Lun is a reference to the cubs' mother, Lun Lun.

The zoo offered online voting to let the public choose among seven sets of names supplied by a panda conservation center in Chengdu, China. Voting ran from Nov. 21 through Dec. 4, and more than 23,400 votes were recorded.

The cubs are expected to make their public debut in the coming weeks.

Family of slain teenager donates to police, fire

OH CLEVELAND HEIGHTS — The family of a teenager gunned down at a Cleveland-area sandwich shop has donated \$20,000 to a city's police and fire departments.

Daveion Perry fatally shot Sunny Ravi Patel, 15, in October as Sunny helped his family at a Mr. Hero shop in Cleveland Heights.

A GoFundMe account was created to help with expenses. The family recently donated \$20,000 to the Cleveland Heights Police Department and Cleveland Heights Fire Department in a show of gratitude.

Fire officials say they'll likely use the money for paramedic training. Police say they'll consider using it for police academy scholarships.

Perry pleaded guilty and agreed to a sentence of life in prison with no chance for parole in a plea deal to avoid a death sentence.

Woman survives an accidental shooting

ME ELLSWORTH — Police said a man was arrested and a Maine woman escaped a serious injury after he accidentally shot her in the head over the weekend.

Ellsworth Police Chief Peter Bickmore said the .32-caliber revolver accidentally went off around 5 p.m. Saturday.

The woman was taken to a local hospital and airlifted to Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, where she was treated and released. Police said the bullet grazed the woman's head but didn't pierce her skull.

Police said her friend, Lawrence Romer, was arrested on charges of aggravated assault and aggravated reckless conduct with a dangerous weapon.

Woman's lip removed after attack by bulldog

MA BARNSTABLE — Police said a Cape Cod woman had to have her lower lip removed at a hospital after her American bulldog attacked her at her home.

Barnstable police Officer Tom Harmon said Sunday that the 9-year-old dog bit the woman's face around 2:40 p.m. Saturday.

Harmon said the woman's injuries were not life-threatening.

Harmon says police have never had complaints about the dog prior to the incident. The woman has owned the animal since it was a puppy. It's been placed in a 10-day quarantine.

From wire reports

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Siemian, Broncos face off with Pats

Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo.— Trevor Siemian vs. Tom Brady.

It doesn't have the same ring to it as Manning vs. Brady.

Yet, Siemian is providing the Broncos with better numbers than Peyton Manning or Brock Osweiler did last year when Denver swept the New England Patriots on their way to winning Super Bowl 50.

And this despite a porous O-line, a battered backfield and a struggling pass catchers.

In his last five starts, Siemian has averaged 303.8 yards passing with eight touchdowns and four interceptions behind a line that's surrendered 17 sacks and a ground game that's managed a sputtering 2.7 yards per carry.

If not for some big drops over the last three weeks, the usual aura of AFC supremacy would surround Sunday's showdown in Denver along with the typical home-field implications for the playoffs.

Instead, while the Patriots (11-2) are closing in on a record-breaking eighth consecutive AFC East title, the Broncos (8-5) are scrapping just to get into the postseason party. Standing in their way are the Patriots, Chiefs and Raiders, who own a combined 31-8 record.

"I don't care who we play, we've got to win these next three games," safety T.J. Ward said.

It would help if Denver's sniffing offense can find a way to help out its sizzling defense.

"Obviously, not getting a win last week, that stings a little bit. But I think we're confident going into these last couple of games," Siemian said. "I don't think anybody says in our locker room that we can't win any of these games, starting with New England. We've got a confident group. We've got the right guys to do it with, for sure."

The Broncos are coming off a 13-10 loss at Tennessee where they held Marcus Mariota to 88 yards on six completions, including just one after halftime when the Titans managed only 42 yards on the ground.

Siemian threw for 334 yards but Bennie Fowler couldn't hold on to what would have been the game-winning touchdown pass, a fastball that struck him in the face mask in the closing minutes.

The Patriots see in Siemian a QB getting better each week — and this after he outdueled three No. 1 picks in his first month as Manning's successor. So, they're not exactly celebrating Manning's retirement.

"For a younger quarterback that hasn't played much, he does a good job of just keeping his eyes downfield, moving around in the pocket and just getting to the best play no matter really what happens with the rush or anything," Patriots defensive back Devin McCourty said.

Despite unrelenting pressure and big hits that have resulted in injuries to both shoulders and his left foot, Siemian has completed 61.2 percent of his passes while throwing for 16 touchdowns and seven

interceptions.

Siemian's athleticism, arm strength and mobility drew praise from Patriots coach Bill Belichick this week.

Siemian's quarterback rating of 89.8 is higher than Manning (67.9) and Osweiler (86.4) had last year, when Manning completed 59.6 percent of his throws with nine TDs and 17 interceptions and Osweiler completed 61.8 percent of his passes with 10 TDs and six interceptions.

Osweiler prevailed in the regular season against the Patriots last year and Manning won the 17th and final meeting with Brady.

Two months after the Broncos overcame a 14-point fourth-quarter deficit for a 30-24 overtime win behind Osweiler, Manning threw for just 176 yards in the AFC championship that Denver won 20-18 thanks to a defense that hit Brady a career-high 23 times, sacked him four times and intercepted him twice.

The Broncos are the only team Brady has a losing record against (6-9), and he's just 2-7 in Denver.

"I think they've had really good teams," Brady said Wednesday. "More so than where you play, it's how you play. We just need to play better than the way we've been playing out there. It's a great place to play. They've got great fans."

Brady added that Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware are "a lot more dangerous ... than the people in the crowd. So, we're going to have to do a good job handling all those guys up front."

Cardinals cut WR Floyd following DUI arrest

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — In an abrupt move that stunned his teammates, the Arizona Cardinals released wide receiver Michael Floyd on Wednesday, two days after the 2012 first-round draft pick was arrested on charges of driving under the influence and failure to obey a police officer.

Coach Bruce Arians declined to comment on the move other than to say it was a "totally" unanimous decision by him, team President Michael Bidwill and general manager Steve Keim.

"Seeing stuff like this happen, I think we're all shocked," safety Tyrann Mathieu said. "We're all kind of in disbelief."

Mathieu described Floyd as "like a brother."

"He's a good guy," said Mathieu, who overcame marijuana-related problems that got him kicked out of LSU and became

a 2015 All-Pro selection. "I think we all make mistakes. You're under the spotlight, you're under a microscope. ... If he ever needs anything, he can reach out to me. I'm sure he could reach out to a bunch of guys in this locker room."

The 6-foot-2, 220-pound Floyd, who was to become a free agent at the end of this season, was taken into custody early Monday after being found unconscious behind the wheel of his running vehicle at an intersection in suburban Scottsdale.

He was booked and was released from the Scottsdale jail later that morning.

It was not his first brush with the law. He had three alcohol-related incidents involving police when he was at Notre Dame, including a DUI arrest.

The Cardinals mentioned Floyd's release without comment Wednesday in a news release that announced several other roster moves.

Arians had said Monday that he was gathering information to determine "what our options are going forward."

The Cardinals made Floyd the 13th pick overall in the 2012 draft after the receiver's standout career at Notre Dame.

Floyd finished the 2015 season strong, winding up with a career-best five 100-yard receiving games. But he was having a down year this contract season, with several critical dropped passes.

He caught 33 passes for 446 yards and four TDs this season.

Quarterback Carson Palmer called it "a tough day."

"Mike's a close friend of mine, an offseason golfing buddy, a workout partner, so it's tough," Palmer said. "I believe in Mike. I'm hoping for nothing but the best for Mike and look forward to seeing what he does with the next opportunity he gets."

NBA players glad for labor deal

Associated Press

MIAMI — Washington Wizards guard John Wall didn't even need to see the details of the tentative collective bargaining agreement between the NBA and its players before drawing his conclusion.

"It's a lot better than having a lockout," Wall said.

Such was the sentiment around much of the NBA on Wednesday night, when it was announced that the sides reached an agreement in principle on a new labor deal. All that remains before at least six more years of guaranteed NBA labor peace are ratification votes by owners and players, which are likely to be no more than formalities.

Basic details include increases in values of rookie-scale contracts and exceptions, with a 45 percent increase in minimum salaries across the board in the first year of the new agree-

ment. The rookie deals will be proportionate to the salary cap, either rising or falling as that does. The average salary is expected to hit \$8.5 million next season and rise to \$10 million by 2020-21.

There's never been more money in basketball, and neither side wanted that disrupted. So on Wednesday, one day before the deadline for either side to opt out of the current deal, negotiations were wrapped up and the sort of strife that caused some seasons to be shortened in the past was avoided without drama or fanfare.

It was announced simply, in a short statement. And then 10 games went on as scheduled, just as they will now for years to come.

"The game is going great for both the owners and players," Chicago Bulls guard Dwyane Wade said. "We talked about having a real partnership in

the last labor negotiations. These are definitely signs that things are going in the right direction."

Three people briefed on the terms said the proposed deal is for seven seasons, with an opt-out possible after six. The people spoke on condition of anonymity because neither side released specific details.

If the deal is ratified, the season will start a week earlier, preseason games would be capped at six and one of the most dreaded elements of the schedule — the four-games-in-five-days stretches — may be eliminated. The deadline for opting out is now Jan. 13, with the NBA saying that's "in order to give both sides enough time to review the terms of the agreement and vote to ratify."

"I think all players wanted to shorten the preseason," said Toronto Raptors guard Kyle Lowry.

Louisville: Analyst shared plays

Associated Press

Louisville athletic director Tom Jurich confirmed that a former Wake Forest assistant coach-turned-broadcaster did share "a few plays" with a Cardinals assistant before the teams played last month.

A spokesman at Army also said Wednesday night that officials at the academy were contacted as part of Wake Forest's internal investigation into potential leaks of its game plans.

The Louisville AD said earlier Wednesday that offensive coordinator Lonnie Galloway received a call from Demon Deacons radio analyst and former assistant Tommy Elrod before the game on Nov. 12. Galloway and Elrod were assistants to Jim Grobe at Wake Forest from 2011-12.

Jurich said Elrod passed along the plays that were then shared with the defensive staff, but "none of the special plays were run during the course of the game."

The Louisville AD said after looking "further into the matter" he learned of the phone call between Elrod and Galloway — who have known each other since 2007 — which came during the week leading up to the game.

"Any other information that may have been discussed was nothing that our staff had not already seen while studying Wake Forest in their preparations for the game and the material was not given any further attention," Jurich said. "I'm disappointed that this issue has brought undue attention to our football staff as we prepare for our upcoming bowl game."

The statement came a day after Wake Forest disclosed the findings of its nearly monthlong internal investigation into potential leaks when documents related to the team's game plan were found at Louisville's stadium.

Army spokesman Matt Faulkner said he had no further details. The Black Knights beat Wake Forest 21-13 in October.

Freshman duo lead UCLA in rout

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Two freshmen almost managed something in one game that's been accomplished only four times in UCLA's storied history — a triple-double.

Forward T.J. Leaf and guard Lonzo Ball each finished only a few assists shy of a triple-double in No. 2 UCLA's dominating 102-62 victory over UC Santa Barbara on Wednesday night.

Leaf finished with 25 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists, while Ball had 13 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists.

UCLA coach Steve Alford took both players out with several minutes still to play, uninterested in individual accomplishments.

"It all centers around our guys being unselfish," Alford said. "I'm not going to leave our guys in for something like that in a 40-point game."

UCLA (11-0) scored at least 100 points for the fifth time this season.

The Gauchos outrebounded the Bruins 50-46, but UCLA held Santa Barbara to 30.1 percent shooting (25 of 83).

"We let the boards get away from us in the second half (34-23), but we did have 10 blocks," Alford said.

Ami Lakoju had 12 rebounds and 11 points, and Gabe Vincent added 10 points for the Gauchos (1-7).

Gauchos coach Bob Williams was left almost in awe of the Bruins' effort.

"They are incredibly gifted, very long and they shoot really well," Williams said. "They really run effortlessly and they're playing and making the game easy. They pass and move and cut hard."

No. 4 Baylor 89, Southern U. 59: Johnathan Motley had 20 points and 10 rebounds for host Baylor.

No. 14 Wisconsin 73, Green Bay 59: Nigel Hayes scored 24 points to lead host Wisconsin.

Zak Showalter added 16 points, including a career-high four 3-pointers, and Ethan Happ had 14 points and 10 rebounds for the Badgers (10-2).

No. 19 Arizona 64, Grand Canyon 54: Kobi Simmons scored 13 points and Rawle Alkins added 11 points and eight rebounds for host Arizona.

No. 20 Saint Mary's 73, Western Kentucky 51: Jock Landale had 15 points and 13 rebounds and host Saint Mary's jumped to a quick lead it never relinquished.

Evan Fitzner scored eight of his team's first 12 points as the Gaels took control from the tip. He finished with 11 points and three 3-pointers.

Rockets stretch winning streak to eight

Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden's latest game left him tied in Houston's record books with perhaps the greatest Rocket of all.

Harden had a triple-double — 15 points, 14 assists and 11 rebounds — in just three quarters to lead the Rockets to their eighth straight win, 132-98 over the shorthanded Sacramento Kings on Wednesday night.

It was Harden's fifth triple-double this season and the 14th of his career, which ties him with Hakeem Olajuwon for most in franchise history. Harden acknowledged how special it is to be mentioned in the same breath as The Dream.

"Yes, obviously all-time Rockets great, best to ever do it [in] a Rocket uniform and one of the best to ever do it period," Harden said. "So just honored. It's a credit to my teammates who helped me and coaches

and just trying to win. That's all."

Houston's winning streak is the longest current one in the NBA and the team's longest since 2014.

Wizards 109, Hornets 106: John Wall and Bradley Beal combined for 19 of their 45 points in the third quarter, their team's highest-scoring period this season, and host Washington came back to beat Charlotte, handing the Southeast Division leaders their third consecutive loss.

Grizzlies 93, Cavaliers 85: Troy Daniels scored 20 points and Marc Gasol had 17 points and 11 rebounds to lead host Memphis over short-handed Cleveland, which left its top three players at home to rest.

Tony Allen added 16 points, eight rebounds and three steals as the Grizzlies won for the seventh time in eight games.

LeBron James, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love did not make

the trip for the Cavs, leaving an average of more than 70 points per game back in Cleveland.

Jazz 109, Thunder 89: Rodney Hood scored 25 points and host Utah defeated Oklahoma City to break a tie between the teams atop the Northwest Division.

Utah led from start to finish behind 58.3 percent shooting and showed why it's one of the best defensive teams in the NBA, holding the Thunder to 36.6 percent from the field.

Spurs 108, Celtics 101: Kawhi Leonard scored 26 points and San Antonio played its second consecutive solid home game in holding off Boston.

Spurs point guard Tony Parker had 16 points, including 10 in the final period.

Heat 95, Pacers 89: Hassan Whiteside had 26 points and 22 rebounds, Tyler Johnson scored 15 off the bench and host Miami beat Indiana.

Raptors 123, 76ers 114: DeMar DeRozan scored 31 points and Kyle Lowry added 20 in his Philadelphia homecoming to help Toronto win its fourth straight.

DeRozan had 31 points through three quarters in his second consecutive 30-point game.

Clippers 113, Magic 108: Austin Rivers made seven three-pointers and scored 25 points in his return from a concussion to help Los Angeles beat host Orlando for its third straight victory.

Nets 107, Lakers 97: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 23 points, Sean Kilpatrick had 22 and host Brooklyn sent Los Angeles to its eighth straight loss.

Pistons 95, Mavericks 85: Reggie Jackson scored 20 points and Andre Drummond led a dominant rebounding effort with 17 as Detroit topped host Dallas.

Flyers rally past Avalanche for 10th straight victory

Associated Press

DENVER — Wayne Simmonds handed his own stick to Pierre-Edouard Bellemare in the middle of a late onslaught by the Colorado Avalanche and continued to try to block shots with his body.

It was the kind of all-out effort the Philadelphia Flyers needed to preserve their longest winning streak in 31 years.

Roman Lyubimov and Brayden Schenn scored 1:46 apart in the third period and Philadelphia held on for its 10th straight victory, beating Colorado 4-3 on Wednesday night.

The Flyers have their longest winning streak since a franchise-best run of 13 games in 1985, but this one didn't come easily.

Colorado had chance after chance to score the equalizer after pulling goalie Calvin Pickard with 1:31 remaining. Steve Mason helped deny Colorado with several clutch saves

as his defense scrambled in front of him.

"Just an all-out battle," Mason said. "Guys were giving everything they could to block shots, try to clear pucks. We had a broken stick, a failed clear on a wrong-way stick. It's a heck of a way to close out a game. It was pretty chaotic."

Off a Colorado turnover in its own zone, Lyubimov slapped the go-ahead goal past Pickard 3:30 into the third. Schenn added to the lead with his fifth goal in his last three games.

Simmonds and Michael Del Zotto also scored, and Mason stopped 26 shots.

The Flyers know they can't be satisfied in a competitive Metropolitan Division, though. They are tied with the New York Rangers in second place at 41 points.

But still, the streak is appreciated.

"I've never won 10 in a row in any league, never mind the NHL," Simmonds said. "So it's

pretty special."

Penguins 4 Bruins 3 (OT): Bryan Rust flipped a backhand past Tuukka Rask 1:24 into overtime to lift host Pittsburgh past Boston for its seventh straight victory.

Racing down the slot, Rust took a swipe at Evgeni Malkin's centering pass and the puck fluttered by Rask. Conor Sheary, Nick Bonino and Justin Schultz also scored for Pittsburgh. Matt Murray stopped 41 shots to improve to 10-0-1 in his last 11 home starts.

Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh improved to 20-7-3 to take the overall NHL lead with 43 points.

David Pastrnak picked up his 19th goal for the Bruins. Brad Marchand and David Krejci also scored for the Bruins. Rask played spectacularly at times and finished with 33 saves.

Lightning 6, Flames 3: Brian Boyle scored two first-period goals and visiting Tampa Bay

snapped Calgary's six-game winning streak.

Alex Killorn also scored twice, the second into an empty net, and Braydon Coburn and Andrej Sustr added goals for Tampa Bay. Victor Hedman and Valteri Filppula each had three assists, and Ben Bishop made 19 saves.

Troy Brouwer, TJ Brodie and Micheal Ferland scored for Calgary.

Sharks 4, Senators 3 (SO): Kevin Labanc scored the lone goal in four rounds of a shootout to lift visiting San Jose past Ottawa.

Joe Pavelski, Brent Burns and Chris Tierney scored in regulation for San Jose, and Martin Jones made 29 saves. On Tuesday night in Toronto, Logan Couture scored the only goal in a shootout in the Sharks' 3-2 victory over the Maple Leafs.

Bobby Ryan, Kyle Turris and Dion Phaneuf scored for Ottawa.